

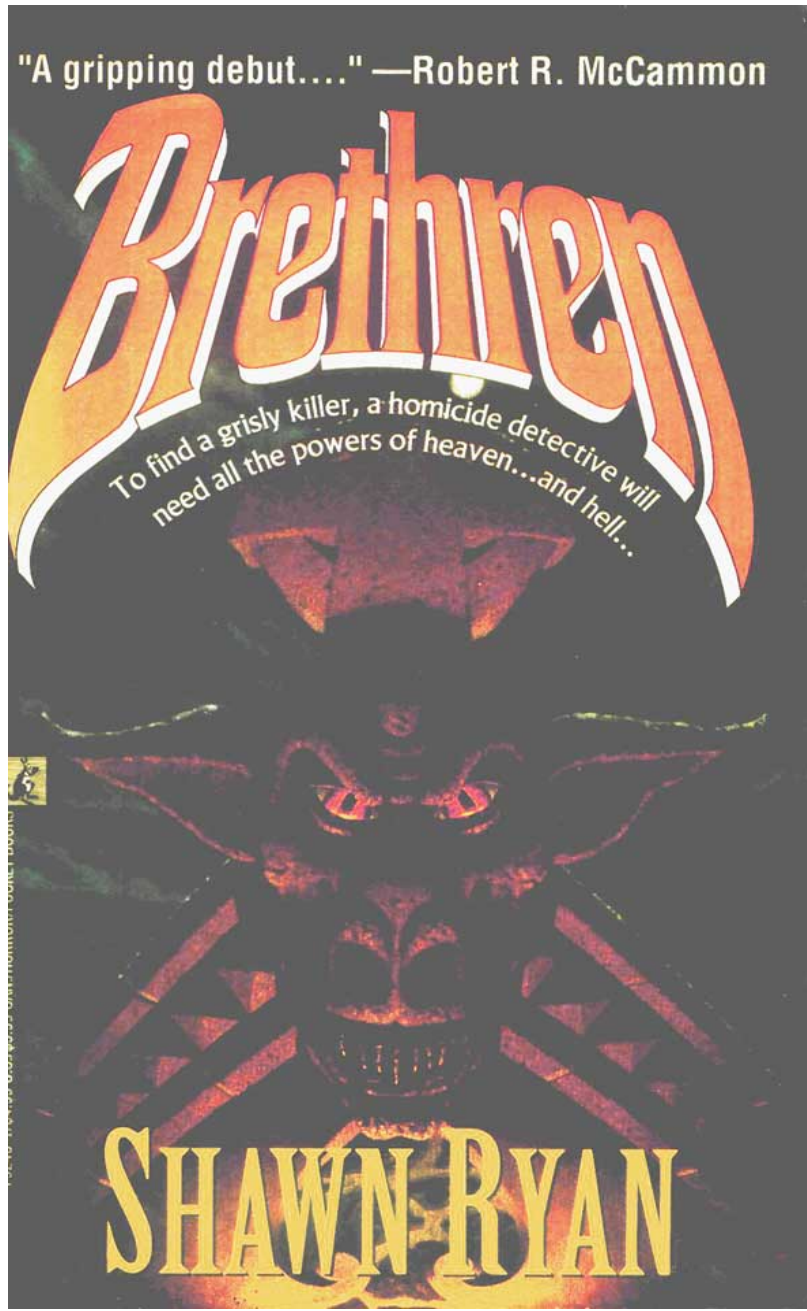
"A gripping debut...." —Robert R. McCammon

Brethren

To find a grisly killer, a homicide detective will need all the powers of heaven...and hell...

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SHAWN RYAN



BRETHREN

By

Shawn Ryan

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EPILOGUE

"A gripping debut..."

—Robert R. McCammon

BRETHREN

To find a grisly killer, a homicide detective will
need all the powers of heaven... and hell...

SHAWN RYAN

ISBN 0-671-79243-1

**HIS FOREFATHERS ARE INDEBTED TO A DEMON.
TO SURVIVE HE MUST ENTER THE HEART OF THE
BEAST...**

The devil has come to the Atlanta, Georgia, suburb of Gwinnett County, in the person of The Mercy Killer—a serial rapist and murderer whose gruesome calling cards are the mutilated, beheaded bodies of children. He strikes without warning, escapes without trace, and his appetite for slaughter is insatiable. But the life he craves above all others is that of Jason Medlocke—the homicide detective assigned to catch him.

It's been eighteen months since Jason lost his wife and small daughter to a drunk driver... and nearly lost his own life to despair and booze. But a worse horror is waiting—for Jason is the last Medlocke son, and the doomed heir to a centuries-old curse that has left his family stained in blood and abomination.

Jason's warlock ancestors have summoned the hideous fiend, Moloch, to rain vengeance down upon the Medlockes' enemies. But now Jason must harness that same magic, which still pulses within him, to stand against Moloch, who has sworn to rule the world of humans... and to bathe in the blood of the last surviving Medlocke!

Was He Crazy or Worse?

Badger reached out with his left hand. His index finger touched the animal, then sprang back. Nothing. Maybe he hadn't left it there long enough. He touched the frog again, resting his finger on it for several seconds. Nothing again. Just a toy. He picked it up. The instant he did, he knew it was a mistake. The eyes of the frog, simple button eyes moments before, opened. They stared at him, the color of cold silver, the frigidity of hatred. Like an evil Cheshire cat, the frog grinned, an ugly grimace full of stained teeth with bits of flesh dangling from the corners. Badger could feel his sanity sliding down a long tunnel. Then the mouth opened and Badger knew his world would never be the same...

"*BRETHREN* is a hard-hitting, fast-paced novel that will have the reader turning pages with both fear and anticipation. Shawn Ryan is a new novelist to watch."

—Lisa Cantrell, award-winning author of *The Manse* and *Boneman*

"*BRETHREN* is a fast-paced read. Ryan shows great potential with his first novel."

—R. Patrick Gates, author of *Tunnelvision* and *Grimm Memorials*

"*BRETHREN* cleverly mixes starkly realistic police work with ultimate supernatural horror... Unflinching and grisly, this book takes you on a rapidly descending roller-coaster ride through hell..."

—Rick Hautala, author of *Twilight Time*

BRETHREN

SHAWN RYAN

POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To Connor, who makes everything worthwhile

Writing is a solitary task, but no one—especially a first-time novelist—writes a book completely alone. I'd like to thank Gina, for forcing me to start what I'd always talked about doing. I am indebted to the members of Magic City Writers, especially Elsa and Bryan, who focused me and kept me moving forward. I am also deeply grateful to Rick, for his help through the years; to Matt, for his unflagging belief in me; and to Eric, for his enthusiasm and energy.

BRETHREN

PROLOGUE



The black loam crumbled in Glendon's fist, falling to the earth in rich, dark cascades. It was good soil, capable of nurturing whatever he planted.

Glendon felt fortunate to get this plot of land five years ago, nestled as it was between the shrub-covered heath and the eastern edge of Blackthorn Forest. Three hectares was enormous for a common landowner, but his blacksmithing talents and deferential yet witty personality made him a favorite of Lord Briane Terlaine. The lord gave him this land in return for years of loyal service—and more than a few ribald tales spilled over flagons of mead.

Glendon missed the old lord. His death three years ago led to great uncertainty. Gilles Terlaine, the lord's son, was not fond of Glendon and made it known he coveted the land now being wasted, as he put it, by that "dirt-farming smithy."

Glendon tried to keep a low profile, doing his farming quietly and providing free blacksmithing services to Lord Gilles. There was no need to upset the applecart, or the young lord.

As Glendon stood up from kneeling, his knees popped in protest. He was only thirty-three but life in Scotland was hard in the mid 1500s and people aged quickly. Still, his upper body was heavily corded with muscle from the blacksmithing, and his legs were tree-stump thick from days spent behind an oxen-pulled plow. His health was good and he felt as if he would last for years, the good lord above willing and the young Lord Gilles not interfering.

Wiping his palms on the thighs of his gray woolen pants, Glendon looked around the field. Underneath the soil, the potatoes were growing firm and fat. On the next field over, thick waves of barley twisted in the breeze. Many a good meal would come from these potatoes, and many a fine tankard of ale would be made from the barley.

Still, Glendon couldn't be completely happy. His good fortune was in direct contrast to the misery of his neighbors a few miles away. They were facing a host of problems—a year of insects, poor seed, blight, even a battering hailstorm several weeks ago that smashed the barley flat.

Glendon knew the reasons for his luck, and as much as he wanted to help his neighbors, he felt it better to keep his "gift" a secret. Too many spies, too many suspicious people roaming the country these days. Best to keep such a thing hidden and enjoy its bounty in solitude.

Oh, his wife, Adeleen, knew. He never could keep a secret from her. Three years ago, when he discovered his gift for making things grow, she was frightened. For two weeks she wouldn't sleep in the same bed.

"I don't know what's happened to you, Glendon," she'd say. "And I'm not sure I want to know. It reeks of Satan's touch."

"But have I changed?" he'd ask. "Am I not the same man you married? This good luck seems less a curse of Satan than a gift from God."

Finally she came to see the truth in his words. He was the same man—good, kind, loving to her and their six-year-old son, Cameron. In time, she even came to accept his power as a blessing from above. He used it sparingly, only for things like good crops and a healthy litter from the pig. He never used it against another person—as much as he would like to blast Lord Gilles off the face of the earth.

As Glendon shook the soil from his treads, he could hear Adeleen singing a plaintive song about a gallant lad and his lady true. Her light, airy voice weaved through the trees like a melodic breeze as she washed clothes down at the stream.

Glendon had married at twenty-five, late for an era when building a family usually began before the teen years were left behind. But Glendon had been selective when choosing a wife. Although several fathers—and more than several girls—had made Glendon aware that a man with his future needed someone to bear him children, he refused to give in. That is, until he met Adeleen when she and her parents moved into the region. From the moment he saw her he knew she was the one he'd been waiting for. He crumbled before her bright green eyes, ringing laughter, and blond hair.

Perhaps if the crop is big enough this year, Glendon thought, I can set aside a few coins for that fabric I caught Adeleen eyeing in the village. She deserved something pretty, something frivolous. He decided to go down to the stream and give her a quick hug, perhaps more if time permitted.

Those plans were thwarted almost instantly as Glendon heard the laughter of Cameron bubbling up underneath his wife's singing down near the stream. The sound of his son's joy made Glendon's heart swell.

Bright with an insatiable curiosity and an unflinching habit of asking questions of anyone and everyone, Cameron was his father's absolute pride. Glendon dreamed of the days when he and his son would plow the fields together, work at the red-hot forge together, even drink a tankard of wine together.

Adeleen's singing ceased and Cameron's laughter slowly lowered. Glendon decided to visit them, steal a hug and a kiss from them both.

The trembling of the earth shook the happiness from Glendon's stride. The thunder of the hoofbeats thrummed through the ground, the vibration reaching

Glendon before the noise.

Eight horses ridden by men bearing the banner of Lord Gilles crested the hillock behind the cottage. Each man wore a sword on his hip and all dressed in chain mail. Thick, bludgeoning maces dangled from the saddles of two riders.

As they reined in at the front door of Glendon's cottage, one of the soldiers, a man with long, black hair braided down to his beltline, stood in the stirrups and looked about. Obscured by a thick beard, his face was cold and cruel, an impression intensified by the scar that began at his left eyebrow and ripped downward, a river of white scar tissue that ran through his beard. A wicked-looking whip, the end stained a suspicious shade of rusty brown, was looped around the man's left shoulder.

Glendon felt a chill. His visitor was William Morven, the bloodthirsty right-hand man of Lord Gilles.

Swallowing the fear rising in his throat, Glendon calmly walked from the field to the house, waving his hand in greeting.

"Hail, good soldiers," he said.

"Where is your wife, smithy?" Morven asked in a tone usually reserved for dogs.

"I'm not sure," Glendon answered cautiously. "Can I help you?"

"You'd do best just to stay out of my way, smithy," Morven answered. "I'm here to bring your wife to the castle to stand trial for witchcraft. Lest you wish to be included in the trial, be quiet and don't interfere."

"Witchcraft?" Glendon asked, his voice incredulous. "My wife is no witch. Why has such judgment been passed upon her?"

Morven looked coolly at Glendon, as though eyeing a rabbit about to be skewered with a lance. A sadistic smirk creased his face.

"I need not answer to you, peasant," he said. "But I suppose there is no harm. There is nothing you can do anyway."

Morven swept his arm in a circle.

"Why does your farm prosper when so many in this region do not?" he asked.

"Why do your crops stand healthy and strong? Why does the rain come here and not down the road? Why do the insects not devour your plants? Where is the blight that eats the heart out of all the other potatoes?"

He looked at Glendon.

"We have reason to believe your wife has the answers we seek. Perhaps she has powers that make such things possible. Being the whore of Satan can provide many earthly rewards, I understand."

Glendon's face burned a deep crimson and he felt anger building in his gut. He also felt something else, a deep stirring within every fiber of his body, a righteous power ready to lash out. He reined it in.

"You do not truly believe my wife had anything to do with our good fortune?" he said, straining against the hungry push of the gift. "Why couldn't luck or the blessing of the Lord above be the answer?"

"Why should the Lord help a common blacksmith?" Morven said. "Why shouldn't he help those who can do the most with it? Why not Lord Gilles? Or even me?"

Glendon stared straight into Morven's eyes. "I know you, Morven," he said.

"You do not truly think my wife is a witch or you would not have had the courage to ride out here. Your cowardice would have held you back and you would've sent lackeys.

"You come because it is another way to kiss the arse of Lord Gilles, who wants my land and will do anything to get it. Well, he won't get it or my wife, unless he

takes them over my lifeless body."

"As you wish, smithy," Morven said in a low voice. His right hand reached over and drew the whip off his shoulder. His arm flicked back and the only thing Glendon heard was the crack of the whip as it licked his face like a snake fang. He staggered backward, his hand on his left cheek. It came away bloody and his fingers felt a jagged wound running from above his eyebrow to the edge of his beard. Blood dripped from his jaw.

"Papa!" a small voice cried. Cameron ran up the path from the stream and toward his wounded father. "Papa, you're bleeding. Your eye is hurt."

"Get back, Son," Glendon said. "Go into the house. I'm all right. My eye is fine."

"A miscalculation on my part, smithy," Morven said. "I'll rectify that mistake now."

Morven's arm reared back again, preparing to strike, when Adeleen's voice rose again from the stream. His arm dropped.

"So, you do not know where your wife is?" he sneered. "Well, I do."

He reined his horse to the right and charged into the woods, toward the soft singing. Glendon started in pursuit, but a horse jumped in front of him, knocking him to the ground, the horse's hoof grazing his temple. Glendon sat up as the world spun, and he knew he couldn't stand without falling.

"Papa, Papa, Papa," Cameron cried. "They're going to hurt Mama."

As the words left the boy's lips, a scream erupted from the woods. It was coupled with the sound of snorting horses and trampled underbrush. Then the scream was cut short like a twig snapped off a dead tree.

"Maaaamaaaaa," the boy cried and ran toward the sound.

"Cameron, come back here," Glendon yelled. "Don't go down there."

The boy disappeared into the woods.

Glendon got to his feet, the world swaying beneath him. The pain in his temple shot lightning through his brain, while the dripping cut on his cheek hurt down to the roots of his teeth.

I don't care about the pain, he thought. I must get to Adeleen. Protect her from Morven.

He took two steps when Morven emerged from the woods. Glendon's knees gave way when he saw his wife's body draped across the front of Morven's saddle. Blood covered one side of her head.

Immediately behind Morven ran Cameron. Glendon could hear his son's pitiful sobbing. The boy beat on Morven's foot with both hands.

"You killed my mama. You killed my mama," he cried.

Morven took his foot from the stirrup and kicked the boy in the side of the head. It was a glancing blow but knocked Cameron to the ground. Crying, the boy jumped up and beat on Morven again. This time the soldier ignored him.

A hard look was etched into Morven's face as he rode up to Glendon. He stopped the horse and unceremoniously dumped Adeleen's body on the ground. Glendon crawled quickly to his wife and pulled her body into his lap, cradling her head in his arms. Tears flowed freely down his face as her head lolled backward and bloody blond hair flowed over his thighs. Cameron sank to his knees beside his father and gently lifted his mother's hand, holding it to his cheek while he sobbed.

The other soldiers slowly filed out of the woods on their horses. They rode fifty feet behind Morven, ashamed and unwilling to be part of his cruelty. Their heads hung forward and they were silent.

"She tried to get away across the stream," Morven said. "She slipped on a mossy

rock and fell. Her head struck another stone. It broke her neck, as you can see. But I suppose it saves us the time and trouble of trying and executing her as a witch." He shrugged.

Cameron fell onto his belly and buried his face in his mother's skirts, grief consuming him. Glendon felt other emotions, ones he could not—would not—deny. The fire scorched his insides, burning the fear and hesitation from him. His back to the soldiers, Glendon brushed the hair from his forehead and glared at Morven. The soldier gasped in shock, his face turning ashen.

Glendon had no eyes. Only a cobalt-blue fire burned in his sockets, flaring like sunlight reflecting off an executioner's ax. It was the crystalline heat of hatred.

"You made another mistake, Morven," Glendon growled. "You killed the wrong one. You want a witch? A real one? I'll show you. But not now. Not yet. But soon. I want you to know it's coming. I want you to fear it. I want you to look over your shoulder at every footstep. I want you to suffer. And believe me, you will, both in the anticipation and when the actual time comes. Suffering as you've never known. Suffering worse than anything you've ever inflicted. Debts are due, Morven, and they will be collected in your blood."

Glendon stood, cradling his wife's limp body in his arms.

"Now leave," he said. "I must bury my wife."

His face gray, his hands trembling as he clutched the reins, Morven wheeled his horse about and, without a word to his soldiers, fled toward the east. After a moment the soldiers followed.

Cameron's crying and the chunk of a spade in earth were the only sounds Glendon heard for the next several hours. Cameron eventually fell asleep on the ground, overcome by his sorrow; Glendon dug until the grave was finished. He took his wife and washed the blood from her hair and face, then wrapped her in

their best blanket Just before he pulled the blanket across her face, he bent over and kissed her on the forehead, a single tear falling from his eye and landing on her lips.

"I love you, Adeleen," he said, covering her face.

Sadness and fury waged a fierce battle in his heart. As he lowered his wife into the ground and threw the first spadeful of dirt in, the fury won. By the time the burial was finished, Glendon's mind was set in stone. He knew there was no turning back. There never had been.

He understood he couldn't inflict the kind of justice Morven deserved. He would need help. Strong help. Stronger than anything this world could provide. Goose bumps broke out along his sweaty arms when he realized what he was thinking. He had never attempted to raise such an... an... avenger. Yes, that was a nice, clean way to describe what he was seeking. An avenger.

About dusk, Cameron woke up long enough to cry some more and to take a little broth, but he went back to sleep quickly. Glendon realized the pain was too much for his son. Better that he sleep than be awake and hurting.

Looking at his boy sleeping, Glendon was racked by sadness and despair. Tears rolled down his cheeks and left glittering diamond beads in his beard.

How will I raise the boy alone? How will I go on without Adeleen? What will happen after tonight?

Questions, questions, but no answers. Probably there are no answers, he thought. The answers come each day, slowly and surely. After tonight, chances were life would not be slow and sure for him and Cameron. They would have to leave this land, move to some place where they were strangers. It might be that they would have to leave many lands before the running was finished.

He kissed his son, made sure the fire in the hearth was burning low but steadily,

then walked to the blacksmithing shed behind the house.

A maelstrom of red-hot coals burned in the fieldstone forge. Their heat swirled and eddied in the air at the center of the shed. Glendon never let them go out.

An iron handle stuck out of the coals, the handle to an M-shaped brand Glendon had made for Cameron several weeks before. Glendon smiled slightly at the memory of the boy running around for hours the day he received it, searing M's into everything in sight.

Tonight the forge's glow painted the inside of the shed a bloody orange. The blacksmithing tools—hammers, iron prods, tongs, the anvil—seemed to burn with an unholy fire, as if they were alive and knew what was coming, even anticipated it.

For a moment, Glendon thought about praying for guidance, then decided it would probably just insult the Lord, considering what he was about to try.

Better to do it and get it over with.

He decided his best plan was to follow the same pattern he used when helping his crops grow but take it several steps further. That was easy enough. All he did was clear his mind of distractions, think about what he wanted, picture it in his head and concentrate.

He lowered himself to the dirt floor and sat cross-legged. Running a shaky hand through his hair, he took a deep breath, placed his palms on his knees, and straightened his back. Dropping his chin to his chest, he proceeded to empty his mind, cleansing it of any thoughts except those of the task at hand. As he did, he felt the familiar stirring in his muscles, an almost sexual feeling of power.

In his mind, he started formulating a picture of the avenger.

Inside the shed, a cold wind began to swirl. The coals in the forge glowed brightly, like the flares of hell.

Chapter 1



"Sonuvabitch! Sonuvabitch! Sonuvabitch!"

Jason Medlocke squirmed madly in the driver's seat as the hot coffee bore down on the tender skin of his crotch. Holding the steering wheel with his left hand, he jerked the ceramic cup from between his legs with his right. In the process, he sloshed some of the steaming coffee on the web of flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

"Goddammit! Goddammit! Goddammit!" he howled as he blew on his scalded hand. Testing his luck on a morning that already sucked, Jason took his eyes off the road to check his skin for blisters.

As he looked at his hand, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Looking up, Jason saw a pickup truck, not more than fifty feet in front of him, pulling across his lane as it made a leisurely left-hand turn from a side road. The truck was barely moving. Jason slammed his brakes, yanking the wheel to the right, throwing his car onto the shoulder. As he passed the pickup, he could see the driver's face speared like a deer by the oncoming headlights. And the driver was smiling.

The force of the swerve jerked the coffee cup out of Jason's hand, and it sailed into the windshield with a thud, creating a starburst in the glass and spraying droplets of coffee all over the interior.

Jason veered back onto the road, a cloud of dust from the shoulder rising

between him and the truck. "That sonuvabitch, that drunken jackass," he said out loud. "If I wasn't in such a hurry, I'd arrest the fucker."

Another drunk bastard. Just like Sarah and Claire. Eighteen months ago.

Blood rushed up Jason's neck and into his face. A familiar tingling made his muscles jump and twitch, live wires racing through his limbs. From the time he was a child, the tingling rose when he was getting too angry, getting ready to lose control. He had seen the effects of his temper, and now the tingling was a signal he always heeded.

His expression swiftly changed, as though a cool breeze blew across his hot cheeks. His jaw unclenched and his mouth relaxed from its granite line. He took a deep breath and settled back into his seat, running his hand through his night-black hair.

Control, he thought. That was the key. One day at a time; one moment at a time.

The tingling subsided.

"Jesus Christ, where's my gun?" he said. "I'm just gonna blow my head off and get it over with."

It was a shitty way to start a week.

It had begun an hour before, when his alarm had gone off at five-thirty as usual. He lay in bed, stretching, rubbing his eyes, running his hand over his face and hearing the automatic coffee maker coming to life in the kitchen. In a couple of minutes, he smelled the appetizing aroma of freshly brewed coffee. He lay in bed, thinking about the upcoming day at the Gwinnett County Police Department. There wasn't a lot going on in the WASP-ish suburban county of Atlanta, at least not for the department's two homicide detectives, he and his partner Peter "Badger" Franklin.

But there was the missing girl, Amanda Benton. Jason had a bad feeling about it. He had been at headquarters the night before, tidying up some paperwork, bored with being alone at home, when Lurleen, the dispatcher, called him on the intercom.

"Jazz, honey, there's some man on the line. He's worked up real bad. Wants to talk to someone. Can you talk at him?"

"Sure," Jason said.

The man identified himself as Joseph Benton. He was panicked. His little girl, Amanda, had gone to the skating rink and should have been home hours before. He wanted police to start searching for her now, but Jason regurgitated the standard spiel about a person not being legally missing until twenty-four hours passed. Please call back in the morning, he told Mr. Benton.

I should've been more helpful, Jason thought as he lay in bed. At least let him know I'd keep an eye out.

But he wouldn't keep an eye out. Truth is, he hated dealing with missing kids. They always reminded Mm of Claire. And that always led to thoughts of Sarah. Some said eighteen months was a long time to mourn, but Jason didn't feel as if he'd ever get completely over it.

He was trying hard to shake these thoughts from his mind and decided a cup of coffee and a shower would help, when his bedside phone rang. The buzzing made him jump and he almost knocked the phone off the nightstand lunging for it.

"Medlocke."

"Jason, it's Badger."

Must be bad news. Badger always called him Jazz otherwise.

"Uh-huh?"

"We've found a little girl's body. She's been murdered."

"Please don't tell me her name is Amanda Benton."

"Yeah, it is. How'd you know?"

After getting directions from Badger, Jason dressed quickly in a pair of jeans, an oxford-cloth shirt, and his prized Levi's jacket. It took him about fifteen minutes to reach the crime scene.

The body was found behind the Kroger grocery at Gwinnett Station shopping center on Pleasant Hill Road. A stock clerk, emptying trash into the compactor out back, thought his eyes might be playing tricks, but when he looked again he was sure he saw something large sitting against the wall about thirty feet away. He decided to investigate.

He fainted when he got close enough to see what it was.

Jason parked at the eastern end of the shopping center behind the other police cars already on the scene. Their cherry tops were spraying the buildings with revolving shades of blue and red.

The Kroger back door was around the corner of the building, out of Jason's direct line of sight, but he could see the white forensic trucks parked near the crime scene. Spotlights illuminated the area. Jason sat in his car for a moment, running his hand through his longer-than-department-standards black hair, preparing himself. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror, his cobalt-blue eyes staring back with undisguised apprehension. He quickly glazed them over with the dispassionate stare of a battle-weary detective and climbed from the car.

The entire freight area of the center was sealed off with strips of yellow tape that read Police Crime Scene—Do Not Cross. Jason ducked under the tape and

walked quickly toward the lights fifty yards away. When he rounded the corner, he saw Badger's ever-present Atlanta Braves cap poking above the heads of the others.

As he moved closer to the crowd, he noticed County Coroner Buzz Saunders and his assistant kneeling off to the left a few yards. Since they were near the wall opposite the Kroger back door, Jason figured they were huddled around the body. His assumption proved correct when the officers turned around with blood-drained faces.

Saunders and his assistant were examining the body. While the main examination would occur at the morgue, they wanted to get some preliminary findings. But they were careful not to disturb too much. Hairs and other fibers clinging to the fabric of the little girl's clothes might be knocked off if she was touched often. The more she was touched, the more likely evidence would be damaged.

All around the freight area, forensic technicians scoured the ground for clues, making a grid-search of the area. The technicians were clothed in solid white from the shoe guards covering their feet to the white scrub pants and shirts; Jason mused they looked like a team of Men from Glad. Along with the surgical masks on their faces, the technicians wore surgical gloves. Clear plastic evidence bags were pulled from pockets each time a potential clue was found, but Jason saw there weren't many plastic bags being used, mostly just a lot of face-near-the-ground searching. Norman Bibb, head of forensics, was directing the operation, on his hands and knees, getting dirty just like everyone else.

The freight area stretched the length of the shopping center, a good three hundred yards, twisting and turning its way behind the stores. The trash that seems to naturally accumulate behind retail buildings made looking for clues more difficult. Jason knew the search would go well into the day. Every piece of

debris would be checked, every corner scoured, every dumpster crawled into. The storm drains would be opened and checked. Employees of all the stores in the area would be questioned.

"So what's the word?" Jason asked, tapping Badger on the back of his left shoulder. Badger turned around, his face washed in the unmerciful light of the spots. Underneath the baseball cap, sweat ran off his forehead and his eyes were glassy. His big, moon-shaped face, normally a face destined to be a magnet for cheek-pinching old ladies, was the shade of fireplace ashes. The lights only highlighted his pallor.

"Jesus, Jason, you won't believe it," Badger said, his voice wobbly. He pulled his cap off and rubbed his meaty hand across his short, red hair, through the blond streak that ran off-center from the top of his forehead to the back of his neck. It was the streak—a birthmark that ran in the Franklin family—that earned him his nickname. Some uncle once said little Pete looked just like a badger and was about as mean.

Badger tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

"Ease up," Jason said. "Talk slow."

Badger took a deep breath.

"I just got here a couple of minutes ago," he said. "It's... it's awful."

"You're sure it's Amanda?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. Go on, see for yourself. But be ready to be sick. I was."

As he walked over to the body, Jason steeled himself. It must be pretty bad to make Badger throw up.

When he first saw Amanda's body, Jason thought it sat propped up against the concrete-block wall, facing outward. Bile rose to his throat when he realized he

was wrong.

The little girl sat about two feet from the wall in a small chair, one with the legs cut off so it would rest firmly on the ground. She was dressed in a peach-colored cotton shirt and a pair of shorts. Her legs stretched straight out in front of her, away from the wall, and her arms rested in her lap, almost peacefully.

That's where the peacefulness ended.

Amanda's head was on backward. A silver choker of duct tape encircled her tiny neck dozens of times. Jason figured the killer must have used most of a roll because the tape extended from just under the chin to the point where the neck met the shoulders. It was wrapped thickly, the killer obviously wanting to make sure her head didn't tumble off before the police arrived. He was making a point and wanted to be sure it was understood.

The girl's eyes were gouged out, the sockets staring sightlessly. On the wall in front of the direction her face pointed, were the words North and Heaven. They were spray-painted in bright red, and bloodlike rivulets of paint ran down the wall. Turning to look at the wall of the grocery store, the direction Amanda's feet faced, Jason saw the words South and Hell painted in the same color.

Not subtle, but effective.

Buzz Saunders finished his examination and grunted as he stood, his knees snapping in protest. He saw Jason and smiled grimly.

"If I had known how badly football would screw up my knees, I'd have spent more time in the library," he said, pulling off his surgical gloves, which were coated with red "Dragon's Blood" fingerprint dust left by the forensics team.

Saunders' voice held a note of humor, but Jason could see the man's eyes, tucked behind his thick, tortoiseshell glasses, were as cold and hard as diamonds. The coroner looked over Jason's shoulder and motioned to two technicians standing

next to the Crime Scene Investigation truck.

The pair came toward the body, one carrying a large black plastic bag.

"What have we got, Buzz?" Jason asked as the technicians unzipped the bag, unrolled it on the ground and, donning surgical gloves, picked up the body and laid it inside. They took special care with the head, making sure it didn't tumble off.

"Well, she's dead," Saunders said. "That takes care of the first part of my job, as if any person off the street couldn't tell you that. As to what killed her, I'm not sure, but I'll bet when I take off that tape I'll find some kind of rope burns or fingerprints. My guess right now is that she was strangled. If she'd been killed by having her head cut off, there'd be blood everywhere. The heart would keep pumping until the very last second. I figure she was choked to death then brought here, where someone would find her pretty soon."

"Forensics make ESDA before you moved into the area?" Jason asked, referring to the Electrostatic Detection Apparatus, a device that lifts footprints, even invisible ones, off any surface.

"Yeah," Saunders said. "They were made in a ten-foot radius around the body. Found some stuff, too, I think."

"Was she raped?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she was, but I can't be sure until forensics finishes checking her clothes for fibers and prints. But there's a good-sized bloodstain in the crotch of her shorts. A ten-year-old girl just isn't equipped to handle a full-size penis."

"When are you going to do the autopsy?"

"Just as soon as I can get back to the morgue with the body."

"I want the report as soon as you finish."

"Sure."

Jason was walking back to Badger when Saunders spoke again.

"This is a nasty one, Jason. I don't think it'll stop here."

As Jason turned to face him, Saunders pulled a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket and drew one out. Using matches tucked into the pack's cellophane wrapper, he lit the cigarette and took a long, deep drag. He rubbed his hand across his rapidly balding head as he exhaled with a lingering whoosh.

"Stuff like this is why I got out of Atlanta and came up here," he said, a cloud of smoke flowing from his mouth and nostrils. "You see this mean-spirited shit in the big city, so you get away from it hoping it doesn't follow. It always does sooner or later. Like cancer."

"I know," Jason said. "I'm from Boston, remember?"

"Yeah, so I'm probably preaching to the converted, right? But I've got an opinion if you want to hear it."

Jason nodded.

"I don't think this is a one-shot deal," Saunders said. "This type of killing isn't emotional; it's not sudden and uncontrollable like someone blowing a fuse. There's too much planning, too much method to the madness. The creep who does this enjoys it. This is killing for pleasure. It's like the first time you get laid. It's so great you want to do it again, and soon. I'd bet my mortgage that this guy already is planning the next one. He's already dreaming about getting his rocks off again."

"So help us catch him," Jason said. "Do the best fucking autopsy you've ever done. Give us everything you can to go on."

"I'll try," Saunders said, dropping his cigarette to the ground and grinding it

under his heel. "I'll surely try."

Jason's stomach rolled as he watched Saunders stroll back to his car and get in. He knew the coroner was right; he knew it from the moment he saw Amanda's body. People who killed children were cut from a crazier quilt than other murderers.

Except to the most insane, children were sacrosanct, off limits if only because, should you be caught and sent to prison, your life was over if the other inmates ever got a chance. Child killers were frowned upon in the hierarchy of the prison system.

Even serial killers—true lunatics if the word had any meaning at all—usually stuck with adults, and often low-life adults at that. It was safer. People didn't get quite as upset when you knocked off a hooker or a junkie or even a run-of-the-mill businessman. But kill a kid and you're just asking for the hounds of hell and public outrage to come nipping at your heels. Politicians become intimately involved in child murder investigations because the voters chew big chunks out of their asses every day the killer goes unfound. Those hassles inevitably come crashing down on the heads of the detectives assigned to the case. This time, that meant Jason and Badger.

Jason was lost in these disturbing thoughts when he heard Badger's voice calling him.

"Jason, c'mere quick," Badger cried, sitting in the passenger seat of one of the police cruisers. The door was open and he was holding the radio mike in his right hand, waving it in the air. Jason sprinted to the car.

"Dispatch says they just got a phone call from some guy saying he killed a little girl," Badger said. "I've got Lurleen on the radio now. Thought you'd want to hear it."

Badger put his mouth back to the microphone. "Lurleen? You still there?" he said.

"Yeah. I'm here," came the shaky reply.

No "honey," Jason noted.

"Jason's here now, start over and tell us everything the guy said."

The sound of Lurleen taking a deep breath came over the radio.

"Well, like I said, this guy called 'bout four minutes ago and asked if we had any information on the death of a little girl," she said. "I told him he'd have to talk to one of the detectives. I figured he was a reporter or somethin'.

"Anyway, that's when he asked me if I *wanted* any information on the little girl who was killed behind the Kroger store," she said. "He said he was the one who'd done it and he was gonna kill some more, only he wouldn't just stick with little girls.

"Then he started goin' on 'bout how he was bein' merciful to these kids and puttin' 'em outta their misery. How evil was everywhere and a lot of other weirdo religious stuff. And just before he hung up he said somethin' I didn't quite get. He said that if we wanted to know more about him, we should pick up the Yellow Pages."

"What the hell does that mean?" Badger asked.

Jason whirled to face a young cop standing behind him.

"Grab some people, get in your cars, and search every phone booth and pay phone in this area, starting with the ones around this shopping center," he said.

"Check every book of Yellow Pages you see. Wear gloves. If you find something, don't touch it. Get on the radio and call us."

The young officer ran off, the responsibility of his task riding high on his

shoulders.

"Did you trace the call?" Badger asked Lurleen.

"Yeah, it was from a pay phone at 2635 Pleasant Hill Road, that's a Phillips 66 station."

"Goddammit," Badger yelled. "That's a quarter of a mile down the road! Get someone down there now!"

like a kicked-open anthill, cops scurried to their squad cars. The pungent smoke of burning steel-belted radials hung in the air as they squealed out of the parking lot. Jason and Badger remained behind.

"He's not going to be there," Jason said.

"I know," Badger said. "But maybe he fucked up and left something behind that he didn't mean to."

Fat chance, Jason thought.

Ten minutes later, the patrol cars returned. They found nothing at the gas station, but part of the crime investigation unit remained on the scene, dusting the phone for fingerprints and searching the station for any clues.

One of the officers, Mallory, hung around after the others moved away. He stood next to Jason and coughed.

"Yeah Mallory, what is it?" Jason asked.

"Well, it's kind of strange," the young man said. "I'm not sure I should even bring it up."

"You already have," Badger said.

"Yeah, right," Mallory said. "Okay, I was the first one up there and had my spot trained on the station from about three hundred feet away. I swear I saw someone standing at the phone next to the cashier's booth. I looked down the

road to make sure I wasn't turning in front of anybody, and when I looked back at the phone, the person was gone. But honest to God, there wasn't anyplace for him to go. Nothing but open parking lot for fifty yards in every direction. And I only took my eyes off him for a split second. Nobody can move that fast."

"You checked the whole station thoroughly?" Jason asked.

"Yessir. I went over every square inch. Didn't find a thing."

"Your eyes probably were playing tricks on you," Jason said. "It's kind of hard to see things this time of the morning, especially with the sun coming up. Makes everything hazy and indistinct."

"But I was so sure I saw something," Mallory said.

"Let's see what forensics turns up," Jason said.

He looked at Badger, who shrugged. Badger opened his mouth to speak when the radio inside the car started barking loudly. The voice of the young officer who'd been sent to look for Yellow Pages leapt from the speaker.

"Detective Medlocke, Detective Franklin, I've found something!" the officer said, nearly out of breath with excitement.

"Where are you?" Badger asked into the microphone.

"Around front, about three quarters of the way down the shopping center."

Jumping into the squad car, Jason and Badger sped to the front of the building. The young officer stood next to his patrol car, its spotlight directed on a pay phone.

When Jason and Badger pulled up, the technicians' van right behind, the officer pointed to an open set of Yellow Pages sitting on the ground under the phone. A plain, white envelope rested in the center of the open book, a small piece of cellophane tape holding the envelope in place. On the front was the word

Brethren.

Badger reached in his pocket and handed Jason his Swiss army knife. Flicking open one of the blades, Jason cautiously pried the envelope loose from the Yellow Pages. Using the blade, he flipped the envelope over. The back flap had not been licked and it sprang open.

"Give me a pair of tongs," Jason said, extending his left hand behind him. A technician laid a clear plastic pair in his open palm.

Holding the envelope down with the knife blade, Jason drew out a single sheet of paper with the tongs. When the paper was clear, a technician picked up the envelope with another set of tongs and placed it in a clear bag. Jason didn't notice. He was concentrating on the paper's typed message.

Brethren: The time is nigh. Armageddon approaches. The great White Throne Judgment. Resurrection of the Wicked Dead. All sinners and unbelievers shall be cast into the Lake of Fire. Do you know Jesus? Do you know God? They know you. They know the good that's in you and They know the evil in you, too. But there is hope, if we act in time. Satan is at work in our world. Even as he works on adults, destroying our world from above, he is injecting his venom into the young, their minds washed in the filth of Satan. Even as their bodies and spirit move north, towards heaven, their eyes and minds are facing south, bewitched by hell's bright glow. They are being raped by Lucifer. They must be cleansed. They must be purified. If thy eye offend you, pluck out that eye, the Lord says. He has said it to me. I have obeyed.

The note was signed "The Mercy Killer."

Chapter 2



Headquarters was hell incarnate. Captain Silverman met Jason and Badger at the door as they arrived from the crime scene about nine that morning. Cyrus Silverman's slender, craggy face, usually bland and expressionless, resembled worked-over granite, gray and haggard with cracks running through it.

Silverman had received a phone call about the murder at six in the morning and arrived at police headquarters at seven. By eight, every member of the county commission had called him, as well as almost every other politician in the county. First they wanted to know what happened, then what was being done to ferret out the killer. What could he tell them except that every possible avenue was being explored? That hardly made them happy.

"I need something substantial," he told Jason and Badger as they walked through headquarters back door. "I don't expect you to solve this in one day, but give me something pretty soon. I'll hold the bastards at bay for a while."

Along with the phone calls from local politicians, reporters swamped headquarters, asking questions about the murder, tying up the phones. Word leaked about the crime's brutality and every newspaper and TV station in the Atlanta area wanted details. They almost went crazy when news about the note and the Mercy Killer got out. Jason was furious that information on the note was floating about; he would have preferred to keep that part under wraps for a while. He could only figure that one of the cops or technicians told a wife or a

girlfriend who probably told someone who probably called a reporter. By that afternoon, the story would be splashed across every newspaper in the city and be the lead story on every TV station. The national wire services would pick it up from there.

"This one's going bad and nationwide," Badger predicted.

The investigative process was one that Jason and Badger knew well. First, information about the note and the murder were fed into the National Crime Information Computer, which came up with a dozen names of religious fanatics and child murderers, but no religious-fanatic child murderers. And most of the "maybes" were either dead or in some mental institution. The computer was still working, though. Nut cases were in no short supply.

The note itself was in forensics, lab experts examining it for fingerprints and to determine what kind of typewriter it was written on. From there it would be sent to a psychiatrist, who would try to glean some sort of psychological makeup of the writer.

The ESDA was examining footprints pulled from the pavement around Amanda's body. It would be able to tell weight and height of anyone who was in that area, as well as the shoe size and make of the shoes. Forensics decided to pull prints only in the near vicinity of the body, since the loading area was routinely filled with delivery trucks and workers.

Knowing that such a murder would take time and planning, officers called local hotels to see who had checked in during the previous several days, checking for drifters or someone staying an inordinately long time.

For their part, Jason and Badger drove to the Benton's house to question the child's parents. It was a task they detested.

Joseph Benton was not a man comfortable with deep feelings. It was hard for him to watch movies or TV shows with crying and tense emotional moments. They made him feel distinctly uneasy, as if he were a little boy watching dirty movies.

He was perfectly suited to his job as a CPA. Numbers and figures were cold and emotionless and safe; they never embarrassed him with their feelings.

In spite of his repressed emotions, Benton sat on the sofa in his living room, his face red and blotchy from tears. His heavily receding salt-and-pepper hair was cropped too close to the head to look truly sloppy, despite the fact that he was running his hands over his head about once a minute. When he wasn't doing that, he wiped his raw, running nose with a well-used handkerchief bunched in his fist. Each time he finished, he folded the handkerchief into a neat square only to crush it into a tangled wad immediately afterward. Then he started over.

Benton's wife, Betty, was in the bedroom, sleeping fitfully under sedation prescribed by her doctor. Unable to sit down while her daughter was missing, she had been up and moving about for almost eighteen hours. When the Gwinnett County patrol officer knocked on the front door about seven in the morning with the news of Amanda, Mrs. Benton threw up on his shoes before he even spoke.

A cup of coffee sat on the Queen Anne table in front of Joseph Benton's knees. It was tomb cold. Benton stared at the cup relentlessly, but never picked it up.

Jason and Badger drank two cups of coffee and were about to ask for another. It helped victims if they could be doing something to take their minds off their pain. Even the simple act of making a cup of coffee helped a little.

The questioning began simply: Tell us what happened.

Benton said he was at the office Sunday night, taking care of some loose ends.

He didn't know Amanda had gone skating and instead thought she was with her mother, shopping or something, so he didn't get excited when he came home about eight and neither was there. Only after her mother returned about nine from a bridge game did he realize his error.

"Why didn't you do something when I called Sunday?" he asked. "Why do you have to wait twenty-four hours? If someone is missing, they're missing. They're either here or they're not."

Jason began to explain that most missing people turn up within a few hours of their disappearance, but Badger gently coughed and shook his head.

Amanda was an only child and there were photographs and portraits of her scattered throughout the ranch-style house. Love for the little girl practically oozed from the walls. Her room was painted a delicate shade of lavender, and her bed—white French provincial with a canopy—was inhabited by a herd of stuffed animals. Posters of U2, Billy Ray Cyrus, and cartoon characters Ren & Stimpy adorned the walls.

She was in the sixth grade at Trickum Middle School, and the yearbook her father brought out held a photo of an amazingly pretty girl with short, blond hair and the smile of a person yet to encounter the harsh realities of the world. The notes and messages written in the back of the yearbook showed Amanda was well liked by schoolmates and by teachers.

Hell, even the principal signed her annual, Jason thought as he flipped through the book.

Her father now sat in a chair, a spent balloon of a man, limp and empty. The yearbook was on his lap, open to her picture. He stared at the floor, his voice a monotone.

"Amanda is such a sweet, beautiful girl," he said. "Why would anyone want to

hurt her?"

For about thirty more minutes, the two detectives tried to dredge whatever information they could from Benton, uncover any untapped tidbit, but it was futile. By this point, Benton's brain couldn't even be called functioning. He finally wound up repeating, "My baby. My baby. How could you do this to my baby?"

Jason and Badger drove back to headquarters in silence. As he drove, Jason developed an overwhelming urge to call his father, Stephen. An Episcopal priest in Boston, Stephen Medlocke was the person everyone in the family turned to for advice, for solace, even for a good laugh. His father was the solid oak center during the worst and best times of Jason's life. He needed him now.

Back at his desk, Jason was reaching for the phone, the number for his father's church office already on his fingertips, when Buzz Saunders walked into their office with a manila folder in his hands and a Marlboro drooping from his lips. His eyes were bloodshot and weak, the result of no sleep and the ever-present cloud of smoke surrounding his head.

"Got the autopsy," he said, grinding his cigarette out on the rim of the wastebasket and immediately reaching into his pocket to get another.

"And?" Jason asked.

"Well, she died by manual strangulation. There were finger-shaped bruises around her throat. But by the time it happened, it was virtually a moot point. There was a monster of a contusion at the base of her skull and I found traces of metal in her skin. Somebody knocked the shit out of her with something big, a pipe or a wrench or something. Her brain was hemorrhaging when the strangulation occurred. Chances are she was already comatose when the fucker was choking her.

"Something else interesting, too," he continued. "The way her head was taken off. It was done cleanly, not hacked off. There were metal flakes in the tissue of her neck and I've sent them to the lab for ID. I think, though, that they came from one of those outdoor survival saws. You ever seen one?"

Both detectives shook their heads.

"Well, basically all they are is a piece of wire stretched between two metal rings. A coating of abrasive metal flakes is attached to the wire so you can saw through stuff quickly. Trouble is, they dull real fast and you can't resharpen them, so, you have to buy a new one after almost every use."

"Where can you get them?" Jason asked.

"Not sure. Probably at any outdoor shop."

Jason picked up his Yellow Pages and leafed through to the O section. As he flipped through the pages, the door opened again and Norman Bibb, head of forensics, walked in. He briefly waved a sheaf of papers at Jason.

"What've you got?" Badger asked.

"We didn't find much, just a few fibers—cotton, white, probably from a T-shirt or something," Bibb said. "Doesn't do us a lot of good."

"No blanket fibers or anything?" Jason asked, looking up from the Yellow Pages.

"Nope. My guess is the guy wrapped her up in some sort of plastic tarp and hauled her to the shopping center."

"Not even any hair?" Jason continued.

"No. The guy must have worn a nylon stocking or something. If he'd been wearing a ski mask, there'd be some fibers from it. You've practically got to have a bag underneath those things to catch all the fibers falling off."

"Fingerprints?"

"Nothing but smudge prints off surgical gloves."

"What about you, Buzz? Any prints from the body?" Badger asked.

"Nope."

"ESDA?" Jason asked.

"We got something there," Bibb said, pulling a piece of paper from the middle of the stack in his right hand. "It came up with about ten different footprints. That's actually kind of low, considering the number of delivery people and what-not that work behind the shopping center. But one shoe cropped up more than the others—a size ten Nike. This print was mostly in a semicircle around the body, like the guy was walking back and forth around it, admiring his handiwork. Judging by the width of the shoe and what that says about the pressure on it, the guy's about five-ten and weighs about one seventy."

He glanced at the papers again.

"Oh yeah, and here's something else," he said. "No fingerprints on the note, but it was typed on an electric 1950 model IBM. One of those big, gray mothers that weighs about the same as a small horse. Can't be too many of those things floating around. And the *a* and the *r* are a bit out of whack on this particular model."

"I'll start calling typewriter sales shops," Badger said.

"Call the repair shops, too," Jason added. "I'd think a repairman would remember one of those things coming past him."

"Had she been raped?" Badger asked, turning his attention to Saunders.

The coroner grimaced. "Yeah. Semen shows he's AB positive."

"That's a pretty unusual blood type," Jason said. "We can feed that into NCIC and hopefully come up with something."

Badger dialed the computer lab, telling them to check AB types. The technician said he'd call back when the program was finished running.

"Here's something else, something not so nice," Saunders said. "She was raped after she was dead and her head cut off."

"Jesus Christ," Badger said, his face going white.

"No, not him," Saunders said. "I don't think he was anywhere around when this was taking place."

Chapter 3



Badger and Jason sat quietly for a moment, leafing through the papers and digesting the information left by Saunders and Bibb. Finally, Badger spoke.

"This one is going to get worse before it gets better, Jazz," he said.

"Not if I can help it. There's got to be something in this information, something we just haven't noticed yet. I'm not leaving until I find it," Jason answered, reaching for his jar full of ballpoint pens and always-sharpened pencils. As he stretched, a nail of pain jolted into his right shoulder and down to his fingertips. He grunted in pain.

"Quit reaching so far," Badger said, his eyes on the paper in front of him. "You do that every time."

Jason nodded and rubbed the lump of scar tissue on top of his right collarbone. The break had been severe, both ragged tips of the bone tore through the skin, but it wasn't the worst injury he received that day eight months ago. Plowing his car into the front end of that tractor-trailer almost threw him through the windshield. Without that bottle of J&B in him making him limp, he probably would've died. Instead, he suffered the broken collarbone, a broken leg, a crushed spleen and ruptured bladder, one hundred stitches sewn into various parts of his body, and the humiliation of finally admitting to himself what everyone else in his life knew: He was an alcoholic.

Luckily for him, the guy in the truck only received minor scrapes and bruises.

The department convinced the man not to sue, after giving him a sizable chunk of cash for his medical expenses.

Six weeks in rehab put Jason back on the path, and he'd been sober ever since. The pain of Sarah's and Claire's death still remained, but he no longer swam in the desire to soak it in booze.

Until a few months before, he hadn't had the chance. Not with Badger hovering over him like a mother hen, inviting him to dinner every night, making sure he kept busy, kept sober.

Now, though, even Badger trusted him. Jason still spent several evenings a month with his partner and his two kids, but he did it because he loved the company, not because he was afraid of being alone.

At his desk, Jason glanced at the pictures of Badger's kids hanging on the wall. Cynthia, eleven, was the spitting image of her mother, a situation that caused Badger no small amount of pain, since her mother had run off with a trucker two years before and no one had heard from her since. Cynthia's brother, seven-year-old Clint, looked just like his dad, white streak in the hair and all.

Dear God, let me solve this one so they don't get hurt, Jason prayed.

The two detectives sat at their desks for a while longer, staring at the papers on their desks, moving things around, accomplishing nothing. Finally Jason leapt up.

"Listen, I'm going to get some coffee. You want some?"

"Sure. Cream no sugar."

"Like I don't know that by now," Jason said, reaching for Badger's white porcelain cup printed with the words *A Country Boy Can Survive*. The inside of the cup was stained a mucky shade of brown from innumerable refills of the department's bitter, gut-busting coffee.

"God, don't you ever wash this thing?" Jason asked, staring with disgust into Badger's cup. "It looks like a swamp in here."

"Nah, I figure if we ever run out of coffee, I can just spit in the cup and get enough taste to slide by," he said.

"That's sicker than shit, you know that?" Jason said as he headed for the kitchenette.

For the first time that day, Badger laughed. He pushed away from his desk and tilted back in his chair, adjusting the baseball cap that never seemed to leave his head. Through year after year of frustration, he was a diehard Atlanta fan, cheering for the Braves during baseball season, the Hawks in basketball, and the Falcons in football. He even spent several months in a pissy mood when the Flames moved to Calgary to play hockey. His masochistic tendencies to cheer the generally dismal Atlanta sports scene had yet to pay off, although the Braves had teased him with two straight World Series appearances.

As Jason headed back from the coffeepot with two steaming cups, he smiled at the thought of his and Badger's initial meeting. It was Jason's first day at Gwinnett and he was looking for the bathroom, his arms full of papers given him by a lady in personnel who wore such hideous makeup he kept expecting her to say: "I want those ruby slippers, my pretty."

His head was turned to the left, scanning an adjacent hallway for a bathroom, when he ran headlong into an immovable object. The papers in his arms exploded into a mushroom cloud and he staggered backward, spearing his thigh on the corner of the water fountain and leaving a deep bruise that would plague him for days. He quickly leaned against the wall to keep from tumbling to the floor.

In front of him stood Badger, all six feet, five inches of him.

"Goddamn boy, you've got your head stuffed *entirely* too far up the crack of your butt," Badger said, a big smile on his face. "Lighten up. We don't bite—at least not hard enough to leave teethmarks."

There'd been a lot of water over and under the bridge since then—Sarah's and Claire's accident, Jason's drinking, Badger's divorce. Life went on, however miserably.

"Here you are, dear," Jason said, setting Badger's cup on his desk.

"Thanks, darling," Badger said.

Placing his cup on his neatly arranged desk, Jason leaned back in his chair and cracked his knuckles, a sound that brought a grimace to Badger's face. "Man, I was hoping you wouldn't get around to doing that today," he said.

"Sorry, first chance I've had," Jason said.

"Well, it's a damned nasty habit," his partner said.

Jason shrugged, then leaned forward, picking up a toy sitting next to his phone. It was a magic trick known to most as the disappearing ball. About the size of a prescription bottle, it was quite simple to perform. A yellow ball rests inside a goblet-shaped vase with a lid. The idea is to show the ball to the audience, then take it out and place it in a pocket. Put on the lid, wave your hands over it, lift the lid and presto! the ball has returned. Put the lid back, wave your hands over it and presto again! the ball is gone.

The trick is elementary. The lid houses an inner section containing a yellow half-ball. Put the lid on, let the inner section drop down, and the audience sees a ball. Put the lid back on, lift the inner section and the lid at the same time—the ball has disappeared.

Jason had bought the trick about two years before at a little magic shop near the Omni. He entered the store to kill a few minutes during a lunch break at the

federal courthouse, where he was giving testimony. He didn't know exactly why he went into the store, but once inside, he spent an hour there, so mesmerized he forgot about lunch and was almost late getting back to court.

He figured magic was in his blood. When he was growing up, his father always did magic tricks, making him a big draw at neighborhood birthday parties. Jason had to admit his father was good at these little feats of magic. Sometimes he was more than good; he was dumbfounding. More than once his father performed a trick that left the kids stunned. Despite massive amounts of brainstorming among themselves, the kids never figured out how the tricks were done.

Jason looked at his dinky, store-bought toy and grinned. He was pretty good at it. Not surprising, considering the secret was one of manual dexterity and he'd spent two years honing his talents.

The toy was part of his daily routine. He fiddled with it every morning to clear his mind, but also used it whenever he was feeling stressed. It relaxed him, helped calm jumbled thoughts.

This particular day, a couple of minutes had passed since he had picked it up when his phone rang. Holding the magic trick in his left hand, he answered the phone with his right.

"Medlocke," he said.

"Hi," a familiar voice said.

"Oh, hi Dad," Jason said, a note of joy instantly entering his voice. "How ya doin'?"

"Just fine, Son," Stephen Medlocke said with equal enthusiasm. "How about you?"

"Well, got a nasty murder case going on, some psycho killed a ten-year-old girl," Jason said. "It's not pretty."

"Dear Lord," his father said. "I'll pray for the family and for a quick resolution."

"Thanks. We can use the help. So how are things at the church?" Jason asked.

"Got this Sunday's sermon in hand?"

"Oh hell no," his father said. "Oops, pardon me. I mean, heck no. The vestry and I have been going round and round this week about money matters, policy decisions, and a bunch of other nonsense. That's put me behind. But I'll get it done. Always do."

Jason smiled. His father and the vestry at Saint Bartholomew's Episcopal Church were always at odds, had been for the fourteen years his father had been the church's priest. Stephen may have been devout in his belief in God, but he also had a devout temper and streak of stubbornness that ran through him like a vein of iron ore.

"I hate to sound pushy, Dad, but I'm swamped right now. Any particular reason why you called?" Jason asked.

"Well..." His father hesitated briefly. "Actually, it sounds kind of silly sitting here in the daylight, makes me feel kind of embarrassed for calling."

"What is it?"

"Well, I woke up this morning with the horrible feeling that something was wrong. Nothing specific, just a gnawing in my stomach. So I called. Was I right? Is anything wrong?"

I just had a feeling. Is anything wrong? Jason had heard those words dozens of times from his father. Stephen always seemed in tune with his son's emotional ups and downs, whatever the distance.

He called the day Jason was promoted to detective on the Boston force. He called the night they found out Sarah was pregnant. On the day Claire was born,

before Jason could make any phone calls, Stephen phoned the hospital. Claire was a month early, so the call couldn't even be attributed to an educated guess. His father even called the night of the accident, before Jason could comprehend what had happened.

"Jason, Jason are you there?" his father asked over the phone.

"Uh, yeah. Uh, sorry, Dad, I was lost in thought," Jason stammered. "No, there's nothing wrong with me. Just this murder. We found out about it last night. Maybe that's it; maybe that's what you felt."

"Could be," his father said, but his tone didn't sound convinced. "All right, chum. Well, just blame your father's overprotectiveness and worrywart attitude for this phone call."

"No problem, Dad. I'll call you in a couple of days."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you, too, Dad."

As he hung up the phone, Jason began fiddling with the disappearing ball trick while considering the amazing and unbroken connection he and his father had, an emotional life preserver always thrown at the right time.

Sometimes it's saved more than just my emotional life, Jason thought.

Jason was eleven years old and ice skating alone on Metzger's Pond. All of his friends were busy or their mothers wouldn't let them go. What sissies, he thought, mama's boys. Still, he didn't tell his father he was going alone, knowing he would spend precious skating time arguing the point.

Once at the pond, he lost track of time, looking up only as the sun went down. The sky turned from thick, snowy gray to deep purple in a matter of minutes.

The temperature, in the low thirties already, plummeted when the sun dipped behind the rim of the tall oaks, elms, and spruces surrounding the pond. Alarm rippled through Jason's stomach, but he tried to beat it back.

No big deal, he told himself. I know the way home.

But as the sun and the temperature dropped, the blizzard hovering just to the west exploded in force. Like a glacial juggernaut, it pounced on eastern New England at the same time Jason walked through the woods toward home. Within seconds, the winds stabbed through his heavy parka, past his sweater and shirt, and sliced into the nerves of his skin.

Whipping through the woods, leaving moans in its wake as though the trees groaned with the cold, the wind mixed snow from the clouds with snow already on the ground, throwing skin-stripping spears into Jason's face. He felt his eyelashes and eyebrows freezing.

Within minutes, the storm was a "whiteout." Jason couldn't see his hand stretched out in front of him. His nose and cheeks were numb and he didn't feel the scrapes and abrasions he picked up each time he plowed into the bark of trees he never saw.

Terror, packing its own feeling of cold, began worming its way from his stomach toward the outside. Oh, I'm in deep shit, he thought.

He ran panicked through the woods, slamming into trees that knocked him down only to see him jump up and start running again. Like a swimmer drowning in deep water, Jason was going under, the killer cold and emotionless. As Jason's fear rose, he felt his body begin to tingle. He'd never experienced such an electric rush, and it terrified him. Oh God, it's the first signs of dying, he thought.

"*Daaaaaddddddyyyyyy*," he screamed, but the wind grabbed his voice and broke it into a million crashing shards. There wasn't even enough time for an echo.

He lasted another thirty seconds before the cold beat him down. He collapsed to the ground, tumbling face first into a snowdrift. The shock of the cold revived him momentarily, just long enough for him to roll over onto his side. He lay there, his arms wrapped tightly around his chest and his body curled up in the fetal position. He waited to die.

"Daddydaddydaddydaddydaddy," he whispered.

Just before he sank into unconsciousness, a strange thing happened. He rolled onto his belly and pushed himself up, making a last, desperate attempt to rise. His head hung straight down to keep the blinding, blowing snow out of his eyes. His eyelashes, already broken off, left little protection.

Looking at his hands, he saw a bright golden glow surrounding them. It shimmered and danced along his fingertips, illuminating the snow beneath his hands. He brought one hand up and watched the glow weave through his fingers, illuminating, outlining bones and blood vessels. I must be dreaming, he thought as his body tingled madly. Then unconsciousness pulled him under.

He awoke screaming, needles of pain jabbing into his feet, hands, and face. He kicked and jerked, but strong arms held him down. A soothing voice spoke to him, breaking into his panic and calming him.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying in his living room, in front of a fire blazing so boldly it threatened to leap from the hearth. Thick, goose-down quilts were wrapped around his body. Both his hands were in pans of tepid water and warm, damp towels were woven around his feet. The first thing he saw was his father's face above him. Looks of unashamed fear and unbounded joy washed across his dad's eyes.

"Hi, fella," his father said as tears flowed down his cheeks.

Back in his office, the puzzle of the blizzard tugged at Jason. He still couldn't fathom how his father had found him. He was half a mile off the path in deep woods and almost covered with snow. How did his father do it?

He'd asked the question once. His father's first response was to smile without any humor reaching his eyes. Stephen seemed ready to say something equally unfunny and a hard, sad look crossed his face. But it was so quick, like a lightning flash across a black velvet sky, and Jason wasn't sure if he'd seen it or not.

"Just father-son intuition, mixed with a liberal amount of pure, dumb luck," his father said.

It was more than luck, Jason knew as he sat at his desk, his fingers moving faster and faster with the disappearing ball trick. It was something fundamental to the relationship between his father and him, Jason thought, perhaps something fundamental to the Medlocke family.

The tingling began to rise within his fingers, lancing backward up his arms and into his shoulders. Why now? It was unusual for the sensation to show up when he wasn't angry or under emotional upheaval of some sort. Nothing like that was going on now. He was just curious. Extremely, insatiably curious about what had happened that evening in the snowstorm. Why would that bring the tingling forth?

He tried to control it, rein it in, but the effort was exceedingly difficult. The tingling seemed to have a mind of its own. Jason felt as if it were going to rip the skin right off his body, when it suddenly stopped.

He blinked several times and rubbed his hands up and down his arms as the tingling dissipated.

He was just returning to normal when the office door swung open and Anson

Quintard strutted in.

"Oh, fuck me with a pine cone," Badger moaned under his breath.

Chapter 4



Badger looked at Jason and grimaced. This was all they needed.

Quintard was a five-term county commissioner, born and raised in Gwinnett and, as Badger said, "so swelled up with himself, if he ever exploded there'd be shit from here to Tennessee."

Owner of a chain of hardware stores, Quintard normally wore nothing but blue jeans and flannel shirts. But when he had county business to handle, he wore suits and ties to dress the part.

Today he was dressed in an eight-hundred-dollar charcoal pinstripe by Armani with a pair of Italian-crafted Guccis. His paisley Geoffrey Beene tie rested comfortably on his belly, a voluminous gut that was the product of one too many fine dinners as well as a habit for bourbon and Cokes.

Despite his taste for alcohol, Quintard voted against every liquor license applied for in Gwinnett. He wanted to present the image of an upstanding, pious man, sworn against the Demon Alcohol, that is, until he got inside his own home or behind some motel door with a cheerleader from a local high school.

"Hello boys," Quintard said as he lowered himself into one of the spare chairs.

Neither acknowledged his presence. Quintard frowned at the slight, a hint of red seeping up from beneath his collar and coloring his jowls. Smoothing back his TV evangelist hair, he cleared his throat and began again.

"I said, hello, boys." His voice was a couple of notches louder.

"Hello, Anson," Jason said. Badger bent his head closer to his desk to hide his smile. Quintard hated to be called by his first name by people he considered his underlings.

Quintard ignored the insult.

"How's the investigation going?" he asked.

"Coming along," Jason answered.

"Any leads?" Quintard probed.

"A few."

"Like what?"

"Anson, you know I can't discuss an ongoing investigation with you," Jason said, looking up, a smile on his lips but flint in his eyes.

"I am here in my official capacity as a county commissioner," Quintard said haughtily. "I am a member of this county's administration and, as such, am privy to that kind of information."

"Not from where we stand," Jason said.

"I deserve to know," Quintard said, starting to fume. "People, important people mind you, have been asking me questions, questions I can't answer. I don't appreciate looking like I don't know what's going on right outside my own front door."

"Especially to the newspapers and TV stations," Badger said. "All you want to do is take whatever we give you to the reporters and become an official spokesman. Forget it. We're not here to fuel your re-election campaign."

Quintard's voice jumped a couple of octaves, his chins quivering.

"I have a duty to my constituents to tell them what the police of this county are

doing to protect them—or not protect them, as the case may be."

"You tell them whatever you want, Anson," Jason said, staring directly into Quintard's face. "But until you pin on a badge and become an official member of this police department, you don't get shit."

"We'll see what Captain Silverman has to say about that," Quintard said.

"Yeah, yeah. Come back when you get his answer," Badger said. "Until then, get the fuck lost."

It was the final insult. The red in Quintard's neck erupted into his face, making him look like a beet with bulging eyes.

"By God, you had better have something on this case soon, you little pricks, or I'll be tearing chunks the size of Buicks out of your fucking asses," he howled.

"You may be not soot to your bosses, Medlocke, but you're just another shitheel with a badge to me. And Franklin, you're just riding on Medlocke's coattails, your lips suckered up to his butt. I've been here my whole life and I'll be here long after your asses have been ridden out of town on a rail."

With a loud thwap, Jason slammed his pencil down on his desk and looked directly into Quintard's eyes. His voice was a quiet razor.

"Yeah, well you know what they say: Shit never falls far from the bird's asshole," he said quietly.

Without a word, Quintard turned and stormed out, slamming the door so hard the pane shook. His footsteps could be heard pounding down the carpeted hall toward Silverman's office. "Get out of my way, shithead!" he yelled at some poor soul in his way.

"What a scum-sucking bag of shit," Badger said. "What a douche bag. He's never forgiven you for giving him that DUI last year."

"Hey, it was just my dumb luck to be at that red light when he roared through it,"

Jason said. "I couldn't very well ignore it. Besides, I didn't know it was Quintard until he opened the door and fell out."

"Not that it would've mattered if you did know who it was," Badger said.

"Right."

"And it's just too bad it made the local news," Badger continued. "Don't you know it just shamed him beyond words. Checking into that rehab center was just to save his political ass. He lost a lot of friends in the deal, a lot of friends who would've translated into a lot of money. He blames you."

"Don't sweat him," Jason said.

Badger paused for a moment.

"It's that other stuff, too, you know," he said. "He's scared of what might happen if it went public."

Jason nodded. Quintard hated him and Badger for other reasons.

The "other stuff" that Badger spoke of had happened a few months after Quintard went through his much bally-hooed sobering up. The first incident took place when a twenty-one-year-old male stripper walked into police headquarters and filed a report against Quintard, claiming that the commissioner had raped him.

The young man, Brandon Spencer, said he had been hired as a private dancer for a party, but when he arrived at the hotel room where the party was supposed to be, Quintard was the only person there. After some gentle coaxing from Quintard, the teenager went ahead and performed, during which, he said, Quintard slowly stroked an erection. Afterward, and with the promise of several hundred dollars in payment, Spencer said he allowed Quintard to blow him. According to Spencer, Quintard refused to pay after he finished and shoved the stripper out the door without his clothes.

Quintard was questioned, but denied everything. A few days later, Spencer returned to headquarters and recanted his entire story, saying it was all lies. With no complainant, the charges were dropped.

It was a few days later that Jason saw Spencer at Gwinnett Place Mall, driving a sparkling new Porsche. The next time Jason saw Quintard, he casually mentioned Spencer's nice car and remarked how odd it was that a young man like him could afford it. "He must have some rich piece of old cheese sugar daddy," Jason said. Quintard's face turned red, but he simply turned and stalked off.

When Jason told him what had happened, Badger wanted to reopen the investigation, but Jason said that a new car, as suspicious as it might be, was not grounds for reopening the case. After several heated arguments between him and Jason, Badger relented. They never told Captain Silverman about the Porsche.

The second incident occurred six months later when drug dealer John "Skank" Burke was found in a dumpster behind a Pizza Hut in Lawrenceville, the county seat. He'd been shot three times in the back of the head, execution style.

On his wrist was a gaudy, nugget-gold bracelet. It didn't mean anything to any of the technicians examining the crime scene, but when Badger saw it, it struck a chord in his memory.

"Didn't Anson Quintard use to wear a bracelet like that?" he asked Jason.

Jason couldn't remember, so the next time they saw Quintard, Badger made it a point to look at the man's wrists. There was no bracelet. Brazenly, he took the direct approach. "What happened to your gold bracelet?" he asked Quintard.

Quintard was pointedly silent for a moment, looking into Badger's eyes. Then he quietly said, "I lost it. Don't know where."

"That's usually what lost means," Badger answered.

The next day, Badger called Quintard on the phone. "I think we found your bracelet, Anson," he said. "Why don't you come down and pick it up at our office?"

Jason was out of the office picking up lunch when Quintard arrived a couple of days later. Badger noted that he didn't seem very excited about his jewelry turning up. Quintard said nothing.

"You know where we found it?" Badger said, continuing to prod.

"I have no idea," Quintard said.

"On a dead drug dealer's wrist. Any idea how it got there?"

Quintard was quiet for a moment, then he leaned forward until his face was halfway across Badger's desk. "If you've got something to say, why don't you have the balls to come out and say it, Franklin?" he growled.

"No problem," Badger said, standing up and shoving his face within inches of Quintard's. "Why does a dead junkie have your bracelet on, Anson? Was he a buddy of yours? An acquaintance? A business partner, maybe?"

Quintard's jowls jiggled with anger, but he didn't retaliate. Instead, he just smiled humorlessly.

"You're just pissing in the wind, Franklin," he said. "There's no way you can prove any connection between me and Burke."

"How'd you know it was Burke?" Badger said. "I never gave any names."

"I read the newspapers, detective," Quintard answered.

Damn, Badger thought. He squeezed out of that one.

"I suggest you keep your suspicions to yourself, Franklin," Quintard said as he straightened to leave. "If you say anything about them in public, I'll sue you for slander."

After Quintard left, Badger was so mad he punched a hole in the wall of their office.

The hole had been patched, but Quintard's Teflon coating still rankled Badger. He now sat at his desk, anger making him fume again.

"Goddammit, we ought to nail that bastard," he told Jason. "We know he's dirty all the way up to his hairline. There's got to be something we can pin on him."

"We will, sooner or later," Jason said. "He'll fuck up so badly that he can't pull his ass free, and we'll be there to watch him sink."

"You know what kind of political ambitions Quintard has," Badger said. "He knows that if we could we'd implicate him in enough stuff to kill those plans forever. Just letting that stuff leak to the media might be enough to wipe him out. He wants us out of the way so bad, I bet his asshole puckers every time he gets near us."

"He'll just have to learn to live with it," Jason said. "There's nothing he can do to us."

"I'll bet that doesn't stop him from thinking about it," Badger said.

Before that line of thinking could be pursued further, the door to their office opened and a butt was stuck in. "Is there any left?" Silverman's voice said.

"It's all there," Badger laughed.

"Well, it's not because Quintard didn't try and chew it off," Silverman said, turning around and coming through the door. "Can't you guys be a little more diplomatic? The guy is on the commission's finance committee. He can make it tough for us to get the little niceties we enjoy so much, like patrol cars and bullets."

"But he's such a scuzbag," Jason said.

"Well, I managed to calm him down—a little. I told him to call me and I'd keep him abreast of the situation," Silverman said, his voice lowering on the last phrase. "I'll feed him a line of say-nothing shit and keep him happy. But for my benefit, anything new?"

Jason filled him in on the outdoor shops, the Nikes and the typewriter. The last thing he told him about was Saunders's autopsy findings.

"We're dealing with a truly sick human being," Silverman said.

"I'm not sure the guy's really human," Jason said.

Nobody smiled.

Chapter 5



After Quintard's storm had subsided, the ensuing hours passed in slow frustration as Jason and Badger slammed into one dead end after another in the investigation.

Following the lead of the saw, Jason dialed the number of Aaron Outdoors, the first outdoor shop listed in the Yellow Pages. He didn't stop until he called all twenty-three shops listed. Almost all of the stores sold the type of saw Saunders described, but the managers said a lot of people bought them, from the rugged gung-ho survivalist to the weekend camper. "They're real compact," one manager said. "Real handy." None of them could remember anyone suspicious buying one.

Jason told them the saw was a suspected tool in a crime and that such a device might be used again. Each manager promised to keep a close watch on anyone buying one in the next few weeks.

It was a frustrating beginning to the grunt process of following leads, but Jason expected no less. Murderers usually don't just fall into your lap; you have to hunt them down one piece at a time.

He and Badger drove out to Trickum Middle School and talked to Amanda's friends and teachers, school administrators, and school janitors. They questioned employees at the skating rink and workers at the convenience store across the street from the rink. Hotels in the area reported no check-ins by apparent drifters

or anyone else who might be considered suspicious.

The only fact they substantiated was that Bill Raimey, the father of Rachel, one of Amanda's best friends, drove and picked up the kids at the skating rink. He let Amanda out at the top of her street about six in the evening. Figuring someone on her street might have seen her get out of the car and walk to her house, the pair drove back to Amanda's neighborhood.

It was just past eleven when they finished interviewing the Campbells, who lived in the last house on Amanda's street. Not one lead materialized. At six the day before, families were inside watching TV or eating dinner. No one saw anything. They drove back to headquarters in frustrated silence.

Once there, Jason started to walk into the building, but Badger grabbed his arm. "C'mon," Badger said. "We're too tired to do any more good tonight and I need to get home. My kids are at friends, but I need some sleep. Let's pick this up in the morning."

Jason nodded in agreement. The two were walking toward their cars when Jason stopped.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

Not needing to ask what his partner was talking about, Badger knitted his brows for a moment before he answered.

"Don't know really," he finally said. "This guy is smart, meticulous. Is he truly a religious nut or is he just using that to throw us off? Does he hate kids? If so, why? Or is he a pedophile, taking out his rage at himself on children?"

"Whatever he is, I agree with Buzz. He ain't stopping with just one. I bet the next one's already in the planning stages."

"What about you?" Badger asked. "What're you thinking?"

"Of all things, I've been thinking about what Mallory told us this morning, about how he thought he saw something in the gas station," Jason said. "For some reason that keeps sticking with me."

"How come?"

"Not sure. There's just something weird about it. Mallory wouldn't have set himself up to look like a fool unless he was dead serious. He believes he saw someone."

"So if there was someone there, how'd he get away so fast? People don't just disappear into thin air, do they?"

"It sounds impossible, I know," Jason said. "But what was it Sherlock Holmes said: 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'"

"Oh bullshit," Badger snorted. "We haven't eliminated the possible yet. Go home. Get some sleep. You're getting screwy."

Jason looked at his watch as he strode across the parking lot to his car. Eleven forty-five. Jesus, almost midnight and the humidity still makes your clothes cling to you like wet rags, he thought.

He cranked his car and instantly set the air conditioning on maxi-cool, aiming the vents directly into his face. His family warned him when he left Boston and moved to Georgia three years before. The heat is awful, they said, and it makes all those cracker-ass rednecks even meaner.

But Jason knew summers in Boston were no wonderlands of moderate climate. He also knew the rednecks down South couldn't be any worse than the rednecks up North.

Besides, the job offer in Gwinnett was too good to pass up.

Until the late '70s, Gwinnett was mostly a rural county, home to cattle farms and

horse breeding stables with a few small towns thrown in for good measure. But in the '80s, its population ballooned by three hundred percent and it now was a predominantly middle-class county with homes in the \$ 100,000s and cable TV available to almost everyone. The county's rapid growth translated into equally rapid moves up the police department's ladder, so Jason left the Boston police force and joined Gwinnett's.

Although he and Sarah owned a house in Lawrenceville, the county seat, he sold it and moved into a one-bedroom apartment off Jimmy Carter Boulevard after she and Claire were killed. It was a longer drive to work, but staying in the house was simply impossible.

He was mentally and physically beat as he pulled off I-85 at the Jimmy Carter exit, turning left at the end of the ramp and driving the mile or so to Singleton Road. The light was red at Singleton and, since he was turning left, he was forced to stop.

He sat at the light for about ten seconds, when the tingling began. It wasn't the angry tingling, however. This one he recognized as the feeling he got when someone was looking at him. He slowly cut his eyes to the right and into the eyes of a beautiful blonde in a Mazda Miata.

Without thinking, he smiled and nodded. She studied him intently, and Jason realized she was sizing him up, deciding whether he was a nice guy or an ax murderer. Taking a chance, he reached into his breast pocket and drew out his badge. He showed it to her and mouthed the words "It's okay. I'm a cop."

For a second she seemed alarmed. Then she threw her head back and laughed heartily. She gave him the Okay sign.

Before anything more could be said between them, the light turned green, the blonde waved goodbye and drove off. *Shit.* Jason thought. Bad luck.

An inquisitive look crossed his face. Strange he would think like that. Women rarely were on his mind since he lost Sarah.

Parking his Celica in a space directly in front of his apartment building, Jason got out, locking his car behind him. The blonde was still on his mind. It intrigued him that he was thinking about a woman he'd seen for only a few seconds. He felt a good glow all over, and an especially toasty feeling in his balls, something he'd felt only fleetingly in the past months.

"I should've got her license plate number," he said, mentally kicking himself in the ass.

Damn, he thought, surprised again. That sounds like the old me.

He smiled as he walked up the steps to his apartment. He unlocked the dead bolt—which he had installed—stuck the key in the doorknob, twisted it, and pushed the door open. Without looking, he reached for the switch on his left, flipping on the lights, revealing a small apartment stuffed with more furniture than it was made for, and much more than was normal for a young man living alone.

Walking to the sliding glass doors on the right-hand side of the living room, he reached behind the curtains and yanked the pull cord. As the curtains swooshed shut, his eyes fell upon the two La-Z-Boy recliners next to the windows. One was covered in black fabric, the other in golden yellow. The black one had been his, the yellow one Sarah's. A slight wave of melancholy washed over him and he rubbed his hand slowly across the top of the yellow one, remembering how they used to hold hands while they watched TV.

On a small table between the chairs lay a copy of *The Collected Works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*. Sarah had always loved Sherlock Holmes, having read his adventures from the time she was a little girl. With her prompting, Jason had begun to read and enjoy Holmes. Now, like Sarah, he was hooked on the stories

and reread them often.

He picked up the book and recalled how one night, after he and Sarah were lying together in bed, sweating and satiated after a particularly energetic bout of lovemaking, she confessed to Jason that one of the reasons she had been attracted to him was the fact that he was a detective.

"So, the only reason you're with me is because you've always wanted to fuck someone like Sherlock Holmes?" he had teased. "Should I buy a meerschaum pipe and smoke it while we're getting it on?"

"Mmmm," Sarah purred as she slowly stroked him back to hardness. "I think this is the only pipe I need."

Cut it out, Jason told himself as he laid the Sherlock Holmes book back on the table in his living room. Why torture yourself?

Jason heaved a deep sigh and headed for the kitchen, eyes cast downward. He noticed the beige carpet was developing yuck-gray traffic lanes of dirt. "Needs cleaning," he mumbled, and made a mental note to call the resident manager when he got a chance.

He entered the kitchen without turning on the overhead fluorescent light, and went to the refrigerator. He hadn't eaten lunch and still wasn't very hungry, but he figured he'd better eat something. When he opened the door, light spilled across the yellow-and-white linoleum and onto the cabinets behind him. He leaned down and looked inside.

"God, that's a sad sight," he said, staring at the wasteland of empty chrome shelves.

Except for a package of greenish bologna and a jar of crusty mustard, the only thing in the fridge was a plastic bottle of Sprite and a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Jason often bought a bucket, knowing he couldn't possibly finish it in

one day, leaving him at least one thing to eat during the week.

He reached inside to get the chicken and noticed the refrigerator seemed awfully warm. He looked at the inside wall of the unit, at the dial that regulated the temperature. It was set on one, the lowest setting.

Damn. Must've hit it with my hand, he thought. Bet I haven't opened the fridge in three days.

He turned the dial to nine and looked back at the bucket of chicken. Carefully taking it out of the fridge, he pulled off the white cardboard top. Instantly he wished he hadn't. The smell of moldy, bacteria-laden chicken popped him in the nose. What was left in the bucket was chicken only in the academic sense; in its place was a greenish-gray mound of hairy goo.

"Christ on a crutch," he gagged and quickly put the top back on. Reaching under the sink, he pulled out a plastic garbage-can liner and stuffed the bucket inside, tying a double knot in the top to prevent any odor from oozing out. Then he stuck the bag in his broom closet.

I'll take it out in the morning.

Turning back to the refrigerator, he grabbed the bottle of Sprite, twisted off the top, and took a gulp. He immediately spit it into the sink.

"Hot, flat puke," he said, pouring the rest of it down the drain and tossing the bottle into the sink after it.

God, what a waste of time. To hell with eating. I'll get something on the way to work in the morning.

He walked to the bedroom and sank onto the bed, preparing to take off his shoes. As he sat down, something jabbed into his right hip. He reached into his pocket and drew out the sharp-edged object. A tingle danced across his scalp.

The disappearing ball trick.

How did that get here? He didn't remember picking it up from his desk at work. What the hell was it doing here?

Oh, stop that! Since the toy was here, he obviously had picked it up from work. Maybe he grabbed it along with his keys and just didn't notice. Whatever. It was here now, he thought, placing the toy on the nightstand.

He fell back on the bed. It was a mammoth thing, making the huge bedroom seem almost small. Jason had shopped for apartments for quite a while, searching for one that could hold all his furniture. He hadn't wanted to get rid of much. Friends told him he might be better off without such memory-invoking items, but he didn't think so.

Lying back against the headboard, he stretched out his arm to turn off the lamp. In doing so, his eyes fell on the photo sitting on the far side of the nightstand. It was a shot of him, Sarah, and Claire on the beach at Jekyll Island. All three were wearing sunglasses and Sarah wore one of those goofy straw hats that's about the size of a sombrero. But damn, she looked good in that two-piece, Jason thought. Having a baby hadn't damaged her figure.

Claire, meanwhile, was mugging for the camera, a pixie-faced elf who always seemed to be smiling and whose cobalt eyes and jet-black hair matched her father's. In the photo, a wide, clownish grin split her face, while her left hand was behind her head and her right hip was thrust out in what she thought was a provocative pose. A little Mae West, Jason thought, except for that raggedy-ass frog she held in her right hand. Rufus the Frog. It was her favorite stuffed animal. He remembered the day she accidentally tore off its right arm by slamming it in a door. She ran to Sarah in near-hysterical tears, holding the frog in one hand and the arm in the other. Sarah calmed her, told her Rufus could be fixed. When Sarah brought out her thread and needle, though, Claire insisted on

doing it herself. She hurt Rufus, she said, she would doctor him. And she did, although she sewed the arm on crooked, giving Rufus a hobbled, hunchbacked kind of look. Nevertheless, she rarely went anywhere without him, not even to the beach.

Not even to her grave. It was one of the few things Jason gave up. He placed it in her coffin.

God, I miss them both so much. So much.

It suddenly occurred to him that Claire died when she was not much younger than Amanda Benton. What an awful thought.

Rubbing his eyes with the knuckles of each hand, Jason pulled himself off the bed. Thinking of the past got him keyed up, put his emotions on edge. He felt the familiar tingling begin in his fingers and toes.

Strange, this was the second time today it had appeared when he wasn't mad or on edge. He figured it probably was a combination of remembering Sarah and Claire coupled with Amanda's death. Each of those would raise its own set of emotions. If all three weren't enough to fray his nerves, he didn't know what was.

The tingling grew harsher, more pronounced.

He realized he probably needed a shower to relax and began stripping off his clothes. He emptied his pockets, placing his change, keys, and beeper on the nightstand next to the magic trick. He gazed at the toy for a moment, then sat back on the bed and picked it up.

Who knows, maybe it'll help, he thought.

The tingling increased.

Instead of putting the ball in his pocket, he left it inside the ball vase and concentrated on putting the inner lid down and taking it off without fumbling. That was the key.

For about two minutes, he did the trick smoothly and perfectly, his mind drifting. Instead of drifting into calm, pleasant thoughts, however, all he could think about was Sarah, which led to thoughts of Claire, which led to thoughts of Amanda.

Why do the innocent have to die? Why do they have to suffer? What kind of sick, fucking world was this?

It made him angry.

The tingling ripped through his body like a brushfire, but this time he ignored its warning. His hands started flying through the trick, blurring in their speed. At the same time, the intensity of his anger increased.

Why? Why? Why? It wasn't fair that the innocent should die. But it always seemed to happen that way. *Why?* Were the innocent somehow more expendable? Less worthy of living? Or did life simply reward evil? Or did life just not give a damn?

It wasn't goddammed fair!

The tingling exploded into his fingertips. For an instant, he thought he saw a golden flash envelope his hands, then the bulb in the bedside lamp burst with a blinding pop. When his eyes recovered, the room was dark.

Climbing over the bed to avoid the glass from the broken bulb, he flipped on the overhead light by the door. The magic trick was still in his hands. It felt hot, almost pulsating. He pulled it apart to find... nothing.

The ball, the real ball, was gone. Not gone as part of the illusion, but truly gone. Disappeared. Vanished.

But there was nowhere for it to go, he thought. He hadn't dropped the trick. It was in his hands the whole time. He hadn't put the ball in his pocket, either, but

he checked just to make sure.

He scoured the bedspread, thinking it must have flown out of his hands. He got on his hands and knees and looked under the bed and the nightstand.

What the hell is going on? he asked himself. Where did it go? It couldn't just have disappeared.

Or could it? What was the flash just before the lights went out?

The phone rang. Jason nearly leapt out of his skin. "Motherfucker," he shouted, then answered it.

"Medlocke."

"Jazz, it's Lurleen."

Oh God, no "honey."

"Not again."

"Yeah. The sonuvabitch has lived up to his word. This time it's a boy."

Chapter 6



It was midnight and Badger was heading home from police headquarters. Working late on the Benton case had only left him exhausted and frustrated with the lack of progress.

Badger had grown up in Snellville, located on U.S. 78 about halfway between Atlanta and Athens, and had graduated from South Gwinnett High School in 1974. He still lived in the town and his first police job had been as a patrol officer on the Snellville force. He had stayed for seven years, rising to the rank of lieutenant before the county had hired him as a homicide detective.

Old habits were hard to break, so on his way home from work he usually drove around a few of Snellville's shopping centers, schools, and other buildings, checking for anything strange.

After checking several of the fast-food restaurants and shopping centers—especially the Kroger center just down from the high school—Badger pulled into the Snellville Civic Complex, shining his spotlight around the grounds, into the corners and doorways. Nothing there. He pulled around to the circular driveway in front of the buildings and stopped his car, turning off the ignition.

It always gave him a twinge of sadness to patrol the Civic Complex. Years ago, city officials decided to tear down the old fieldstone school building that sat where his car now was parked. The building dated back almost to the Civil War. From 1922 to 1957, it was Snellville High School, a fact proclaimed by a small

granite monument sitting near the complex's turnaround driveway. After that it was Snellville Middle School and Badger went to grades six through eight there. There were a lot of memories tied up there, and Badger fondly remembered the creaking hardwood floors, high ceilings, and drafty hallways.

He couldn't understand why they figured a driveway, a parking lot, and a Krystal was a better use for the land.

He shook his head in puzzlement, then started the car. He headed for the entrance, planning to get back on U.S. 78 and make a coffee run to the Waffle House and chat with a few of the regulars before going home. His house always seemed terribly empty when his kids were gone, and he feared it would seem especially lonely tonight.

But as his headlights spun across the grounds out front, he noticed a shadow leaning against the granite Vietnam veterans memorial sitting a few yards away from the Snellville High School stone. The Vietnam memorial was about seven feet tall with an ever-burning torch on top. For Those Who Served was carved into one side of the rectangular stone along with a bas-relief map of Vietnam and the symbols for all six branches of the American military.

Badger's first thought was that the shadow must be Homer Busby, the town drunk, probably sleeping off another bout with some MD 20/20 or Red Dagger. The drunk was harmless, but it sure pissed off Mayor Preston when Homer's snoring body was found leaning in some doorway or sprawled out on the sidewalk. More than once Homer had scared the bejesus out of some poor woman coming into work.

Oh well, Badger thought. I'll pick him up and give him a night in city jail. He'll be a lot more comfortable there, anyway.

Pulling his bulky frame out of the car, Badger ambled to the memorial, his

flashlight in his right hand. The light played across For Those Who Served.

How appropriate, he reasoned. Ol' Homer was a Vietnam vet, one who never quite meshed back into society.

As he walked around the monument, Badger shined his flashlight at the body.

"C'mon Homer, up and..."

His knees went watery and he felt the blood draining from his face as if someone had pulled a plug in his neck. His hand instinctively came up as he choked back a mouthful of bile. He stumbled back to the squad car, yanked open the door and grabbed the radio microphone, twisting the frequency knob to the one used by Snellville.

"Millie, Millie, this is Badger," he stammered. "Millie, you there?"

"Oh, hey, Badger," Millie, Snellville's dispatcher, answered. "Uh, you know you're supposed to ID yourself by car."

"Goddamn, Millie, it's my car," he shouted. "Uh... oh shit, I don't know... uh, County 165. Dammit, I don't have time for this. I've got a dead body at the Civic Complex. A little boy. Send me some help."

Badger sank to the ground, his back leaning against the car's open door. He sat there for a second, breathing heavily, before he leaned to his right and threw up.

Jason arrived a few minutes later. Buzz Saunders was already at the scene, checking the body.

"What have we got, Buzz?" Jason asked, walking up behind him. Saunders looked over his shoulder, his mouth set into a straight, hard line.

"like I told you before, some guy getting his rocks off," he said. "It's the same thing as before, only worse."

Jason looked over Saunders's shoulders. The coroner was right.

The body of a small boy rested on its knees, facing the war memorial. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a blue jacket with a silk-screened drawing of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on the back. Like Amanda's, his head was cut off and taped on backward. The bastard must have used a whole roll of duct tape again, Jason noted.

Like Amanda's, the boy's eyes were gone. Dark trails ran down his face like tears. Unlike Amanda's, the boy's arms were up, hands planted against the memorial, almost as if he were asking for help from above.

"How do his hands stay up like that?" Badger asked, echoing the question in Jason's mind.

Saunders reached up and pulled the left hand away from the stone. There was a slight sucking noise and the boy's arm fell down, palm up. A piece of duct tape was rolled up and stuck to the palm.

"That's how," Saunders said. "This freak is a regular special effects genius."

Jason turned and followed the line of sight from the boy's face. The gray fieldstone steeple of the Snellville United Methodist Church rose above the line of fir trees growing about thirty yards away. lit by spotlights on the ground, the cross on top of the steeple glowed with righteous purity. There seemed little doubt what the killer was trying to say. War, death, and religion, the constants of human existence.

Jason turned back to the memorial. His eyes were as hard as the granite.

"Raped, too?" he said.

"I'm not sure, but I think so," Saunders answered.

"Sonuvabitch, what are we dealing with here?" Badger asked to no one in particular.

"Do we have a name, Buzz?" Jason asked.

"No, nothing. There's no ID on the body. I'll have to wait until we get back to the morgue and check some dental records or the fingerprint file. Isn't it a good thing we've been taking kids' fingerprints at the malls for the last couple of years?" he added sarcastically.

Saunders sat back on his heels and took a cigarette out of the package in his chest pocket. It was the last one, but he shoved the empty package back into the shirt. Pushing his glasses up on his head, he put the cigarette in his mouth, but didn't light it.

"Damn," he said quietly. "Damn."

He looked up at Jason. Even without the glasses making them look big and swimmy, Saunders's eyes were soft. They were filled with fear.

"This is starting to scare me, Jazz," he said, the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. "Deep in my heart of hearts I was hoping I was wrong the last time. I was hoping maybe it was just a wild, random killing. I knew it wasn't, but I was hoping. Now, there's no doubt. And I'm scared."

Jason just nodded. He knew exactly how fear tasted. It was a stale, metallic flavor, like biting on a piece of aluminum foil. It grated from your teeth all the way down to your soul. And it never went away. It faded from your mouth, yes, but your soul retained the awful flavor.

He didn't say anything to Saunders. Instead, he looked at Badger. "Let's get started with the search."

Fifteen forensic technicians spread out across the complex, plastic evidence bags in their hands. Five squad cars and the forensics wagon sat in the parking lot, their spotlights focused toward the buildings and the ground in between. Every square inch of lawn was lit. Insects scurried across the grass to escape the light.

"Ya'll cover the ground out here first," Jason said, "then move to the back."

Badger wasn't involved in the search. He was still too shaken. His mind was blasted by the sight of a little boy's body encircled by the glare of a flashlight. Spotlight on death. Vaudeville in hell. He strolled toward the back of the complex, trying to smoke a cigarette, but he had trouble getting it into his mouth. His hands were trembling as if he had the palsy.

Standing in the back parking lot, Badger stared at the large, empty field behind the Civic Complex. The sky was full of stars, but looking at them made him uneasy; there was too much wide-openness up there, too many hidden secrets. Best to keep your eyes close to the ground. Yet even that was scary, you never knew what the light might reveal.

His cigarette only half smoked, Badger gave up. It tasted like shit anyway. He wasn't sure he was calm enough to help the search, but it was better than feeling totally useless. He walked toward the breezeway between two of the buildings. As he flicked the cigarette butt onto the pavement, he caught a flash out of the corner of his eye. Or, at least he thought it was a flash. When he turned in its direction, all he saw was the darkness surrounding the complex's trash dumpster. Light from out front flowed over the tops of the buildings, lending a vague glow to the back, giving just enough brightness for Badger to see objects without being able to make out the sharper details. Squinting his eyes, he saw something leaning against the dumpster, something small and oddly shaped. For a moment, he thought he saw a greenish glow around the object, but he blinked his eyes and it was gone. Just trash that missed the trash container, he thought, then reconsidered. "We should check out everything," he said, and angled for the dumpster.

It was a stuffed animal, Badger saw as he came closer. A frog, maybe. Pulling on the black leather gloves he carried in his back pocket, Badger picked it up

gingerly. Yep, a frog. Pretty beat up, too. One of the arms had been torn off and sewn back on badly.

The frog was familiar. He'd seen it before. Where? He felt it coming to him, like a rainstorm blowing in from the distance on gun-metal-gray clouds.

Just before the storm of understanding broke over Badger, things changed. For the worse.

Holding the frog, Badger was struck by a blast of sheer, unrelenting evil flowing off the toy, evil as old as the world, as timeless as the universe, as palpable as the cold hand of death. Badger shivered uncontrollably and felt an overwhelming need to hit his knees and pray to whatever god was handy. He felt naked and unprotected. There was no escape from such demonic malice, maybe not even by turning to God.

Badger was not a religious man. He never had much use for the holier-than-thou attitude of the churchgoers he knew. He considered it hypocritical to be pious on Sunday but raise hell the rest of the week. But the feelings that now absorbed him were too powerful, too tangible to ignore. He felt a desert form in his mouth as fear absorbed all its moisture.

A slight tingle began in the thumb of his right hand, a feather-light twitch starting at the tip and slowly creeping up the finger. He tried to lift his thumb, but couldn't. His thumb was iron and the toy a magnet.

The tingle became sharper, coursing through his hand and up his arm. It felt like a huge insect crawling along the bone, its hairy legs gently scraping against the nerve endings. And it was moving toward his shoulder. Badger noticed goose bumps creeping up his skin in a steady wave. The hairs on his body stood on end.

And he still couldn't let go. Fear changed to horror and a scream begged to be released. Just open your throat, it said, just for a second. He did. A pitiful croak

was all that escaped.

The tingle reached his shoulder and Badger could see the muscles hunch up under his shirt, as though something was trying to break through. As he watched, his eyes wide and unblinking, a sharp jab of pain burst through the skin and his shirt split with a rending sound. Two fangs the size of small nails tore through the fabric, followed by a head the size of a golf ball, a Mack, hairy head with eight glistening eyes. They caught Badger's stare and he could have sworn he heard laughter.

With a squeal, Badger pulled the toy hard with his left hand, tearing it from the grasp of his right. The frog fell to the pavement and Badger's left hand flew to his right shoulder, pounding, pounding, pounding, trying to smash the horrible creature that was being born inside his body.

It took a moment before he realized his fist was hitting empty flesh. There was no creature, no ripped shirt, not even any tingling. Nothing.

Adrenaline coursed through Badger's body and all his muscles were tensed. His stomach felt nauseated, as if it had just plunged from the top of a roller coaster. Hallucinating? Why? How?

"What the fuck is happening?" he said.

He looked down and saw just another child's stuffed toy lying on the pavement. Nothing special about it. Squatting, he nervously extended his finger toward it, then pulled it back quickly. Did he really want to touch it again? Did he want to take that chance?

He stared at the frog for several seconds, debating. If he touched it and it was just a toy, did that mean he was losing his mind? What if he felt the same things he had felt before? The implications of that were even more horrifying.

But he had to know. Was he crazy, or worse? He reached out with his left hand.

His index finger touched the animal, then sprang back. Nothing. Maybe he hadn't left it there long enough. He touched the frog again, resting his finger on it for several seconds. Nothing again. Just a toy. He picked it up. The instant he did, he knew it was a mistake.

The eyes of the frog, simple button eyes moments before, opened. They stared at him, the color of cold silver, the frigidity of hatred.

Like an evil Cheshire cat, the frog grinned, an ugly grimace full of stained teeth with bits of flesh dangling from the corners. Badger could feel his sanity sliding down a long tunnel. Then the mouth opened and Badger knew his world would never be the same. There would be no more safe places to hide, no secrets to keep.

Two eyes rested on the tongue, bright blue eyes that Badger somehow knew once belonged to a little boy who now was dead. Optic nerves trailed behind the eyes, disappearing down the black throat. The eyes gazed straight at Badger.

"Eyes see you," a voice said, then the tongue moved upward, swallowing the eyes with a satisfied smack of the lips. A shrill cackle tore into Badger's brain.

This time, he did scream. Loud and long.

Chapter 7



Jason strolled toward the back of the complex. He felt useless out front; there was nothing he could do except get in the way of the technicians searching for evidence. A couple of minutes earlier, he had seen Badger head back this way, shakily trying to get a cigarette into his mouth. Better see if he's okay, Jason decided.

He was just entering the breezeway when Badger's scream echoed over the buildings. In an instant Jason was sprinting toward the sound, his Reeboks slapping the concrete.

Skidding to a stop in the parking lot, Jason swiveled his head left to right. At first, everything was fuzzy as his eyes adjusted after the glare of the spotlights out front. When shapes became solid, Jason saw nothing unusual. Just the dumpster and some trash lying beside it.

He spun around, scanning the field behind the buildings. It took a moment before he saw something out in the middle, about fifty yards away. A shadow blacker than the rest of the darkness lay close to the ground like a rock.

Jason ran in the shadow's direction. As he drew closer, he heard whimpering. Badger. The man was on his knees, folded like a card table. His hands were on top of his head, fingers woven together as though trying to protect himself from something overhead. Jason could hear him mumbling as he got closer: "Get him away. Get him away."

"Badger. Badge," Jason said, dropping to his knees and grabbing the man's shoulders. "It's me, Jason."

He spun Badger onto his back. The look of blind terror in Badger's eyes was shocking. It was the look of a cornered animal, a level of fear that erased rational thought. Seeing Jason's face, Badger yelped in horror and lashed out with his right fist. The blow caught Jason in the jaw with a solid crack and he flew backward. Badger scrambled to his feet and ran.

"Help me, God. Help me," he screamed.

"Badger, get back here," Jason yelled, leaping up to give chase.

By this time, other officers were at the back of the buildings. Jason could hear them shouting, but didn't look back.

Badger was a big guy, but he was running like a terrified deer. Jason pumped his arms harder and put everything into his legs. He started gaining. As his legs began to throb with exertion, Jason dove, catching Badger's feet in a shoestring tackle. The big man went down with a heavy thud, the wind rushing out of his lungs.

Jason quickly clambered over Badger's back and spun him over. This time he was prepared for a fist to come his way, but Badger just lay on the ground whimpering, his eyes closed. Jason leaned forward, pressing his weight onto Badger's arms between the shoulders and elbows.

"Badge, Badge, it's okay. It's all right," he said as the other cops thundered up behind him.

"No, no, get away," Badger cried. "Leave me alone. Who are you? What do you want?"

"It's me, Jason. It's Jazz. Calm down. You're safe."

One of the cops shined a flashlight in Badger's face. His eyes squeezed shut more tightly and he shook his head from side to side. When his eyes opened, the glaze of fear was gone, but the confusion remained.

"Huh? What... what's going on? Where am I?" he asked, bewildered.

"You're behind the Snellville Civic Complex," Jason said.

"What happened? What'd I do?"

"You went a little nuts," Jason said. "Something scared the shit out of you. We heard you scream and came running back to see what happened."

For a moment, Badger's face was blank as he tried to recall the past few minutes. Then memories flooded onto his face, turning the skin linen white. His lips trembled.

"Get off me," he said in a strangled voice. "I'm gonna puke."

Jason lifted his weight off Badger, who rolled onto his side, retching violently. Since he had thrown up just a few minutes before, nothing came up, and Badger suffered through a powerful attack of the dry heaves.

When the spasms were over, he sat up and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. Then he held his sides and rocked from side to side.

"Ah, God, that hurts," he said.

"You okay?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," he said in a low voice. "Yeah, I'll live."

Badger looked at Jason, then scanned the other faces in the crowd around him. He turned his eyes back to Jason.

"Listen, I found something over by the dumpster," Badger said. "A toy, some kind of stuffed animal. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the case."

Jason gazed into Badger's eyes. There was something in them, something deeper

than his friend was willing to say, at least in front of the other men. Jason almost felt Badger's plea to talk to him alone. He turned to the other cops. "Find that toy," he said. "But don't touch it before you call forensics."

When the other cops left, he turned back to Badger. "So tell me what happened," he said.

Badger reached into his pocket and drew out a Salem. He stuck it in his mouth and tried to light it, but his shaking hands made the flame dance spastically. Jason took the lighter away and lit the cigarette for him.

Taking a deep drag, Badger sat silently for a few seconds. He drew his knees near his belly and wrapped his arms around them. Putting his head in the cradle formed by his knees, he stared at the ground. Finally, he looked up.

"I'm not crazy," he said. "You're going to think I am when I tell you what happened, but I know what I felt... and heard."

"So tell me," Jason said.

"Well, I found that toy and picked it up to see what it was," Badger explained. "I had my gloves on so I wouldn't smudge any prints. But just picking the thing up gave me a real bad feeling, as if something mean was staring me in the face. I don't know what."

He explained the tingle that ran up his arm and how he couldn't let go of the stuffed animal, but left out the part about the spider and the part about the eyes. Some things were *too* crazy.

"When I dropped the thing, the feeling went away," Badger said. "So I picked it up again, and it was worse. And this time I heard someone speak. A horrible voice. It said, 'I see you.'"

"Where did the voice come from?" Jason asked.

"Nowhere. Everywhere," Badger said. "I think only I could hear it, as if it was

meant only for me."

"Describe the feeling you got when you picked the toy up," Jason asked.

Badger hesitated, trying to form his emotions into words. Several times his lips parted as if to speak, then he held back.

"I've never felt anything like that before in my life," he finally whispered. "It was evil. Burning. But cold, too. And full of hate. Pure hate."

He stopped to look directly at Jason.

"As if it was hating me just for being human," he whispered.

Jason stared at Badger for a couple of seconds. He didn't doubt his friend thought he was telling the truth. It was too evident in his face. But it was too incredible to believe.

What was it Sherlock Holmes said? A voice whispered inside his head.

Something about the impossible?

Jason stood up and walked a few yards away.

"Hey, I'm telling you the truth," Badger said to Jason's back. "Don't you believe me?"

"Yeah, I do," Jason said over his shoulder. "Dear God, I do," he said to himself.

Jason walked about twenty yards. When he stopped, he tilted his head back and drew in a few deep breaths. The air was humid, but clean. The heat of the day had dissipated and the cool of the coming dawn was softening the air. He hoped it would help him think, sort things out, but it only served to make his confusion clearer.

"So what do you think is going on?" Badger said, coming up behind. "Am I flipping out?"

"Maybe so. You've always been pretty fucked up anyway," Jason said with a

smile as he patted Badger on the back. The smile disappeared.

"You know, it just might be true," Jason said. "At least in part. Maybe you have some sort of psychic ability that the killer has tapped into. Have you ever had any experience like this before? Something psychic or something you couldn't explain?"

Badger shook his head.

"Uh-uh. Never," he said.

"Maybe the killer is psychic and is tapping into you without you're consciously being involved at all," Jason said. "I've read of it happening before."

Jason stopped talking and looked at Badger.

"God, that sounds crazy, doesn't it?" he said with a smile. "Am I reaching for straws or what?"

The sound of footsteps broke into their conversation.

"Detectives?" an officer said. Jason and Badger shot a glance at each other, then turned.

"Yeah?" Badger said.

"We couldn't find anything out behind the buildings," the officer said. "Nothing but some trash. No toys."

"What kind of stuffed animal did you say that was?" Jason asked Badger.

"I don't think I did," Badger said. "It was a frog."

Arctic cold sped through Jason's veins.

"A what?" he asked quietly.

"A frog. A stuffed toy frog. It was kind of shabby looking, and one of its arms had been torn off and sewn back on badly. It was kind of cockeyed." He paused.

"For some reason, it was familiar. I don't know why."

Jason reeled. He gasped in an effort to catch his breath and could almost feel his ribs bulging out with each mammoth heartbeat. The world turned upside down and someone was shaking it by the ankles. Jason felt reality slipping away like coins falling from a pocket. He thought he might pass out.

"Jazz, what's wrong with you?" Badger asked. "You look awful."

Jason looked at his partner, but didn't speak. He couldn't. A frog. A toy frog with a crooked arm. Rufus? Badger must have been mistaken. It couldn't be. That frog was in the ground, next to Claire.

He stopped his train of thought, couldn't bear to go any further.

"Jazz?" Badger asked, putting his hand on his partner's shoulder. "What's wrong, man?"

Jason began to speak, when a shout rose over the top of the buildings.

"Jason! Badger! C'mere! Quick!" It was Norman Bibb.

Both men ran toward the front lawn. A couple of times Jason's knees went rubbery and he thought he might fall, but he made it upright.

Bibb stood next to the body, now wrapped in a heavy black tarp. A clear plastic bag dangled from Bibb's right hand and he held it up to his face, peering intently at it.

As Jason and Badger approached, he held it up for them to see.

"We got another note, just like Amanda," Bibb said. "This time it was attached directly to the boy under his jacket, and it came with a little present."

Inside the plastic bag, the note was pinned to a ragged stuffed animal, a frog with a crooked arm.

Chapter 8



"Brethren," the note began:

Once again, I have served my Lord, sustained his glory and done battle with his enemy. In a shrine of man's Tainted House of Sin-filled Pretenders, built blasphemously near the house of God, I have taken one more soul from Satan and delivered it to heaven. I have spit on the scourge of man's folly. There is only one Lord and Master, one divine governing body. The world is unclean. The children are carrying the plague. The disease must be eradicated. It is my duty and my honor. I will not stop until my work is complete.

It was signed: "Under God's Command, The Mercy Killer."

"Buzz found it pinned to the frog," Bibb said, after Badger handed the note back to him. Standing next to Badger, Saunders nodded his agreement, but his attention was focused elsewhere. On Jason.

Jason was on one knee next to his partner, panting. He had explained his reaction as hyperventilating to the stricken-faced Badger hovering over him. His head still swam, but he was in control. At least momentarily.

"Has anyone been near the body except you and forensics?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Nope. No one except you and Badge when you first came up," Saunders said.

"We haven't let anyone else get near it. Standard procedure. You know that."

"So how come Badger said he saw that same frog out behind the buildings just a few minutes before?" Jason asked. "How did it get from there to here? Someone must have moved it. It didn't just walk over here on its own, did it?"

"I have no idea how it got from there to here, Jazz," Bibb shrugged. "I really don't. All I know is that it was here when we took off the boy's coat. We found the frog only a minute or two before I called you."

"I've got a better question," Saunders said. "What's wrong with you? The crap about hyperventilating doesn't hold water. You're in too good shape. Besides, you look like someone has sucked the blood from your face. That's not a symptom of hyperventilating. It's the sign of someone about to faint."

Jason sat silently for a moment, collecting his thoughts. How much should he say? How much could he say? Could he tell them the truth?

Of course you can; this is Badger, Norm, and Buzz you're talking with, a voice inside said. Besides, if you don't tell them, you're withholding valuable evidence. You can't let your personal feelings overcome the fact that two children have been killed. And you're responsible for finding their killer. What exactly was going on here? Jason wondered. The note seemed like the ravings of just another nut, a madman bent on terrorizing a little portion of the world and getting his share of publicity for doing it.

So where did he get Claire's toy? Was it Claire's in the first place? If it was, how did the killer know about it? They must have met, must know each other. But how? And who?

Jason decided the more people who could be thinking on this, the better.

"I'm not sure, but I think that frog was a toy of my daughter's," he said. "It looks just like one of hers."

"Sonuvabitch!" Badger said. "How could I not have noticed? It's... it's... what was his name?... Rufus! Rufus the Frog!"

He looked at Jason, horror enveloping his eyes. "But... but you buried it with her."

"I know," Jason said. "Why do you think I look like shit?"

"Motherfucker," Badger whispered, the color beginning to drain from his face.

"No wonder it seemed familiar when I saw it. *Motherfucker!* The killer must know you, then. Who is it? How does all this connect? What's the common ground?"

"I don't know," Jason said. "But before we start all that, I want someone to go out to Claire's grave and check it. See if it's been disturbed. I mean, I might be mistaken about this frog being hers. And there's only one way the killer could've gotten it."

"Jesus," Saunders said. "This just keeps getting worse and worse."

Dawn was two hours behind them before Jason and Badger climbed into their cars and left the Snellville Civic Complex. Jason drove to police headquarters. Badger went home to make some phone calls to be sure his kids got off to school all right. He promised to be at headquarters as soon as he was finished.

Jason was bushed. He hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. Tired grit filled his eyes and they itched with red intensity. He stuck his nose under his right arm and sniffed. Whew. He smelled like a moose. He should go home and at least get a shower, but he didn't want to. He kept telling himself he needed to be at headquarters when the information about Claire's grave came back, not to mention the autopsy and lab reports on the boy, but the truth was he didn't want to go home to an empty apartment.

Confusion burned inside him. He still couldn't fathom what it all meant, couldn't

see the whole picture. It was like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle in the dark. About the only way to understand the jumbled mess was through sheer, dumb luck.

By the time he reached headquarters, the only thing he knew for sure was that he needed a cup of coffee. And then he was going to call his dad.

When he opened his car door and stepped out, he realized with despair that it was going to take longer than he thought to get his coffee. A mob of reporters—TV with cameras on shoulders, newspapers with pads in hand, radio with recorders strapped across one arm—descended on him. Questions began pummeling him from all sides and he held up his hands.

"Hold it, hold it," he said. "I'll answer a few questions if you'll be nice about it and ask them in a civil manner."

"Has there been a murder?" asked Melinda Thorpe, a reporter from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Briefly, Jason considered giving the standard "we have found a body and are investigating it" story, then decided that was pure bullshit. Be straightforward with these people, he thought. They'll find out sooner or later and you'll look like a schmuck. He'd worry later about what his superiors would say. Still, he wasn't just going to spill his guts. They would have to ask him the right questions.

"Yes, we have a murder," he said.

"Man or woman?" someone asked.

"A small boy."

A few oohs and aahs were heard.

"Do you have his name?" asked a dark-haired man from Channel Two.

"Not at this point."

"Is it another Mercy Killing?" Melinda asked.

"We think so."

"Same method as before? Decapitation? Head reattached? Eyes gouged out? All that?" she asked.

"Yes. All that."

"So you're pretty sure it's the same person as before?" a voice from the back asked.

"It seems that way. Not too many people would go to this much trouble."

"Not even a copycat?" someone said.

"Not to this degree. They'd get a lot of the same things right from reading the papers or watching TV, but the little things, the kind of stuff we don't even tell you guys, he couldn't possibly get right."

"Little things like what?" Melinda asked.

Jason gave her a lopsided smirk.

"Little things you know I'm not going to tell you, Melinda," he said.

She grinned back. "Well, I tried," she said.

"Any suspects?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Not yet," Jason said. "But we're hopeful. A crime of this magnitude takes a lot of planning and a lot of research. Sooner or later this guy's going to slip up somewhere in the process and we'll have him."

"You think it's a guy?" Melinda asked.

She's quick, Jason thought.

"The style of the murders, the sheer amount of brute force it would take to cut a child's head off, makes us lean in that direction."

"Detective Medlocke, you say you hope to solve this crime sooner or later," the man from Channel Two asked. "Do you think it will be sooner or later?"

The station's cameraman stepped closer to get a better reaction shot. The hot, bright light on top of the camera blinded Jason and he put his right hand in front of his eyes.

"Hey, do you really need that thing?" he asked. "It's brighter than hell out here."

"Sorry, the sun keeps going in and out of the clouds," the cameraman said. "I need it."

"Okay, but try to keep it out of my eyes. They're bloodshot enough as is."

The cameraman nodded and smiled.

"Detective Medlocke, you still haven't answered my question," the reporter pressed.

"What do you expect me to say?" Jason said sharply, exhaustion taking its toll.

"Of course I hope it'll be sooner."

"But will it be?" the man asked.

Irritation colored Jason's face. The camera lights were blinding him and the heat was making him sweat. His head thundered. He squinted at the man's face through the glare of the lights.

"I don't recognize you," he said. "What's your name?"

"Anthony Bradley. But I don't think that's important."

"Well, Anthony, maybe not to you, but I like to know who I'm talking to," Jason countered. "And to answer your question: I can't tell you exactly when we will solve this case. Murders don't get solved on deadline. But believe me when I say that we've got every available police officer and forensic technician working on this. Even though this isn't their jurisdiction, we're in daily contact with the FBI

and GBI. We'll crack it as soon as is humanly possible."

"There are some officials in Gwinnett who say you aren't doing enough," Bradley continued. "That you're sitting on your hands. How do you answer that?"

Understanding flooded Jason's mind. A mixture of anger, awe, and grudging respect followed it. This guy had been talking to Anson Quintard. The fat son of a bitch was using the media to get back at him and Badger. Give the bastard credit for being true to his word.

Even though he realized this reporter was just doing his job and following a tip, Jason was damned if he was going to be a scapegoat for Quintard's grandstanding. He straightened his back and looked directly at Bradley. He knew what he was about to do was foolhardy and reckless and probably would look incredibly stupid if he didn't do it right, but he decided to screw the risks.

"I don't know what you've heard, Anthony, but do these look like hands that have been sat upon?"

He held up his hands, backs to the camera. Bloody scrapes and cuts dotted the knuckles while bruises peppered the rest of his hands. Jason knew they were the by-products of his scuffle with Badger, but Bradley and the people watching this evening's newscasts—provided they used this sound bite on the air—wouldn't know that. Jason was counting on it.

Bradley looked at the hands, then back at Jason.

"No, they don't," he said, his voice steady. "But with your past history of alcoholism after the death of your wife and daughter, there is a question of how fit you may be to handle a case of this size."

A collective gasp rose above the crowd as the other reporters realized Bradley had gone too far. It's one thing to be hard and cold questioning an uncooperative person or a well-known bag of shit, but Jason was forthright and out in the open

and most of the reporters liked and respected him.

Even Bradley's cameraman backed several feet away, getting out of the line of fire. He kept filming, however. Getting a cop busting a reporter in the mouth would be a coup. A small smile creased the cameraman's face. It would be fun to watch this smug, overachieving, snot-nosed kid learn the art of give-and-take reporting.

Jason didn't notice. All he could see was the clean-cut, good-looking face he now wanted to pound into the pavement. His hands clenching involuntarily, he took a step toward Bradley. The reporter moved backward, his face registering the knowledge that he had stepped over the line and now was going to pay for it.

"Hey now, wait..." he stammered. "Don't touch me."

Jason was within a foot of Bradley, bringing his hand up to grab him by the shirt collar, when he stopped. Bradley, still backpedaling, tripped over his microphone cord and crashed to the pavement. His pad flew out of his hands and landed facedown on the parking lot. A loud rip was heard as the seat of his pants gave way.

Standing above him, Jason's red-rimmed eyes glared down in fury. He felt heat infusing his face. How dare this young punk bring up Sarah and Claire? How dare he use them to question his competence? How dare he listen to Quintard as if he were some kind of truth-spouting messiah?

But looking at Bradley, who sat with his legs sprawled apart and his hands on the pavement, all Jason saw was a scared young man. He heard the giggles from the other reporters and knew the kind of humiliation Bradley was going to have to suffer. The worst of his anger flowed away. But there was another lesson this little shit needed to learn, and Jason leaned down, putting his nose within two inches of Bradley's.

"Look, I know Quintard has been feeding you this information about me. I know you're new and you want to do a good job. But hear this and hear it good. Don't ever bring up my family again. Not in the context of my job. They're gone and I have to live with that. I have to live with the fact that I'm a recovering alcoholic because they're gone. But I don't have to live with someone tossing that in my face every time something goes wrong. I don't like it, I don't want it, and I sure as hell don't need it."

Jason straightened, never taking his eyes from Bradley's.

"You got that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I understand," Bradley said, dropping his eyes. His voice was low and meek.

"Good. Here, let me help you up," Jason said, extending his hand. Bradley looked at it for a second, then at Jason. Distrust clouded his brow.

"No shit. Take my hand," Jason said. "I'm not going to drop you or anything."

Bradley reached up and locked his hand around Jason's wrist. Jason leaned back and Bradley came off the ground in a flash. Once up, he reached behind him and checked out the tear in his pants. His eyes widened as his fingers told him the size of the damage. An embarrassed glow erupted on his face.

"You'd better get back home and change pants," Jason said. "Those are shot."

Bradley nodded and turned, holding the seat of his pants closed with his left hand. "Bill, can you get my pad?" he quietly asked the cameraman, then walked as quickly and with as much dignity as he could to the Channel Two news van. Bill reached down and picked up the notepad, then looked at Jason and winked.

"They all need some comeuppance sooner or later," he said.

After a few more questions, the other reporters cleared out, some of them concerned that Jason might unleash his grizzly-bear tactics on them. They

needn't have worried. He felt washed out, drained and hung on the line to dry. The reporters gone, he turned and walked toward headquarters rear entrance. Captain Silverman was standing outside the door. Jason stopped in front of him and shrugged his shoulders, a rueful grimace on his face.

"Try to be a little more civil next time," Silverman said. "All we need on this case is a pissed-off reporter who would just love to catch you putting your foot in your mouth. We've already got Quintard with his nose planted up our butts and his teeth just begging to chomp out a bite."

"Sorry," Jason said. "I'm just real tired and that kid brought up Sarah and Claire in a way I didn't think was necessary. But to be honest, I don't think he's going to be causing me any trouble."

"I hope not," Silverman said. "I also hope he doesn't send us the bill for those pants."

Jason smiled. "Just forward it to me."

Silverman laughed as he opened the door and motioned for Jason to go inside.

"Oh by the way," he said. "Your father called."

Chapter 9



Jason's fingers rapidly dialed the number to his father's office at church. The phone rang several times with no answer.

"C'mon, Dad," Jason fervently whispered into the receiver.

The other end picked up.

"Hello," his father's voice said.

"Hi Dad," Jason said with relief.

"Hi Son, how's it going?"

"Not too well. We've got another child murder," Jason said, the words coming out in a rush. "I just got back from the scene. It's a boy this time. I don't think I told you this last time. As an added twist, the killer leaves a note at each scene. Mutilates the kids. Says he's doing it because the lord is commanding him to. Calls himself the Mercy Killer. Some mercy."

"It's not the same lord that I worship who's commanding him," Stephen said.

"How can people like that live with themselves? What does it take for the human mind to descend to such a level?"

Stephen took a deep breath. "So how're you holding up?" he asked. "I got one of my bad feelings again in the middle of the night."

For a moment, Jason debated whether to tell his father about all that had happened in the past few hours. About the disappearing ball trick that really

disappeared, about Badger's encounter with the voice and the eyes and especially about the stuffed frog. It was all a little weird even to tell his dad, in whom he confided almost everything. Maybe he wouldn't tell him everything. Not yet. Maybe the ball trick was just a figment of a tired, overworked brain. The ball probably was lying somewhere around his bedroom. He just hadn't had time to find it. And what about Badger's story about the voice and the bad feeling he got from the stuffed animal? Well, Badger was just as tired and overworked as he was. A mind can create some amazing things when it reaches the point of exhaustion. He wouldn't talk to his dad about that until he'd talked to Badger again. His partner might change his mind, decide it was all hallucination. But it was a damned powerful one to make a big guy like Badger cower like a blubbering infant, wasn't it? a voice inside him said.

But the frog. There was no way to get around the frog.

"Uh, yeah, Dad, there has been something else," he said. "They found a toy at one of the crime scenes. A stuffed frog. It... it was just like one Claire used to have. In fact, I think it may be hers. I don't know how this killer got it. I put it in her... uh, next to her... at the funeral. If it's really hers, he would've had to... well, you know... dig her up to get it."

Stephen's voice instantly barked back over the phone.

The friendliness was gone. In its place was cold, hard seriousness. And buried deeply, almost unnoticeable, Jason heard an echo of fear.

"Has anything else unusual happened to you lately? Before or after you found the frog?" his father asked.

"That's a weird question," Jason said. "What do you mean? Unusual how?"

"As in out of the ordinary; as in unexplainable. Think, Son."

"No, no, not a thing," Jason stammered, shocked by the iron in his father's voice

and forgetting the incident with the disappearing ball trick. "I mean, two kids being killed and mutilated is unusual, if that's what you mean."

"No, it's not what I mean," Stephen said. "What about bad dreams? Had any nightmares lately?"

"Nope, sleeping like a baby," Jason said. "What are you getting at?"

His father was silent for several seconds. When he spoke, much of the concern was gone from his voice. Disguised, but not totally disappeared, Jason noted.

"Nothing, nothing really," Stephen said. "At least I don't think so. I don't know. When you told me about Claire's toy, it just shocked me. Scared the goddamned hell out of me, actually."

Jason was stunned. Despite his religious beliefs, his father could swear like a longshoreman when truly angry, but he never used God's name in his tapestries of obscenity. Something must have truly terrified him.

"Are you all right, Dad? Is everything okay up there?" he asked.

Stephen didn't answer for a moment. When he did, his voice was almost—but not quite, Jason noticed—back to normal.

"Yeah, everything's okay," Stephen said. "Honest. Once again I guess I just overreacted. I'm just worried. I don't want you overworking yourself, getting to the point of total exhaustion. That's a dangerous place to be."

What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Jason asked himself. Out loud he said: "I'm fine. Just a little tired. And as far as the toy is concerned, I'm not even completely sure it was Claire's. I'm having that checked right now."

"Will you call me when you find out?" Stephen asked.

"Sure I will. But right now, I really need to get back to work. They'll be bringing me lab and autopsy reports any second now."

"Oh sure, I understand," Stephen said, then paused. "Jason, will you do me another favor?"

"Of course."

"If anything strange happens to you in the next few days, anything at all, you call me immediately. You understand? Call me instantly, don't wait."

"What do you mean? Strange in what way?"

"Things you don't understand, that make no sense no matter how you look at them. You'll know what I'm talking about if it happens."

For an instant, Jason flashed back to the disappearing ball trick and Badger's bizarre story. Then he swept those from his mind. Not now. Those couldn't be considered now. They were nothing more than the products of tired minds. They had nothing to do with all of this.

"I doubt it, Dad," he said. "I have no idea what you're talking about right now."

"That's fine. Just humor your old man. Talk to you later, Jason. I love you."

"Love you, too. Bye."

Holding the receiver next to his cheek, Jason sat and stared. Damn, that was bizarre, he thought. It was so unlike Dad to get worked up like that. He usually remained calm in the face of any crisis. For a brief instant, Jason was rocked with a sinking fear that his father was getting old and perhaps senile.

"Oh, don't be stupid," he said to himself. His father was only sixty-four, hardly ancient. He was in good health, still robust in his work, quick in the mind. So what if he got overly upset this time? They were, after all, talking about his granddaughter, one of the true joys of his life before she died. His father's concern was understandable.

"Chill out," he said as he placed the receiver back in the cradle. As he did so, the

phone slid back an inch on the desk and bumped into something hidden behind it. With a slight clink, the object tumbled over and rolled into Jason's view.

His body went cold.

The magic trick.

How had it gotten here? It was on his nightstand the last time he saw it. Then Badger had called and he'd gone straight to the crime scene. Had he unknowingly put it in his jacket during his hurry to get dressed? He didn't remember doing it. And even if he had, he certainly didn't remember taking it out and putting it on his desk.

He held the trick in the palm of his right hand, his fingers spread wide as if it might turn into a great black spider at any moment. Slowly, he lifted off the top. The yellow ball stared back at him. Jason felt his stomach flip-flop.

Impossible. It *hadn't* been there. It was *gone*. He knew it was gone. Yet here it was again. Same as always. The sight of it caused sweat to break out across his upper lip.

Without warning, a quick vision of shining silver eyes flashed across his mind and fear unfurled its wings in his belly.

What the hell was going on here?

Chapter 10



Jason felt the blood draining from his head and a wave of dizziness flowed over him.

This can't be happening, he thought. There must be a rational explanation.

What did Sherlock Holmes say?

First the ball disappeared, now the trick shows up where it's not supposed to be and the ball has returned. Couple that with the stuffed frog and Badger's story and things were just getting too strange for rational explanation.

What did Sherlock Holmes say?

Jason's mind swam through a sea of confusion, nothing solid from horizon to horizon. He put his fists to his temples and pressed hard, as if trying to squeeze out the maelstrom.

If anything strange happens to you in the next few days, anything at all, you call me immediately. You'll know what I'm talking about if it happens.

Is this what his father meant? Should he call him now? Or was he overreacting? Certainly, if anything could be called strange, this was it. Tentatively, he reached for the phone. As he lifted the receiver, the door opened.

"Autopsy or lab reports back yet?" Badger asked as he came in.

"Uh, no. No, not yet," Jason said, dropping the phone into its cradle. "I'll call about them right now."

He dialed the coroner's office first. Saunders answered.

"Buzz, this is Jason. Got anything yet?"

"We've got a name," Saunders said. "Matthew Greene. We ID'd him off fingerprint records from one of those local grocery store sign-ups.

"We also know the kid was killed by the same guy," Saunders continued. "The finger marks on his neck matched those on Amanda Benton's. The boy was strangled to death before he was decapitated, and the head was cut off with an outdoor saw. The same type used on the girl."

"Was the boy raped?" Jason asked.

"Yes."

"Same blood type?"

"Yep. Semen analysis shows AB positive."

"Parents been called?"

"Nope. I'm leaving that to you."

Jason heard Saunders take a deep drag off a cigarette and could picture the cloud of smoke surrounding the coroner's head. For a man who dealt in death all day, Saunders seemed oblivious to his own mortality.

"Okay, thanks Buzz," Jason said and hung up. He immediately dialed the forensics lab and waited while Norm was called to the phone.

"So far we don't have anything," Bibb said. "Like the last time, there weren't any fibers or hairs on the body. We're still searching the clothes and stuffed frog for prints."

Jason mentally grimaced at the mention of the toy.

"There were several smudge prints on the body and on the boy's clothes, but we lifted some solid ones, too," Bibb said. "My gut tells me they're not from the

killer. More likely they're from his mother or father or friends at school. But I've got them running through CAL-ID right now just to make sure."

CAL-ID was a huge bank of computers containing the fingerprints of millions of felons around the nation. A few years ago, after police took a print off a car stolen from a strangulation victim in California, it took CAL-ID all of three minutes to come up with a suspect. The man turned out to be Richard Ramirez, the so-called Night Stalker, and he was later convicted of killing thirteen women.

"What about the note?" Jason asked.

"Typed on the same typewriter as before, but the paper was clean. My guess is that this guy wears surgical gloves from start to finish."

"So basically we've got another killing with the same bunch of nothing to go on?" Jason said. It was more a statement than a question.

"That's about the size of it," Bibb agreed.

Jason hung up quietly. He looked at Badger and shook his head.

"Just to let you know, we sent someone out to where Claire... uh, where she is..." Badger said.

"Buried," Jason said.

"Yeah, uh, anyway, the site hasn't been disturbed. No one's been there. So I guess that means the toy wasn't hers."

Jason took a deep breath. "I guess not," he said. "But I could've sworn it looked just like hers. Crooked arm and everything. What're the chances of two kids having toys like that?"

"I don't know," Badger said. "But coincidence is a crazy thing. Anything's possible."

"I suppose," Jason said. "That still doesn't rule out that the killer knows me. It

might be that he got a toy just like Claire's to freak me out. And you know what? He's doing a damned good job."

Badger's whole body suddenly erupted in a gigantic shudder and he rubbed his arms vigorously as if he were freezing. Jason raised his eyebrows and Badger looked at him with his mouth set in a tight line.

"I'm feeling a little freaked myself," he said. "I just can't get rid of that horrible feeling I got when I picked up that frog back at the Civic Complex dumpster. Whenever I think about it I shake. And I can't get that voice out of my mind, either. It's fucking with me bad, Jazz. I keep trying to pass it off as some sort of hallucination, but I don't know. It seemed as real as hell when it happened."

"I understand," Jason said. "I wish I could explain it. Maybe it's just from being tired, but I'm not so sure. I trust your feelings too much to just pass it off as complete bullshit."

They sat in silence for a minute, not knowing what to say, afraid to explore the possibilities of their discussion. Finally Badger spoke.

"Do we have a name on the new kid?" he asked.

"Yeah, Matthew Greene," Jason said. He leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Looks like we get to be the ones to tell 'em. You ready for that?"

"Hell no, but let's get it over with."

Matthew Greene's parents were much the same as Amanda Benton's. Middle class, well educated, with good jobs, they lived in Bayswater Common, a well-kept subdivision with neatly trimmed lawns sitting in the northeastern corner of the county and about forty miles outside Atlanta. Rick Greene worked in management at Georgia Power and his wife, Carolyn, was the manager of the First Impressions dress boutique at Lenox Square. Besides Matthew, there were

two other children, eight-year-old Barrett and three-year-old Michelle. They were at their grandparents' house when Jason and Badger arrived.

Rick Greene met them at the door. His eyes were bloodshot and glassy from too many cups of coffee and a night without sleep. Like the Bentons, the Greenses started calling police the night before, when Matt didn't return from baseball practice. Unlike Joseph Benton, who was near collapse and in shock when police arrived, the Greenses still were in fits of hyperactivity.

"It's about fucking time," Greene said when Jason introduced himself and Badger.

"May we come in?" Jason asked through the screen door, almost hoping the man would refuse.

Greene pushed the door open with one hand and called to his wife.

"Carolyn, the police have finally graced us with their presence," he said. "And only twelve hours after we started calling."

Carolyn Greene, a petite, pretty woman with blond hair and hazel eyes, came rushing in from the kitchen, drying her hands on a paper towel. Her face was creased with worry and fatigue and her eyes were bleak.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked in an excited voice. "Do you know where Matt is? Is he all right?"

"Would you two care to sit?" Jason asked.

Mrs. Greene stood there trembling, her face going flat with the implications of Jason's question. She stared into his eyes and they told her what she was terrified of knowing. With a stifled cry, she collapsed on the floor in a heap.

Her husband ran to her and rolled her onto her back. He looked at Jason, silently asking the question he couldn't put into words. Jason gave a small, somber nod. Greene picked up an ashtray and flung it into the nearest wall, where it shattered,

ripping a chunk out of the Sheetrock.

For five minutes, Greene ran around the house in a blind panic. He ignored his wife, leaving Badger to pick her up and lay her on the couch while Jason soaked some towels in cold water and laid them on her forehead. Greene, meanwhile, kept running into his son's room, only to emerge seconds later, gasping for air. When he wasn't doing that, he was screaming at Jason and Badger, threatening to sue, have their jobs and kick their asses. Finally he fell into his recliner and began crying.

By the time Mrs. Greene revived several minutes later, her husband was calm and going into shock. She also was having trouble grasping the situation, but between them they managed to mumble answers to a few questions.

Matt was at Little League practice from five until seven the evening before, they said. He practiced every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with games on Saturday mornings. The ball field was only about half a mile away and Matt always walked to and from practice. All he had to do was cut through a section of woods behind the house and he was at the field within five minutes. Since it still was light at seven, his parents didn't worry about him walking home. And there usually were a couple of kids who lived in the same neighborhood walking with him.

Phone calls to friends, the team's coach, and a handful of others led to nothing, so at eight o'clock Rick Greene went looking. It was growing dark by then and he took a flashlight, cutting down the path in the woods that led to the ball field. He didn't find anything and when he returned home, he began calling the police every hour. He was told—as the Bentons had been—that children weren't considered missing until twenty-four hours went by.

"There'd already been one murder," Greene said. "Why weren't you taking

missing children more seriously?"

Badger and Jason remained silent. They had no explanation.

Greene stared at the floor and shook his head from side to side. "I don't understand," he mumbled. "I just don't understand."

"Mr. and Mrs. Greene," Jason said, "I have one final question and then we'll be through. Did Matthew have a stuffed frog, a toy frog that he carried with him?"

"No," Mrs. Greene said. "He threw away all his stuffed animals a couple of years ago. He was afraid other boys would come into his room and think he was a sissy. Besides, he never had a stuffed frog at all."

Badger glanced at Jason, his eyebrows raised.

The questioning over, Badger called forensics to examine the Greene's house and the path to the ball field. Then he phoned a squad car to take the Greenes to identify the body. Jason couldn't help but imagine how it would be to identify your little boy by looking at his severed head. He stopped thinking along those lines. It made him ill.

He and Badger wandered out to the backyard, looking for the trail that cut through the woods. It was easy to spot, a gap in the azaleas at the corner of the yard. The gap opened onto a foot-wide trail that angled off between the trees. The woods, mostly a set of Southern pines and dogwoods, were hardly dense or impenetrable. From where they stood, Jason and Badger could see at least two hundred feet into the trees and could hear the roar of lawn mowers coming from the ball field.

Forensics arrived within twenty minutes. One team took the house while another fanned out along the trail. About three hundred feet into the woods, one of the technicians almost tripped over a baseball glove lying beside a dogwood. A few feet away, a Louisville Slugger baseball bat, the *Dale Murphy* model, was

partially obscured by a pile of leaves. Ten yards farther was a spot in the undergrowth where a struggle obviously took place. Leaves were scattered about and patches of bare ground showed through. Nearer the trail, a small pool of blood was found on some leaves.

While forensics was making its discoveries, Jason and Badger were at the ball field, questioning the maintenance workers who were getting the diamonds ready for the night's games. None of them had been there yesterday afternoon; they had been at the complex in Mountain Park.

Jason and Badger drove back to headquarters and started making phone calls. The first was to the Little League's main office to get a list of the boys on Matt's team, their home phone numbers, and the schools they attended. They also called the coach, Sid North, and learned only that Matt had made it to practice. North said he left right after practice to pick up his ten-year-old daughter who was at middle school cheerleader tryouts.

Using the list of team members, Jason and Badger made the rounds between half a dozen schools. Bobby Mendaglio, the first baseman on Matt's team, said he, Matt, and Orin Taylor stayed a little late after practice, talking about school, girls, and the Atlanta Braves. The conversation lasted about thirty minutes, Bobby said, or until it started getting dark. Then everyone went home. The last thing he saw was Matt heading into the woods, his baseball glove in one hand and a bat over his right shoulder.

Six schools, five hours, and twenty-five interviews later, nothing was any clearer than when Jason and Badger began. So they headed for the Greenes' neighborhood to talk with residents there. Once again, it was the same story, second verse. People were inside. They heard nothing and saw nothing. But how could something like this happen in their neighborhood? they asked. Why weren't the police protecting them?

As the sun set, Jason and Badger crawled wearily into the squad car and drove back to the station.

"God, this is depressing," Badger said. "We've spent all day getting nowhere."

"You know the press already is having a field day with this one," he added. "And Quintard's going to do his best to brand our asses."

Jason just shrugged and looked out the window. He didn't say anything the whole way back. When they walked into their office, there was a message on Jason's desk to call forensics. He grabbed the phone and dialed hurriedly. In his haste, he misdialled the number... twice.

"Shit, fuck, sonuvabitch," he hollered until he got it right.

Bibb answered the lab's phone.

"Norm, it's Jason."

"Oh, hi Jazz," Bibb said. "Got a couple of things here for you. First of all, the blood from the woods came from our guy. AB positive. It's not the kid's because his is B negative."

"And here's something else that might help," Bibb said. "While checking around the area, my boys found a set of footprints underneath all the leaves and shit. Remember that hard rain we had about four days ago? The ground underneath all this stuff was still good and damp and made a real nice set of prints. And get this, they were Nike Airs, size ten and a half."

"Same as last time," Jason said.

"Right-o," Bibb answered. "But more important than that, these prints led away from the site and up to a nearby road. Up there we found a set of tire tracks on the shoulder. Goodyear Vectors that fit a pretty healthy-sized car—a Caprice, Riviera, Delta 88, Cadillac, or something like that. The back rear tire has a plug

in it from a nail or something, plus the front one on the driver's side is worn heavily on the outside. Whoever this guy is, he needs to have his front end aligned."

"That's great," Jason said. "Maybe somebody saw the car while it was parked on the side of the road."

"We can hope," Bibb said.

Jason hung up and told Badger the new information.

"It's a start," Badger said.

Captain Silverman, his face flinty and hard, opened their door. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"I've been on the phone all day with county commissioners, reporters, worried PTA members, school officials, everybody but the goddammed dog catcher," he said wearily. "And if Anson Quintard has called once, he's called a dozen times. I hope to hell you guys have some good news for me."

"Not much," Badger said, telling Silverman what the lab reported,

"That's pretty lame," Silverman said.

Jason was leaning back in his chair, staring at the ceiling with his fingers locked behind his head.

"Captain, unless we get a lucky break—I mean something that helps us nail a suspect—we're going to be up to our necks in dead children," he finally said.

"This guy is just warming up.

"In a perverted sort of way, maybe that'll be good," Jason continued with a grimace. "If he does a lot of them, it means he can't plan as meticulously. He'll be bound to make a mistake somewhere."

"Yeah, but how many kids are we going to lose before he does?" Silverman

asked.

"A lot, I'm afraid," Jason sighed. "A whole fucking lot."

The door opened and Norman Bibb walked in. His face was pale and drawn and he glanced around the room as though he were looking at the walking dead.

"What is it, Norm?" Captain Silverman said.

"Uh, I've got something here for Jazz," he said, holding up a piece of paper in his hands. "Something we just got back a few minutes ago, after I talked to you."

"And?" Jason said.

"Um, you know we took prints off that stuffed frog we found. You know, standard procedure to find out who's been handling it."

"So?"

"So we only found one set of prints on it, Jazz. We ran them through CAL-ID and nothing came out, so on a hunch, I ran them down the list of kids' fingerprints we have from mall and school sign-ups and stuff like that."

"Goddammit, Norm, tell us what you've got!" Badger said, his patience gone.

"Okay, okay," Bibb said, swallowing hard. He turned to face Jason.

"The prints were your daughter's, Jazz."

Chapter 11



Feeling, as Badger put it, "shot at and missed, shit at and hit," Jason arrived home a little before midnight. With no sleep in almost two days, his body functioned on a combination of untapped reserves and innumerable cups of coffee.

He hadn't eaten and still didn't feel much like it, but knew he needed something, so he stopped by the grocery store on the way home. He unloaded the bologna, bread, mayonnaise, and mustard from his one bag and placed them on the counter. Smearing large amounts of mayo and mustard on the bread, he made two sandwiches, adding two slices of bologna to each. Pulling a glass from the cabinet, he filled it with ice and reached into one of the grocery sacks for a bottle of Coke.

Carrying the glass in his left hand and the sandwiches in the palm of his right, he walked into the living room and plopped down hard on the couch, ignoring the squeal of badly treated springs. Setting the sandwiches on the couch arm he grabbed the remote control off the cushion and turned on the twenty-five-inch Sony color TV nestled across the room. He wasn't planning on watching anything in particular, he had too much to think about for that, he just wanted some background noise.

Hunger, however, overtook his need to think and he wolfed the sandwiches, washing them down with swigs of Coke. He knew he hadn't eaten in a while, but

was surprised at how he practically inhaled the food. He thought about making another sandwich, but it was almost one and he decided against it.

After turning off the TV, he stopped by the kitchen, he refilled his glass with Coke, then went to his bedroom. He put the glass on the nightstand, making sure to use a *National Geographic* for a coaster so there'd be no rings, and sat down on the bed to take off his shoes. Once again, his eyes drifted to the photo of Sarah and Claire at the beach.

Oh God, what was going on with this case? he wondered.

There was no doubt that the frog was his daughter's. Even if he wasn't sure upon seeing it, the fingerprints proved it beyond doubt. Still, Bibb had noted that it was extremely unusual for fingerprints to remain intact for eighteen months, since they are based on body oils and moisture, which evaporate in time. But the prints were there and there was no doubt they were Claire's, so Bibb attributed the whole thing to a fluke of the frog being buried underground in a sealed, watertight casket. There was no other rational explanation, he said.

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

"Oh fuck you, Sherlock," he said out loud. "Get out of my head."

The question now was: How had the son-of-a-bitch killer gotten the frog? Her grave was undisturbed. Could the bastard have done that neat a job getting in and out? At first he thought the toy might have been taken from Claire's coffin before she was buried, but a call to the funeral home dispelled those thoughts. The funeral director, Mr. Dollorand, said he personally oversaw the funeral and would swear in court that the toy had been inside the casket.

That left the first premise, but the thought of some maniac rooting around in his daughter's casket almost made the sandwiches come up. I have to catch this

killer, he thought. I have to. If only for my own sanity, if only to find out who and why. If only for Claire.

It didn't help that Claire Medlocke died when she was only a couple of years younger than Amanda and Matthew.

It was Halloween. Sarah and Claire were on their way to a school play in which Claire was to be the star attraction, a witch intent on spoiling Halloween for the other children.

Despite the thrill of the evening's thespian challenge, seven-year-old Claire was more afraid she wouldn't finish in time for trick-or-treats.

"Honey, you'll be out of there by six-thirty," Sarah told her. "Daddy and I will take you trick-or-treating right after. You won't even have to change your costume."

Jason was supposed to meet them at home, then drive them to the school. But a late-breaking batch of paperwork—Captain Silverman wanted those reports now, by God—delayed him. He called Sarah and told her he'd meet them at the play.

The drunk crossed the center line only half a mile from the school entrance, smashing headfirst into the Chevy Nova carrying Sarah and Claire. In a terrible irony, neither Claire nor Sarah was killed instantly, but the drunk was, leaving Jason with no place to aim his anger. "At least if the bastard had lived," Jason kept saying, "I could have made sure he spent the rest of his life rotting in some jail cell."

Sarah died within twenty-four hours of the wreck, never regaining consciousness. Police at the scene said she must have flung herself across Claire at the last second, hoping to lessen the blow to her.

Claire lingered horribly in the intensive care unit for ten days, coming in and out of a coma. Even when she was conscious, the extent of her injuries forced

doctors to keep her heavily sedated. They didn't expect her to survive, but neither did they want her to suffer.

Jason almost lost his mind. He wanted to talk to his baby girl, to say goodbye, although he never thought about it in those exact terms. He only knew he had lost his wife; why must he lose his daughter, too? But he couldn't stand to see her suffer, so he went along with doctor's orders. He never spoke to her again.

Sarah's parents flew in from Texas. Jason's father flew down from Boston. All three spent hours each day trying to make Jason eat and rest. He refused, eating twice and sleeping a total of ten hours in a week.

On the eighth day, Stephen sat down beside his son on the orange Naugahyde-and-chrome sofa in the hospital's waiting room. Jason's eyes seemed nonexistent, having sunk into the blue-black depths of the sockets. His hair was unwashed and uncombed. He had changed clothes once in the eight days. He smelled like hell.

"Jason, you've gotta go home. You need sleep," his father said for maybe the hundredth time. "You'll die if you don't," he added for the first.

No response.

"Please listen to me. It's not your fault," Stephen continued. "There's nothing you could've done. If you had been with them, you'd only be dead, too."

"I wish I was."

"No, you don't. You think you do now, but you won't later. Trust me, I know. Your life is not over."

"Dad, I've just lost my whole family. How the fuck do you expect me to feel? Happy? Like a million bucks? Like dancing?"

The words stung Stephen in their intensity, but his only response was a quick blinking of his eyes and a deep breath.

"Jason, I was only six years older than you are when your mother died. Believe me, I know how you feel."

Jason looked up, his eyes swimming in agony. It took him several seconds to speak.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he finally said. "I know that. It's just that I... I don't know... I can't think straight. I feel like my whole life has been swept away by a giant hand. And I don't understand why. There's nothing left. I just want to be left alone."

"Sorry. I can't do that. And neither can anyone else who loves you. You're tired, beat. You can't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders any longer. Let me take some. I'll stay here while you get some sleep. Go home. There's nothing you can do anymore."

Jason said nothing. He wrung his hands and looked out the window at the dark gray clouds of November. Frost glistened along the windows' edges as winter approached with solemn assurance. Yet the gloominess of the day was light compared to Jason's despair. Tears welled up in his eyes, then spilled forth onto his cheeks.

"I can't," he said. "Suppose Claire wakes up and wants to see me? Suppose she... she..." But he couldn't bring himself to say the word. "Oh God, Dad, I don't know what I'm going to do," he said as he hunched over, racked with soul-jarring sobs.

A shuddering heave shook Jason's body as he sat on his bed eighteen months later. He took a gulp of Coke to loosen his throat.

God, I'm still not sure how I made it, he thought. Hell, I'm still not sure I have made it. I may lose it at any second.

Despite the bleakness of the memory, Jason felt his chest filling with warmth as

he recalled his father's kind, loving presence that day in the hospital.

Thank God for Dad. I'd have been a rubber room resident for sure if not for him.

He remembered his father leaning over and hugging his shoulders as he cried in the hospital. Cradled in his father's arms, Jason felt a sense of serenity washing over him as his father stroked his hair. Just the memory was comforting.

I guess that's when I fell asleep, Jason thought. Weird, though. I was tired, but I sure wasn't sleepy. I didn't think I'd ever sleep again.

With perfect clarity, Jason recalled his father's hand slowly moving across his forehead and a comforting glow spreading over his body like a warm washcloth in a loving hand. He suddenly realized it was similar to the tingling he experienced when his emotions ran high, a bit more soothing but essentially the same.

He tried to pursue the memory further, but the screen went blank, clicking off as if someone had thrown a switch. Jason figured that must have been when he fell asleep. A nagging question tugged at the corners of his mind, then disappeared.

"Well," he said, shaking his head. "I may not have been tired then, but I sure am now."

Standing up, he shed his clothes in a pile by the bed then flicked off the nightstand light. He lay on top of the sheet, the covers remaining at his feet. The strenuous day caught up with him quickly and Jason felt his eyelids turn leaden. As he drifted to sleep, one last thought entered his mind: What did Dad do to me that day? Then sleep enveloped him.

The red digital readout of his alarm clock read three o'clock when Jason sat upright in bed, gasping for breath. Sweat flowed off his body in streams, soaking the sheet. His hair was glued to his head in a soaked mop. Although his eyes

were closed, he shook his head back and forth, as if he were walking through a wall of cobwebs.

With a small cry, he flung himself forward, landing on his hands and knees on the mattress. Sitting up straight, he threw his hands out, crossing his arms in front of his face as though warding off an attacker. Terror passed over his face and he threw himself backward, a muted scream leaving his lips as he tumbled off the bed, cracking his head on the baseboard of the wall.

His eyes sprang open, clear and bright. He looked at his legs, his heels still on the mattress, then glanced around.

"Damn," he said. "Damn, damn, damn. What a dream."

He couldn't remember all of it, just terrifying glimpses. Blood, fire, faces, screams. It was jumbled, didn't make any sense. Even as he drew his heels off the bed, the dream was fading. By the time he got to the bathroom, it was gone.

Sleepily, he stood over the toilet and peed, then turned to the sink to splash some water on his blushing, sweaty face. Droplets dripping off his nose, he grabbed a nearby hand towel and, dabbing at the wetness, cast his eyes on the mirror before him.

Deep in the mirror's recesses, a small green glow appeared. Jason first thought it was the reflection of something behind him and whirled around. Only the white shower curtain stared back at him. When he turned back to the mirror, the viridian glow was bigger.

No, not bigger. Closer.

He stepped away from the mirror and the glow picked up speed, coming toward him in a streamlined jet. Jason stood mesmerized for a moment, wondering if he still was dreaming, then decided he didn't want to find out one way or the other. Spinning on his heels, he started to run. Too late. The glow erupted from the

mirror, spewing a vast cloud that swallowed Jason and stopped him in his tracks. From inside the cloud, Jason saw everything through a diseased greenish hue. The white porcelain of the toilet, sink, and bathtub resembled yellow-green jade. The tile floor looked as if someone had coated it with vomit. The sick discoloration made him feel ill.

Prickling in his fingertips made him glance down and a cry of shock rose in his throat. His fingertips were absorbing the emerald cloud.

As the glow moved under his fingernails and into his hands, he could see the blood vessels beneath the skin take on an iridescent green. Holding his arms outstretched, he watched as the green flowed up his forearms and past his elbows. He grasped his right shoulder with his left hand, trying to stem the flow, but the sickening greenness moved as if his hand weren't there.

He suddenly realized it was aiming for his brain. And he couldn't stop it. He stood still, fearfully waiting for the green-tinted blood to reach its destination. There was no doubt when it did.

A rush of visions erupted in his head, collapsing him to his hands and knees. His mind's eye was drenched in an onslaught of horrid pictures. Blood, fire, faces, screams.

He shook his head to rid it of the images. No use. He closed his eyes, threw his hands up and covered them with his palms, but the parade of horror continued. He opened his eyes and the visions remained. His whole existence revolved around the world within his mind.

There were vast fires, screaming people trapped inside. No, not just trapped, put there on purpose. To burn, to die, to repent. Skin charred, then was peeled back with iron hooks to reveal fresh, sensitive muscle. Howls rent the air.

He saw chunks of iron, spikes jutting on four sides, shoved into people's mouths.

Confess, demon, confess. Spikes thrust through the roof of the mouth and into the blood-rich, tender tissue of the brain. The demon died, his guilt assured. Or the demon lived, his guilt assured.

Jason saw hundreds, thousands, of people dying. On the rack, joints popping as they stretched beyond their breaking point; in the pillories, cat-o'-nine-tails lashing their backs, blood splashing the grinning face of the whip wielder. Innocent people were swept up in mob rule, carried away by fear and hate.

The images abruptly changed and individual faces flew by, each unknown, yet each familiar. Men, all men. Many were dressed in ancient clothes: tricornered hats, powdered wigs, high-necked blouses. Some faces were peaceful, others screamed in agony.

Who are these people? What do they mean to me?

The images changed again, combined into one. The familiar faces were in the flames, in the iron devices, on the racks, and in the pillories. Tortured. Racked with agony. Dying. The pain scorched into Jason's body, shredding his nerves. It was hideous, horrible, yet a sense of unendurable sadness washed over him.

What did they do?

He flung his arms upward, crossing them in front of his face to ward off the horror. An anguish-filled scream burst from his mouth as he threw himself backward to get away, to hide, to leave this pain-drenched place. His head cracked against the side of the tub and he collapsed to the floor.

He awoke on the floor of his bedroom, the back of his head aching where it had just hit the baseboard. His heels rested on the mattress. He wondered how long he had been there and looked at his alarm clock. The time read three o'clock.

"Damn," he said. "Damn, damn, damn. What a dream."

Hadn't he just said that? It sounded awfully familiar.

Lowering his legs from the bed, he slowly picked himself up off the floor and sat down on the edge of the mattress. The memories of the dream already were fading, in fact, he could barely remember anything. Just something about the color green and then it was gone, leaving him with the feeling he'd missed something important.

Except for the nasty goose egg swelling on the base of his head, he felt okay. But the throb already moving into his skull warned him to have an aspirin bottle close at hand tomorrow.

He thought he might have to pee, but there was no urge so he climbed back into bed and pulled the sheet up to his waist. He wiggled around on the bed, trying to find a comfortable position, but finally gave up. Closing his eyes, he felt himself drifting off almost immediately. But he felt strange, restless, uneasy.

What kind of sleep is this?

A point of light blossomed in the deepest part of his mind. The light wasn't bright, but it was a disturbing shade of green. Jason tried to open his eyes. He couldn't.

Am I dreaming again?

The light moved forward, slowly at first, then picking up speed. Closer and closer. Its glow was sickening, unhealthy, evil. Jason squirmed. He didn't want it coming any nearer, but couldn't get out of the way. Like a penny on a railroad track, he was stuck, waiting for the train to smash him flat.

As the light drew close, a face began to take shape inside. Colors swirled and eddied, foggy mists trying to coalesce into a whole. But the whole never materialized, just agonizing glimpses—jagged teeth, high cheekbones with sunken cheeks, a huge, misshapen head. Anger, hate, evil.

Only the eyes became solid. Silver, burning, no pupils, yet oozing the evil of the

universe.

Then the eyes spoke.

"Medlocke, you're mine," a voice whispered.

Jason remembered nothing else.

Chapter 12



When the alarm went off at six-thirty the next morning, Jason's head throbbed like a well-whacked croquet ball. He reached to the back of his neck and gingerly touched the goose egg. It was a big one all right, thick and swollen hard and tight. When he raised his head to get out of bed, the pounding felt like a jackhammer. It felt as if someone were behind his eyes, chiseling to get out. He had slept very little. After waking from the horrible dream, questions and fear kept his eyes wide and his mind racing. He hadn't come to any definite conclusions by the time he finally fell asleep about four. And that scared him. Staggering to the bathroom, he opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out a bottle of aspirin, dumping three into his palm and tossing them into the back of his mouth where he chewed them quickly. He glanced into the mirror, but for some reason that gave him a chill and he climbed quickly into the shower, careful not to move his head too much. The aspirin took a few minutes to kick in and he had a devil of a time washing his hair without hitting the knot.

An hour later, with a cup of coffee in his hand and the sun just rising through the trees, he drove to work, his mind puzzling over the night. Those eyes. That voice. What did it all mean? Was it just a bad dream, the product of too much stress and too little sleep? Or was it the killer? Was the killer psychic, as he had suggested after Badger's episode? If he had tapped into Badger's skull, why couldn't he tap into others? That might explain how he knew about Claire and

her toy.

But with the sun up and the world seemingly safe, it all seemed so farfetched, so Hollywood, so bestseller. More likely than doing anything paranormal, the killer had probably slipped some sort of drug into his food or coffee. Even that sounded like a paranoid delusion. The most rational explanation was that it was a nightmare that should be ignored like all nightmares. Still, he couldn't shake the overwhelming evil and hatred he felt when the eyes appeared. He would never forget it, even if it wasn't real.

Suddenly his father's voice echoed through his mind: *If anything strange happens to you in the next few days, anything at all, you call me immediately.*

Jason shivered. Maybe I should call Dad when I get to the office.

But by the time he pulled into the parking lot at police headquarters, he was back to questioning his judgment. If he called his father, did that mean he should tell Badger, too? In a case like this, any little clue might be helpful. And that was doubly true since Badger had suffered through an unexplainable incident. But was there any connection between his horror last night and Badger's? He just didn't know. And truth be told, he was a little afraid of finding out.

As he climbed out of his car, his eyes fell on a blue Mazda Miata parked in one of headquarters public spots. The car jogged a memory, but he couldn't quite remember from where. Once inside the building, he forgot about it entirely.

Badger already was at his desk, poring over the autopsies and forensic reports when Jason walked in. "You look like shit," he said.

"Thanks," Jason said.

"Bad night?"

"Yeah, didn't get much sleep."

"Man, I went down like falling timber," Badger said. "I didn't budge until the

alarm went off."

"I just had some bad dreams," Jason said and left it at that. He wasn't quite ready to tell the truth. He wasn't sure he knew what the truth was.

"Look, I need some more coffee," he said. "You want some?"

"Nah, just got some."

Coming back from the kitchen, steam rising from his cup, Jason couldn't get his mind off the night before. Did it have a connection with the murders? Maybe he was grasping desperately at anything that came his way, but dammit, he didn't have anything else.

Immersed in thought, he wasn't watching where he was going. Rounding the corner, he was totally unprepared for the collision. He slammed hard into someone, his cup of coffee sloshing halfway up his arm and onto the bare skin exposed by his rolled-up sleeve. He heard another crash, but the coffee was burning into his flesh and he didn't have time to see what it was. Dancing about for a moment, he located a desk to put his cup on, giving him a chance to frantically wipe his arm.

"Shitfire and save matches," he said, borrowing one of Badger's pet phrases.

"My sentiments exactly," a female voice said.

Jason turned around, then looked down at the carpeted floor and a head of blond hair. The head glanced up and Jason found himself staring into the eyes of the blonde in the Miata. Now he remembered where he'd seen that car before.

She squatted, surrounded by a bloom of manila envelopes and folders. Papers spread out all around her and she was picking them up one by one, making sure to replace them in the correct file.

Jason stood dumbfounded, his mind bewildered by coincidence.

Say something you fucking idiot, his brain screamed at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just wasn't thinking, wasn't watching where I was going."

Oh, that's terrific, his brain sneered.

"Obviously," the blonde answered, running her fingers through her hair, which was cut short on the sides but fairly long on the top. Stunned though he was, the cop in Jason noticed she was a natural blonde because her eyebrows were honey blond, too. Either she's a natural or she's very thorough, he thought.

A questioning look crossed her face. "Aren't you even going to offer to help?" she asked.

You're fucking up. You're fucking up, his brain said.

"Oh God, yes, I'm sorry," he said, kneeling quickly and grabbing a handful of papers. "My brain just isn't working. I guess this makes me a candidate for a ticket for DWHUA."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Driving With Head Up Ass."

She laughed, a throaty chuckle that made Jason quiver.

"Really, I'm very sorry," he said. "I was just totally absorbed in my thoughts."

"I noticed."

"You're the one in the Miata from a couple of days ago, aren't you? The one at the stoplight on Jimmy Carter."

"Yeah. I thought I recognized you, too."

"God, you're really seeing me at my best."

"If that's true, your best is pretty shitty."

It was Jason's turn to laugh, and he noticed it raised a smile on her face. Her

smile was devastating, big and white. It lit her face, which was square with a nose that was just a little on the big side.

"My name's Jason Medlocke," he said, extending his hand.

"Alex Cotton," she said, her handshake a firm, dry grip. Jason held his breath when she drew it back, hoping she wouldn't wipe it on her pants leg. She didn't and he thanked God for dry palms.

"Your name is Alex? Just Alex?"

"Alexandria. My father was an Egypt nut."

"Hooray for the pharaohs," Jason said, amazed at how charming he was being. It had been such a long time.

"Are you looking for someone in particular?" he asked.

"Yeah, Captain Silverman. Do you know where his office is?"

"Oh yeah, he's my CO. His office is just down the hall from mine. C'mon, I was heading that way."

Her papers back in order, she straightened. She was tall, a plus in Jason's book. He also noted her navy-blue business suit accented her curves.

"You here on official business?" he asked as they strolled down the hall.

"Yes, I'm a computer programmer," she said. "I'm here to put some new software into your office system."

"What kind?"

"Basically an advanced word-processing system, but it's keyed to policework. Understands police abbreviations and jargon."

"That should help," he said, not really knowing what else to say.

"That's the idea," she answered.

When Jason got to his office door, he stopped. "The next door down on the left is Silverman's," he said. "Just knock. I think he's in there."

She smiled. "Thanks."

"Look, I apologize again for almost tackling you," he said, trying to prolong their meeting. "I'm usually better than that. I'm just sort of caught up in a case."

"The Mercy Killings?"

"Yeah," he said. "I see you read your newspaper."

"Well, you'd have to be in a cave not to know about them at this point," she said.

"And it's all over TV."

"Yeah, well, it's all over me, too. Got me on edge," he said. "It's all I've thought about."

"It must be tough, knowing he's still out there."

"Tough is putting it mildly. I'm lying awake nights wondering who might be next, if there's some clue I'm overlooking."

Alex gazed directly into his eyes and Jason felt himself being sized up. After a second, she smiled and nodded. Apparently he'd passed the exam. She suddenly looked at her watch. "Uh-oh," she said. "I'm supposed to be with Captain Silverman right now. I'd better go."

"Sure, sure, it was nice meeting you," Jason said.

"You too," she said and smiled. To Jason's eyes, it seemed genuine.

"Are you going to be around headquarters for a while?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, for a few days. It'll take me a while to get the software in place and then to train you guys how to work it."

"Great," he said. "I'll see you again, then."

"No doubt."

"I look forward to it."

"Me too."

She smiled again and turned toward Silverman's office. Just before she knocked, she looked at Jason and gave a small wave.

Jason waved back and went into his office.

"Where's the coffee you went to get?" Badger asked. "And why's that shit-eating grin on your face?"

Chapter 13



Moonlight streamed through the windows of Joseph and Betty Benton's bedroom, washing the room in a pale, ghostly light. Betty lay flat on her back, her arms sprawled out to the side, like a scarecrow on a pole. Her mouth drooped open, limp because of the handful of tranquilizers she had swallowed a couple of hours earlier. Since coming home from the hospital, she got out of bed only to use the bathroom and nibble on some food. She slept only when heavily sedated. Even then she had terrible dreams.

As his wife snored beside him, Joseph Benton slept on his side, his back to her. Instead of bringing them closer together, the loss of their daughter had driven a wedge between them. Just the sight of each other brought memories of what used to be. They both knew their marriage wouldn't last much longer.

In the two weeks since the death of his daughter, Joseph slept fitfully, with only rare moments of deep sleep. He usually awoke more exhausted than when he went to bed. He also was troubled by terrible dreams, but not the same ones as his wife's. He couldn't quite remember his, the only residue was a sense of lingering horror and the feeling he was covered in filth that sunk all the way to his heart.

Tonight he was in one of those rare moments of deep, dreamless sleep, his face peaceful and calm instead of twitching and pained. Suddenly, his whole body jerked as if touched by an electric wire. Springing from his bed, he landed

nimbly on his feet. His eyes were wide open, but glassy and unseeing as he moved stiffly to the window and stared into the backyard lit by the bright moonlight. He seemed to be listening.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he said softly, then turned and pulled out the nightstand drawer. Inside was a set of keys, and he clutched them tightly in his fist as he left the bedroom and headed for the door that opened into the garage. Unlocking the door, he stepped into the pitch-black room.

Without turning on the overhead light, he walked straight to the trunk of his Caprice and inserted the key into the lock. As the lid opened, the trunk light snapped on. Benton reached in and lifted the carpeting that covered the spare tire. The spare was gone. In its place were a pair of Nike Air jogging shoes, five rolls of silver duct tape, a box of black plastic lawn bags, several unopened packages of panty hose, and a half dozen outdoor saws, still in their small boxes. Benton stopped momentarily and cocked his head. He remained motionless for a few seconds, then an irritated look crossed his face.

"Yes, I know, I know," he said. "I said I understood, didn't I? Didn't I move them from the storage house out back to the basement when the police were searching the house? I hid them in that box they'd already searched. Now I'm putting them back until the next time."

Gathering the items in his arms, Benton walked back through the house to the sliding glass doors at the sun deck. He unlocked the doors and went down the sun deck's steps. Glistening footprints trailed behind him across the dew-covered grass as he walked across his backyard, eyes fixed on the white aluminum storage building at the back. The keys jingled as he flipped through them and stopped at the one that fit the Master lock on the building's door. He inserted the key and grunted as the lock clicked open.

Ten minutes later, Benton trudged up the sun deck stairs. The cuffs of his pajama bottoms were wet from dew and tiny pieces of grass and dirt stuck to his feet. A satisfied look was on his face. He had hidden all the items in the compartment beneath the seat of his Craftsman lawn tractor.

"Don't worry. No one will ever find it," he said out loud as he walked up the stairs. "It will all be safe. My wife never goes out there. No one but me ever goes out there."

He paused, listened.

"Yes, I know who the next one is," he said. "It will be done according to plan."

Benton put the keys back in the nightstand and crawled into bed. His wife had not changed position and her snoring still bounced off the bedroom walls. He was asleep moments after his head hit the pillow and a look of relieved calm spread over his face.

About thirty minutes later, Joseph Benton threw back the covers and groggily got up to go to the bathroom. As he pulled his feet from under the covers, he noticed the cuffs of his pajamas were sticking to his ankles.

How did that happen? he wondered sleepily. It's as if I've been walking around outside.

He walked to the window and gazed into his backyard. The moon was low in the sky and the backyard was covered in darkness. The lawn was black in shadow.

Oh well, he thought sleepily, it's not worth getting worked up over. Yawning, he went to the bathroom and relieved himself. At least his sleep was free of dreams.

Chapter 14



Jason and Badger sat at their desks, staring at each other. They had spent the past fourteen days questioning more people, going over reports, checking computer printouts, discussing the facts between themselves. The end result still was two dead children and no suspects and a rapidly dwindling hope of finding any.

"Look, we've done everything we can today," Badger said. "All we'll do from here on out is frustrate ourselves. Besides, you're getting that stressed-out, I've-got-to-solve-this-one-myself look and I don't like it."

"I'm okay," Jason said. "Just real tired."

"Well, go home. Get some sleep."

"Maybe I will. A bed sure sounds wonderful right now."

"It might be even better with someone in it," Badger said slyly.

Jason gave him a lopsided grin.

"Call her, man," Badger said. "Don't be such a pussy."

"I'm not being a pussy," Jason countered. "I'm too tired right now. I wouldn't be any fun and she'd think I was a jerk. She'd never go out with me again."

"So call her and set up a date for later," Badger said.

"I'm all tied up with this case," Jason said. "I don't have time. When we're a little further along, when things aren't so tense, I'll call her. Don't worry about it."

"Hell, yes, I'll worry about it," Badger said. "This is too good a chance to piss away. You need a date, you're just too goddammed muleheaded to admit it. Don't be nervous. She's just a woman."

Jason had no doubts that she was a woman, and that made him more than nervous. He was just plain scared to death. The confidence of the first meeting was gone and he was convinced his bravado and suave manner were flukes. He couldn't find any trace of that person inside himself.

But he wanted badly to talk to her. It was almost an ache settled deep in the middle of his chest. Despite thinking it was an incredibly chauvinistic thing to do, he kept visualizing what her body would look and feel like.

And just when his mind was full of wonderfully erotic images, guilt would kick him squarely in the gut. How could he be thinking about his own pleasure at a time like this? For God's sake, two children were dead.

You're a dick, he told himself more than once.

Besides the shots of erotically laced guilt, Badger's comments about asking Alex for a date were beginning to get on his nerves, mainly because they were right. He did need a date, some companionship. He wanted someone to talk to, someone to cuddle up with.

He didn't say anything, though; he just kept looking at a forensic report.

"Hey, if you're too chickenshit, I'll act as your social guidance counselor," Badger said. "Hell, she might still be in the building. I'll go find her."

He lifted himself out of his chair and headed for the door.

"Don't do that, you fucking asshole," Jason said as the door opened and Alex poked her head in.

"Was that directed at me?" she asked. "Am I interrupting a lover's spat? Should I have knocked first?"

"Well, well," Badger said. "Speak of the devil. We were just talking about you."

Jason cut his eyes at his partner and gave him an eat-hot-death look.

"I hope it was nice stuff," she said, smiling at Jason.

"Oh yeah," Badger said. "Reeeal nice."

"Just ignore him," Jason said. "He's a boy in a man's body and is having a severe hormone imbalance. So, uh, how have you been?"

Badger humphed with exasperation. "What a geek," he mumbled. "Why not just save some time and go buy a pocket protector right now?"

Jason bared his teeth at his partner. "Shut up, please?"

Alex laughed. "I've been fine," she said. "I'm stopping in to make sure your computer can access the software I've installed."

"Have at it," Jason said, offering her his chair.

"I don't need that, thanks," she said. "You need to sign on anyway, and then I can show both of you how to access this program. I'll just look over your shoulder and tell you what to do."

Jason took his seat as she bent over and placed her hand on his left shoulder. To his on-edge nerves, it felt as if someone had zapped him with a live wire. Her perfume gently wafted in his direction and he strained not to turn his nose into her neck and sniff deeply.

"Okay," she said. "Sign on."

He punched his six-digit code into the keyboard and OK appeared along with the prompter.

"Now, type in *EZ* and hit enter," she said.

Jason began to type when the screen flashed once and went black. His fingers hit

the keyboard, but nothing came on screen.

"What happened? What'd I do?" he asked. "Did I mess it up?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "I've never seen this happen before. It might be your computer. Let me try something."

She leaned forward to type in a command, when a sentence printed itself across the screen:

Hello Jason. How are you?

Jason got a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Is that your software?" he asked.

"No," Alex answered.

"How can a computer work when the screen is black?" Badger asked.

"It shouldn't," she said quietly. "It can't."

"Let's try something," Jason said. He turned off the computer.

Oh Jason, why did you do that?

"Dear Jesus," Alex whispered.

Jason stared at the screen for several seconds, then placed his fingers on the keys.

"Who is this?" he typed.

Don't you know me by now?

"No, I don't. Who are you?"

I'd think that after Amanda and Matthew, you'd be quite familiar with me, especially after I gave you Claire's little frog as a token of my esteem.

"Are you the one who calls himself the Mercy Killer?"

Yes and no.

"What does that mean?"

It means yes and no. In some ways I am the one called Mercy Killer and in other ways I'm not.

"What is your real name?"

Oh please, do you really expect me to answer that? Let's just say I'm an old friend of the family.

"Whose family?"

Why yours, of course.

"What do you want?"

I just wanted to introduce myself, Jason, and perhaps give you a little information.

"What is it?"

There's going to be another killing.

"Where? Who?"

You'll find what you're looking for if you keep in mind that when it came to higher thinking, Socrates loved the forest and stream.

"What does that mean?"

Now, now. You don't want me telling you everything, do you? Besides, I haven't finished. It's going to be another girl, Jason. There's no way you can stop it; but if you're smart, you might be able to catch the person who did it.

"Are you that person?"

Please. I thought we'd already discussed that. My, you are dense, aren't you?

"Why are you killing these children?"

Because it pleases me and hurts you. "Please don't do it. If you want me, just tell me where to meet you and I'll come there."

Medlocke, you're already mine.

Chapter 15



"What the hell does he mean, Socrates loved the forest and stream?" Badger asked as Jason and Alex sat in stunned silence.

"I don't know," Jason said. "It sounds like some sort of riddle. Let's think about this. Socrates was a Greek philosopher. What was his philosophy, what were its major tenets?"

"Jesus, I don't know," Badger said. "Do you?" he asked Alex.

"It's been so long since I studied Socrates," she said. "It was back in college. The only thing I remember about him was that he taught by the Socratic method, asking questions that lead you to certain conclusions."

"But he was a teacher, right?" Jason asked.

"What's that got to do with it?" Badger said.

"Socrates was a teacher as much as he was a philosopher," Jason said. "He taught. 'Socrates loved the forest and stream.' He's talking about a teacher, he's talking about a school."

"So the forest and stream are some hint about the name of the school?" Badger said.

Jason yanked open a desk drawer and drew out a telephone directory. Flipping quickly to the school listings, he dragged his finger down the list. Private schools were first.

"Auburn, Benefield, Brookwood Elementary, Brookwood High," he read.

"Brookwood," Alex almost shouted. "Forest and stream. Brook for stream, wood for forest."

"But which one?" Badger asked, "Elementary or high?"

"What was it he said: 'When it came to higher thinking'?" Alex said. "Higher thoughts. Could that mean high school?"

"All right! Nice going," Badger said, slapping her on the back.

"Before we celebrate, let's check the rest of the names to see if any others fit the clue," Jason said.

He ran down the rest of the names—high school, middle school, and elementary. None worked within the context of the riddle.

"I think we've got it."

He grabbed the phone and punched Captain Silverman's extension. "Sir, come down here quickly. I think we've got a break in the case."

Within ten seconds, their office door swung open and Silverman stepped through.

"What've we got?" he said, his voice trying hard to stay level.

Jason told him about the messages over the computer and their solving of the riddle.

"What do you guys think?" Silverman said. "Is this legitimate?"

"I think we've got to treat it as if it is," Jason said. "We can't ignore it on the off chance that it's a hoax."

"I agree," Silverman said. "Okay, let's get a plan into gear. It's five o'clock. I want someone out there in an hour. I want you two in my office in twenty minutes with some logistical plans in mind. We'll go over them and drum up the necessary personnel."

"And you," he said, turning to Alex. "Not a word to anyone. You understand? If you call the newspapers or TV, they'll be all over us out there and fuck up the whole operation. If we can catch the guy, then you can call 'em. But not before. If you do, I chunk your ass in jail for obstructing justice. Got it?"

"No problem," Alex said.

"Sir," Jason said. "There are a couple of other things. When this guy, whoever he is, sent the messages over my computer, the thing was turned off."

"Off? How could someone do that?" Silverman asked Alex.

"I don't know," she said. "It's technically impossible. Even if someone was inside the building, there'd have to be some sort of connection to this computer."

She examined the computer top to bottom and shook her head. "Nothing here that's not supposed to be here. I can't imagine how it was done."

"Well, we'll figure it out later," Silverman said. "Maybe he's a computer whiz. I'll have some of our guys start checking lists of hackers. See what they can dredge up. For now, though, let's concentrate on catching the guy before we figure out all his little tricks."

"Captain, one more thing," Jason said. "He called me by name, said he was an old friend of the family and talked about Claire's frog. He knows me somehow."

"Well, that would make sense," Silverman said. "Any ideas who he is?"

"Not right this second, but you can bet I'm putting my mind to it," Jason answered.

"Let me know if you come up with something," Silverman said as he prepared to leave. "Okay, let's get going and not fuck this up."

By seven, as purple and red streaks arced across the evening sky, twenty-five police officers surrounded Brook-wood High School, Home of the Broncos,

according to a sign on the baseball field's backstop. Some were bidden in the small stand of woods across the street from the school's front entrance. Others hid in the line of trees behind Brookwood, running the length of the school and the football and baseball fields sitting to the right of the classroom buildings. They had to be quiet since the trees were the only things that separated the school from the backyards of a nearby subdivision, and they didn't want any of the locals interfering with the surveillance.

The remaining officers tucked themselves into doorways in and around the buildings or between the mobile homes that sat alongside as temporary classrooms. There was no way to get near the school without being seen.

"Is everyone in place?" Silverman said into his two-way radio. Affirmative answers came from each location. "Okay, stay there until I tell you to come out. No smoking, keep talking to a minimum and whisper. And if any of you falls asleep, I'll have your nuts for breakfast. Or your tits if you're a woman."

Jason and Badger camped out on the roof of the gym, the largest building in the school complex. Each of them had a pair of binoculars and a radio. They sat with their backs to the air-conditioning unit, which hid them from view. After about fifteen minutes of silence, Badger spoke.

"So what do you make of all this, Jazz?" he asked.

Jason shrugged. "I'm not sure I can make anything out of it except a confusing mess," he said. "How do you explain all of it? The stuffed frog, your run-in with it, the computer working when it shouldn't, the message on the computer."

He looked at his partner with a rueful grin. "I guess I should let you know all of it," he said, and told Badger about the dream of a couple of weeks before, about the cold, blazing eyes and the horrible voice that said, "Medlocke, you're mine."

"That's the same message the guy signed off with on the computer," Badger said.

"Jesus, Jazz, this is giving me goose bumps. There's just too much weird shit. It's downright scary." He took off his Atlanta Braves cap and vigorously rubbed his scalp.

"Think of how I feel."

"So what do you think is going on? Do you have any idea who this guy might be?"

"I have no idea, only guesses. And all of them are insane. I just don't know. Maybe I'm connected to the killer in my dreams. Maybe this guy has got such a strong personality or something that he's getting inside my head somehow. Or maybe I'm getting inside his. Maybe he's psychic. Maybe I am. Maybe you are."

He looked at Badger. "God, that sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"I'm beginning to think nothing sounds too crazy with this case," Badger said.

For the next several hours, Jason and Badger sat almost silent, speaking to each other only occasionally and answering Silverman's thirty-minute check-ins. One hour became two, two became three, and three edged into four. Midnight was only thirty minutes away and Silverman called in on his usual timetable.

"You guys still awake?" he asked.

"Barely," Badger whispered into the radio. "Jazz and I haven't been getting a lot of sleep lately, you know."

"Well, now's not the time to catch up," Silverman said.

"We aren't, we'll be ready for—"

The scream erupted from the right-hand side of the school, near the baseball fields. It was a piercing cry of terror, a cry of painful death. Jason and Badger scrambled to their feet and sprinted toward the side of the roof. Silverman's voice burst through the radio.

"Maxwell, Santucci, are you over there? What's going on? Can you see anything?"

"Negative, sir," came the reply. "The scream came from somewhere in the middle of the ball field. We were looking in that direction when we heard it But we can't see anything, sir."

"Everyone get your asses over there *now*," Silverman barked. "Anyone in the vicinity of the ball fields, turn on your spots, coat the field, see where that scream came from."

Dozens of flashlights flared to life, their light bobbing from one end of the field to the other as officers ran from their hiding places, scouring the ground. Finally, a cry rose from the infield of one of the baseball diamonds. Jason and Badger heard the officer's voice on the radio as they clambered from the roof.

"Sir, over here, I've found something," the voice said. "It looks like... Oh my God."

The sounds of violent retching echoed out of the radio.

"Oh fuck no," Badger said.

The pair arrived at the ball field within seconds, running down the sidewalk then slipping and skidding down the scrub-covered red-clay slope from the school buildings. Several signs hung on the backstop of the baseball field, including one that said: 1986 Class AAAA State Champs. After tonight, Brookwood would lose its next thirty-five games.

A circle of officers stood around the pitcher's mound. Two officers pulled away from the crowd, one taking deep gulps of air, the other holding his hand over his mouth. Jason and Badger squeezed between shoulders and peered in.

Perched on top of the mound, hair hung down over a little girl's chest instead of her back. A mane of strawberry hair hid a pair of eyeless sockets. There was a

baseball cap on her head.

Jason felt someone push him to one side as Captain Silverman elbowed his way into the circle. "Sweet Jesus," Silverman whispered.

For a few seconds, no one moved. They stood transfixed by the horror, frozen in disgust and disbelief.

"Underwood, go call the coroner and forensics," Silverman said. "You and you," he said, pointing at two other officers, "stay here with the body. The rest of ya'll start looking around to see if you can find any evidence. I don't need to tell you not to touch anything until forensics gets here. And walk gently so you don't disturb too many footprints."

He fixed his stare on a tall, blond officer standing on the other side of the circle. Jason recognized him as the one who walked away from the mound looking as if he was going to puke.

"How did this happen, Maxwell?" Silverman said.

"I don't know, sir," Maxwell said. "We had our eyes on this area the whole time. We never fell asleep or were distracted by anything, sir. Honest."

"He's telling the truth, sir," the swarthy Santucci said, standing next to Maxwell. "We were awake the whole time."

"Then how did this get here?" Silverman asked, pointing at the body on the pitcher's mound. "This is not something that can just appear out of thin air."

Oh yeah? a tiny voice within Jason said.

A strident voice burst forth from behind them.

"Captain Silverman, Detective Medlocke, Franklin, come over here, quick. *Quick!*"

Heads turned to see Officer Crowson standing next to home plate, pointing at it.

It was glowing a sickly shade of green.

When the officers approached, the glow flared to a near-blinding shimmer, then immediately died. As the glow ceased, however, a bright green line emerged from underneath the back tip of the plate. Like a phosphorescent snake, it cut a tiny furrow in the dirt and slithered past the dugout, under the chain-link gate, and up the hillside leading to the school.

Jason and Badger in the lead and Silverman directly behind, the group followed the line as it climbed the hill, then cut alongside the sidewalk between the mobile homes and aimed for the front of the school. No one spoke.

Stopping at the curb where buses dropped off students, the glowing line slowly faded. As it did, another glow blossomed across the parking lot, in the grassy knoll that ran the length of the school in front. The line began to move through the grass, heading for the concrete sign reading Brookwood High School.

As he and the others hesitantly moved toward the sign, Jason saw a piece of paper attached to its side. Inside the green aura, the paper flapped in the slight, humid breeze. Oh shit, here we go again.

Badger drew out his knife and opened the blade, holding the paper still with its tip while he and Jason read:

Brethren, and especially Jason:

I'm glad you could make it. I hope you didn't have any trouble finding this note. You shouldn't have, not with the road map I provided. I'm sure my little trick will provide you with hours of wonderment and speculation.

I've done as I promised. Another day, another death. The Lord commands and I obey. You're probably wondering how I did it without alerting the twenty-five policemen you stationed all around. With the help of the Lord, one can do many

miraculous things. The power of prayer is wondrous.

Please tell Captain Silverman not to be too hard on Maxwell and Santucci. They are telling the truth. They never fell asleep. They just didn't see me. No one saw me. I am cloaked in righteousness.

As for you Jason, you know so little and understand less than that. But you will. In time. I'll make sure of it.

So better luck next time. And there will be a next time. I promise.

Sincerely, The Mercy Killer.

Chapter 16



Banner headlines screamed across the top of the Atlanta papers. "How Many More?" "Parents Frightened." "Terror Grips Gwinnett."

Alison Quintard folded the copy of the *Atlanta Constitution* and tossed it onto his desk. He picked up the *Atlanta Journal* and scanned its story on the third killing. As soon as he finished, he read the piece in *USA Today* and the *Marietta Daily Journal*.

He was loving it. A week had gone by since they'd found the girl at Brookwood, and the cops still were stumped and admitted it.

With a satisfied smile, Quintard sank back into his leather chair and pulled the bottle of Jim Beam from the bottom drawer of his desk. This was better than he had hoped. The way things were going, unless they came up with some miracle soon, he had more than enough to bury Medlocke and Franklin. Those cocky bastards were going to take it on the chin, he thought as he poured a shot into a Dixie cup. Those shits were going down in flames.

Medlocke cost me millions when he arrested me for DUI, Quintard fumed. I had those campaign contributors all lined up, I was ready to make my move to the state senate within a couple of years. Now I may never get there, and if I do, it'll be years behind schedule.

Quintard felt his face flush as he remembered begging Medlocke—down on his knees, goddammit!—to let him go. He told Medlocke that the publicity might

ruin him, ruin his chances for a career in state government. But it made no difference. That fucking pig was too goody two shoes to do that. Even when I offered him money.

It never occurred to Quintard that, along with the DUI, Jason might also have charged him with trying to bribe an officer but didn't.

Besides that embarrassment, Quintard knew both Medlocke and Franklin knew too much, or suspected too much, about his other dealings. He couldn't let them get the chance to release that information, even if it was true—actually, especially because it was true. It would totally ruin him and might send him to prison to boot.

Quintard took another sip of liquor. But what helped alleviate some of the worry about his political future was how Medlocke's and Franklin's lack of progress in the child murders was going to do wonders for his re-election campaign for county commission. Hell, he should pay them to be publicity chairmen. They were doling out more than he could possibly use. The thought struck him as tremendously funny, and he laughed so hard part of the liquor came up through his nose and splattered his white shirt.

Damn it burns, Quintard thought, but that seemed even funnier and he laughed again.

Before these child murders came along, Quintard knew he was in serious jeopardy of losing his seat to that snot-nosed liberal Scott McClendon from down in Duluth. McClendon's campaign motto was Open-minded Yet Responsible Progress.

Progress, Quintard humphed. Bullshit. McClendon didn't have a corner on wanting progress. He was for progress, too, especially progress leading to big construction projects. His hardware businesses had increased their profits by

three hundred percent in the past ten years, and by passing almost any rezoning or construction permit coming before the commission, Quintard made sure his stores remained moneymakers. If there was some controversy over the project, say a huge shopping center or apartment complex in a residential area or a liquor store in the same vicinity as a church, he simply abstained from voting or was conveniently out of town when the vote was taken. That way he could hold up his hands and say, "They're clean."

He had been in office for too long to give it up easily. It was too lucrative and he loved the feeling of power it gave him. By God, he was somebody. Somebody important. And he wanted more.

Why, if he wasn't a commissioner, he was just another business owner in Gwinnett, another working-class slob, nothing special. The thought terrified him and he poured another slug of whiskey. He would never go back to that endless life of nothingness. No matter the cost. No matter who got in his way. Never.

He remembered his childhood years, days of growing up in a two-room tar-paper shack outside of Buford. Although Gwinnett County was completely rural at the time, the depths of the Quintards' poverty was something even poor people talked about. Seven skinny kids with hand-me-downs and dirty faces. His mother tried her best, but it was hard with a father who was a sharecropping drunk who beat any living creature within reach when the urge took him.

Unconsciously, Quintard rubbed his right forearm, feeling the four round scars. He was ten when he accidentally kicked over that pail of milk. Only his young, catlike reflexes prevented his father from stabbing the pitchfork into his stomach for the mistake.

Quintard smiled and took a belt of bourbon. Paybacks were hell and he got his. The cops decided his father died during a robbery, since his body, the back of his skull laid open and his brains spilling out, was found lying facedown behind the

Dirty Dog Pub, his nightly rendezvous point. His wallet was gone and so were his shoes.

Twelve-year-old Anson Quintard tied the shoes to a lead pipe and threw them into the deepest part of the Yellow River. No one would ever find them there, he thought as he heaved the pipe over the water. No one ever had.

As far as money was concerned, things were no better after his father died. His mother still had seven kids to raise and was able to take in only a few loads of laundry and sewing each week. The kids brought in what they could from picking cotton and other odd jobs around town, but food and clothes were scarce most of the time. Anson left the moment he graduated from high school. He wanted to leave sooner, but loved his mother dearly, and it was her desire that he at least get a diploma.

His mother now was dead, and though most of his brothers and sisters still lived in the Atlanta area, he rarely visited. There was nothing to say to them.

After high school, he went to work in Watkins Hardware Store in Buford and saved his money like a miser. When Quintard was twenty-four, the bank foreclosed on Watkins's mortgage and he jumped at the chance to buy the business for a pittance. In his behalf, he offered to let Watkins work there, but the old man couldn't bring himself to work for someone else. He died three months after he lost the store. Quintard didn't attend the funeral. It was on a Thursday and he couldn't leave the store, he said, even though all the other businesses in town closed for half a day.

"Just because Watkins is dead doesn't mean the whole world has to stop," Quintard said at the time.

The position on the commission had come fifteen years before and he now was the ranking member. He never ran for commission chairman because he knew

public scrutiny would be horrendously high. It was much easier to work if you weren't the one people came to for answers or targeted for dispute.

Photos and memorabilia hung on his walls like Little League trophies in a young boy's room. In many ways, they amounted to the same thing. They were proof that he helped his community. That he was needed; important.

There were plaques of commendation from the Gwinnett County Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, the Jaycees, Civitans, Shriners, and dozens of others. He snorted in laughter when his eyes fell upon the one from the Gwinnett County Fraternal Order of Police for his participation in the organization's annual Toys for Tots campaign.

In among the plaques were dozens of framed photographs of Quintard with local and state dignitaries. There was one with him and former Governor Lester Maddox, one with current Governor Joe Frank Harris, one with Atlanta Braves slugger Dale Murphy, even one with home run king Hank Aaron.

Hell, I'll even throw my arm around a nigger if it'll get me some votes, Quintard thought and giggled.

Feeling supremely proud of himself, Quintard picked up the phone and dialed a number he had used often in the past couple of weeks. It rang several times before someone answered.

"Anthony Bradley," the voice on the other end said.

"Tony, this is Anson Quintard. I've got a tip for you."

"I'm not sure I want any more of your tips," Bradley said, "The last one almost got my ass beat."

"Yeah, I heard about that," Quintard answered. "But here's something that will help you get back at Medlocke. I'm not sure the police are doing enough on this investigation. I don't think Detectives Medlocke and Franklin are serving the

people of this county. I'm thinking of calling an investigation into it."

"You're going to call an investigation into the investigation? Don't you think that's a bit much?" Bradley asked.

"Hell no, I don't think it's too much. And I think you'd be derelict in your duty if you didn't look into what the police are—or aren't—doing to solve this case."

"Seems to me you think everybody's derelict in their duty except yourself," Bradley countered. "You know, ever since my run-in with him, I've been checking up on Medlocke. I've heard nothing but good things. Other reporters like him. They say he shoots straight and doesn't bullshit. People in this community like him. They respect the fact that he's come back from the death of his family and alcoholism. You seem to be the only one who doesn't care for him. It makes me wonder what he did to you to piss you off so bad. Was it that DUI he gave you? Is that still making you mad, Anson? You want to talk about that?"

Quintard felt his anger rising. This punk was getting too cocky, too independent. Looked like he'd lost an ally. Better get out of it as cleanly as possible.

"I'm not doing anything that any decent human being wouldn't do," he said to change the subject. "I'm trying to rid our community of a horrible plague. I just want to make sure that everybody is doing their part. And I wonder if the police are. I have my doubts."

"I guess you don't want to talk about the DUI then," Bradley said.

"That's all in my past," Quintard said coldly. "I'm more interested in what's going on in our community right now. Apparently you aren't."

"I am, Anson, but I'm not going to write a story about your threatening to call an investigation. That's like writing about a threatened lawsuit. We don't write about it until it's filed. In this case, when you get around to actually calling for

the investigation, then talk to me."

"I don't know," Quintard said. "I may go elsewhere with my information first."

"You do whatever you want," Bradley said.

Hanging up, Quintard pulled himself out of his chair and walked unsteadily to the window. The whiskey was taking its toll on his empty stomach. Better go get some lunch to cut its effect.

Damn, I could've used that reporter some more, he thought as he gazed at the clouds cutting across the summer sky. Little bastard better not make me look bad. I'll have his heart.

This meant he'd have to take other measures. He lifted the phone and dialed a number no one in the county knew he had. It rang twice before a squeaky voice answered.

"Frog, it's Quintard. I need you to do me a favor."

"Hey, I thought you said you wouldn't call again. Not after the last time, not after I had to take the girl for her abortion."

"Shut your fucking mouth, Webster," Quintard bellowed. He could practically hear Jimmy "Frog" Webster shitting in his pants. Fine. That was the idea. Keep the fucker whipped like a yard dog.

"Now listen to me, you jumpy little turd," Quintard continued. "If not for me slinging my weight and my money around, you'd be locked up for life for second-degree burglary. Or have you forgotten that three felonies make you an habitual offender? I own your ass and don't you forget it. If you do, police may get an anonymous phone call about a certain fence in their jurisdiction. A fence that also deals drugs."

"Okay," Webster said. "You've made your point. What do you want?"

"Hey, it's an easy job. I want you to keep an eye on Detective Jason Medlocke for the next few days. Watch where he goes, see what he does. I want a complete report this following Monday."

"Anything special you want me to look for?"

"No, I just want to know everything he does. Got it?"

"Yeah, I'll call you Monday."

"No, I'll call you," Quintard said and hung up.

The wheels were in motion, all rolling toward the commission meeting next week. Quintard planned to fan the flames at the Rotary barbecue this Saturday and could get by on generalizations and innuendo there. But he needed a full load of buckshot before the commission meeting itself. Hopefully, Webster would provide what he wanted.

I couldn't care less about a few dead brats, Quintard thought, but if I play my part right, I can bring Medlocke and Franklin down as well as turn this into a run for the state senate. From there, who knows? The thought gave him an erection.

Chapter 17



Stephen Medlocke laid his copy of *The Magic Mountain* on the mahogany table next to his left arm, then took a long, lingering stretch. Although Thomas Mann's novel was one of his favorites, he found the book to be beyond his enjoyment this evening. One problem was the English translation he was reading was so inferior to the original, written in Mann's glorious German. But Stephen's German was rusty these days and he didn't want to tackle the original just to grease some squeaky hinges.

Still, there was more to his lack of interest than the book's language. Sitting in the study of his two-story red-brick home, built more than two hundred years ago, he heard the house talking to him, speaking with a myriad of squeaks, rattles, and creaks. While the sounds didn't frighten Stephen, they did make him uneasy. The house was too old to be settling, so noises like these meant either changes in the weather or shifts in other currents, ones not noticeable to most people.

He glanced out the window across the room. It was a warm summer night, mostly clear but with a few low-hanging clouds scurrying across the slate of the sky. They seemed to be licking the top of the dense forest surrounding the house. The clouds were close enough to the ground to reflect the lights of Boston, sitting about thirty miles to the southeast. The city lights gave the clouds an eerie pink hue, as though they were cotton balls dipped in diluted blood.

Leaving the outdoors to its nocturnal inhabitants, Stephen scanned the study of the home he'd been living in the past forty years. The oak shelves covering two walls of the room were lined with hundreds of books by masters of literature, including Bronte, Melville, Boccaccio, and Dickens. Stephen had read them all, many more than once. The thick, musty smell of aging pages and old volumes gave him a feeling of security. There was comfort sitting among the knowledge of the ages.

His family had been raised in this sturdy home sitting just outside Nashua, New Hampshire, at the base of Jeremy Mountain. His children grew up here, his wife died here, he became an Episcopal priest here, giving up a career as an investment counselor to counsel on a higher plane than Dow Jones averages and GNPs.

While being a priest was hardly a moneymaking venture, Stephen was no fool when he made the career switch. God may pay the bills of the soul, he knew, but He's never been big on paying for new cars or kids' braces. During the four years he spent studying to be a minister, Stephen kept his investment job, working three times as hard. He intended to build a tidy portfolio to carry him and his family through the rest of their lives. But his plans bore more fruit than he anticipated. Not only was there enough money for one lifetime, there was enough for two or three, and the interest kept adding more. Stephen found the task of soothing troubled souls was easier when your own wasn't troubled by monetary headaches.

Tonight, though, it was something not of this earth, nor of God's heaven, pricking his senses.

Sighing deeply, he lifted the brandy snifter on the table and cradled it in the palms of his hands. Warmth seeped into the Courvoisier and he drained the last mouthful. Flicking off the reading lamp, he headed upstairs to his bedroom.

Once upstairs, Stephen took a quick, hot shower, then rolled back the covers of his bed and stuffed himself under.

Mrs. McCrady changed the sheets every day and it was always a pleasure to slide into a freshly made bed.

Staring out the window into the New England night, Stephen's thoughts turned to Jason and their conversation a few weeks before. It had been on his mind almost constantly. The story about Claire's stuffed frog unnerved him. It reeked of a familiar touch, one he hadn't experienced in twenty-five years. Stephen still questioned his suspicions, but a feeling in his bones told him his doubts were related more to desperate hope than reality. What was happening to Jason was too similar to what had happened in his own life twenty-five years ago. It wasn't just coincidence, it was heredity.

"God, I just hope I haven't waited too long," Stephen said.

But he knew that in some ways he already had. It was irresponsible of him never to have told Jason about his heritage. Oh, he had reasons. They seemed like good ones at the time. But now that the horror was beginning again, reasons lost their power and became nothing but excuses.

And what if you died? Stephen asked himself. Jason would be left alone with absolutely no knowledge. You might as well shoot your son in the back, old man. Jason was his first child and his only son. In the Medlocke family, the father-son connection ran deep, back through generations, across the sea to the dark days in Scotland. Sons, especially first sons, were special in the Medlockes. They were cast into a harder life just by being born.

But until her death, his wife, Maureen, was adamant about not telling Jason the truth.

"You yourself said it sometimes skips generations," she argued. "Why saddle

him with such a load if it's not necessary?"

"Because of the chance that it might be necessary," he answered. "And if it is, he damn well better be prepared. When the time comes, it's not going to wait for him to get ready."

In the end, however, Maureen always won the argument and Stephen hid the Medlocke heritage from his son. Even after Maureen died, Stephen kept the secret. During the first two years following her death, there was a dagger in his heart and he simply didn't have the energy to talk about her or anything connected with her. After the pain subsided—it never faded—he convinced himself that, as she had said, it wasn't necessary.

Now the time had come and Stephen wondered how Jason would handle the news. How does a father explain such an inheritance? How does he tell his son that he's capable of feats that once had people burned at the stake? How does he tell him that he's in life-threatening danger? How does he cushion the blow?

The answer was: He couldn't. He couldn't soften something that was going to irrevocably change the rest of his son's life.

Turning off the bedside light, Stephen ran his hand through his thick, white hair. Locking his fingers behind his head, he lay back on the goosedown pillow and stared at the ceiling.

He knew he was a strong man for sixty-four. Each morning when he shaved, he saw a face that was heavily lined, but with creases that revealed knowledge and solidity instead of age. He felt his jaw with his right hand. Still firm. Reaching under the covers, he ran his hand across his stomach. Thick, yes, but hardly flabby. Neighbors joked about how you could set your watch by Stephen's daily exercise. Come Arctic blasts of snow or monsoon rainstorms, he was up every morning at five, taking a brisk walk around the fifteen acres surrounding his

house.

Yes, he was in pretty good shape, Stephen thought, but was it good enough? If what he thought was approaching, could he handle it? Handle it again? He could admit it to himself. He was scared.

For almost an hour, sleep danced around him, teasing and taunting but never coming close enough to grab. When he finally nodded off, he was no less nervous, no less worried.

He awoke suddenly several hours later, his eyes snapping open and his mind in a state of crystalline clarity. There had been no noises; none were needed. He knew what was happening.

He sat upright in bed, the covers falling away from his neck. He jumped as they crumpled to a pile at his waist.

My Lord, the room is frigid, he thought. His rapid breaths formed Siberian clouds in front of his face.

He looked quickly to the windows, closed to keep the air conditioning inside. The panes were covered in thick ice—on the inside. Even the wood between the panes was sheathed and glistening, a diamond-clear covering that, except for the fuzzy, muted light from outside, shut out the world.

And I'm shut in, Stephen thought.

As he stared at the windows, he saw the curtains gently lift and sway, as if a slight breeze made the fabric dance. What emerged was no breeze.

An opaque band of mist oozed from behind the drapes and slithered slowly along the wall, brushing past the paintings, over the chest of drawers and across the dresser, where it left a line of ice on the mirror. As it moved, it swirled in a corkscrew spiral and Stephen could see faces, twisted in pain, appear in the fog, then quickly dissipate. Vague moanings rose from the heart of the mist.

It snaked past the open bathroom door without entering and continued to the corner of the room, where it veered away from the wall and aimed itself at the bed, a sinuous cobra approaching its prey.

Stephen sat stone still as wintry tentacles crawled over the edge of the bed, along the comforter and up his right hip. Climbing over his thigh, the fog coiled around him, starting at his waist and moving up. The cold was so intense it burned. His skin turned to goose bumps and his balls drew into his body, tightening to almost painful knots of muscle and fiber.

Winding upward, the stream encircled his head. For a moment, the band simply spun itself about his head, creating a chilling band around his skull. Then it clamped down.

Nausea swept through Stephen's body. Malignant visions assaulted his mind. Bodies writhed as their faces were ripped off in baconlike strips. Faces contorted as their limbs were twisted until they broke, then broke again. Screams echoed as abdomens were slit open and the entrails pulled out and laid on the chest like a newborn baby on its mother's belly.

Just as Stephen thought he would vomit, the fog leisurely unwrapped itself from his head, leaving him shivering with cold and revulsion. Flowing off the end of the bed, the mist moved toward the door, spreading out as it flowed, expanding into a rolling cloud extending from floor to ceiling. A shape began to rise within but the fog hid its contents with eddies and backwaters of vapor. Stephen watched and waited.

"Hello, Stephen," the guttural hiss said from the cloud. "How nice to see you again after all these years."

Stephen jumped, then mentally cursed himself for showing such a strong reaction.

"Oh, did I scare you?" the voice said with hateful sarcasm. "I'm so sorry."

"I was wondering when you'd show up," Stephen said, searching the fog for a solid shape. "You're too much a creature of habit to change your ways now. You're predictable."

"Am I?" the voice said silkily. "Am I really?"

From out of the fog extended a hand as wide as the blade of a shovel. The color of dark bronze, each of its long fingers was tipped with twin nails, bloodthirsty scalpels jutting out two inches. The index finger pointed at Stephen, light sparkling off the razor edges of its nails.

"Too predictable? I could say the same for you, Stephen," the voice scraped.

"However, you have changed in one way. You've gotten old."

Stephen looked at the powerful hand, remembering how a blow from it had sent him flying twenty feet and shattered three of his ribs. He ran the fingers of his hand down the foot-long scar along his right thigh, another by-product from a swipe of that claw.

High in the fog, only a few inches under the nine-foot ceiling, two points of flaming silver ignited. Stephen felt evil hatred grip him like a vise. It was a living thing, capable of squeezing the life out of him.

Raising his arms in a cross, Stephen passed them in front of his chest, crossing his heart with the palms inward. The air crackled and spit as a thin, almost transparent sheen of blue light enveloped him.

"Don't worry, old man," the beast sneered. "There's no need to protect yourself with such pitiful spells. I'm not here for you."

"Forgive me if I don't trust you completely," Stephen answered.

The beast chuckled, a raspy sound like dry leaves burning. "Indeed," it said.

"Just why are you here, if not for me?" Stephen asked.

"To let you know I've been thinking about you, Stephen," the voice said. "About you and the whole Medlocke family."

The name "Medlocke" was spit with disgust.

"I'm not through with you yet," it said. "I'm not through with your family yet."

"You're still not smart enough to give up, are you?" Stephen said, his voice remaining calm. "We've kicked your ass for the past five hundred years. Haven't you had enough? Or are you truly that stupid?"

Stephen heard an angry intake of breath, a thick, asthmatic wheeze. A low growling came from inside the fog and Stephen saw a horrible face press itself closer to the outer edge of the cloud. The eyes burned above high, protruding cheekbones, and a mouth full of teeth grinned wickedly. As the growling increased, Stephen saw an M begin to glow a virulent green on the left side of the beast's face, scar tissue cutting across the eye and cheekbone in a hideous brand. The flow of hatred strengthened, and Stephen felt it push against his protective shield.

"What about your wife?" the voice spit back. "What about what I did to her?"

It was Stephen's turn to flinch and his eyes tightened.

"You did nothing to her," he said quietly. "She didn't give you the chance. She was too smart for you, which isn't hard to do considering your success rate over the past few centuries. You must be a real embarrassment to your family. What does it take to get through that malformed head of yours that you're a loser?"

A roar split the room. The windowpanes shook and their icy sheaths shattered, tinkling in tiny pieces to the carpet. Two hands swung upward from the fog, ripping through the ceiling and tearing great gashes of plaster that fell in a white, dusty cloud. The hands grabbed the ceiling fan and yanked it from the socket,

sparks flying, then flung it into the far wall, where it ripped through a painting of Stephen's great-grandfather, Nathaniel Medlocke.

Thundering around the room inside the fog, the beast swept its hands across the top of the dresser, sending vases and other knickknacks flying. The overpowering smell of cologne filled the room as several bottles shattered under the beast's fury. With its nails, it dug trenches into the wall, talons slicing through plaster and wood alike.

Passing in front of the mirror, it stopped. Stephen could practically see it trembling within the cloud as it gazed at its reflection. With a musical crash, the beast slammed its fist into the glass, bringing back shredded knuckles that dripped thick, black blood.

Turning to face Stephen, its anger reached an apex, eyes flashing into nuclear brilliance. The beast rushed the bed, hands outstretched. Stephen flinched involuntarily, but as the hands reached the blue aura, a horrid sizzling erupted. The creature howled, falling backward and shaking its hands as smoke rose from their blistered fingertips.

"I'll have you, Medlocke," it screamed. "I'll tear your eyes from your head and piss in the sockets. I'll rip your heart out and make you kiss it before I eat it. I'll fuck your ass then make you suck my cock."

"So you do have a dick," Stephen said. "I always wondered if you were a eunuch."

The fog rippled with anger and hatred. Stephen steeled himself for a second charge and wondered if he could withstand it. But just as he expected it to happen, loud laughter burst from inside the fog. The laughter—a sharp, high-pitched cackle—was worse than any sound the beast had made. Stephen cringed.

"Oh, you're quite good, Stephen, quite the strategist," it said as its laughter

subsided. "You make me angry, make me use up all my energy. You know I can't stay long in this world, at least, not without help and... how shall I say it? Protection. Yes, protection you humans provide so nicely with your blood.

"But I came here for another purpose and I will have my say. It's about your son, Stephen. It's about Jason. I have plans for him. Big plans. I've paid him some visits, Stephen, just to tease him. Of course, he does not understand yet. But he shall. I shall be his teacher."

Stephen's eyes widened slightly, and the beast noticed.

"Ah, yes, you know as well as I, Stephen. He's your weak link. You were foolish not to tell him his heritage, Stephen, very foolish.

"Yes, I know you haven't spoken to him yet," the voice continued. "You had the perfect opportunity when I killed his wife and daughter, but you let it slip by. Now it's too late. He's mine."

"You underestimate him," Stephen said. "You underestimate us. He's stronger than you think; we're stronger than you know."

"Not strong enough, old man. You're weak physically; he's weak in his powers. Even if you tell him now, he won't have time to develop his strength, not well enough to stop me. It's too late. I've waited over five hundred years and it's my turn to dance. I'll have your heart and your son's, too.

"So tell Jason everything. My victory will be that much sweeter when he tries to stop me and I crush his soul."

The fog moved rapidly to the door, passing through the solid oak with only a ripple, like that of a pebble thrown into a still pond. As it moved through the gateway, the beast spoke.

"Goodbye, Stephen. See you soon."

The portal closed with a slight sucking sound, then it was gone.

Stephen waited several minutes, then climbed out of bed and went to the door, the blue cone of protection crackling. Taking his right hand, he reached out and touched the door. Solid wood. The gateway was closed.

Waving his hands, Stephen dropped the blue aura. His shoulders sagged when it vanished. It had taken more out of him than he expected.

"Damn, I am getting old," he said.

Standing in the middle of his room, he looked at the wreck the beast had made. Shattered bottles, dust and destruction lay everywhere. Mrs. McCrady will have a fit if she sees this, Stephen mused. He'd fix it in a couple of minutes with a wave of his hand. Right now, though, he needed to think.

The catastrophe around him was evidence only of the beast's physical power. It didn't unleash the others, saving them for the real confrontation. This was merely a warning, an egomaniacal jest. But it spoke as though it had every intention of remaining here the next time it came. What new trick had it learned? Stephen wondered. That the beast had unseen weapons in its arsenal was a horrifying possibility.

Stephen leaned his head back and spoke to the ceiling.

"Dear God, have I really fucked up this badly?"

Chapter 18



The name of the girl found on the pitcher's mound was Vanessa Strickland. She was twelve and a student at Lanier Middle School. And the only difference between her death and the other two was the speed. She was missing for only a few hours before her body was found.

Their faces slack and their voices monotone, Bob Strickland and his wife, Dawn, told Jason and Badger that they'd just returned from seeing *Lethal Weapon 3* when police called.

"Vanessa was supposed to be on a field trip with her school class," Mrs. Strickland said. "They were going to see a Shakespeare play at the Civic Center then go to The Varsity for dinner."

"They weren't even supposed to be home until about ten," her husband continued. "So we went to a movie. We haven't done that in a long time. We thought she'd be okay."

After getting statements from the Stricklands, Jason and Badger interviewed Vanessa's friends. They learned that she'd never made it to the bus for the field trip.

Friends said they last saw Vanessa about three-thirty, just after school let out. She was heading home to change for the field trip, but never returned. The school chaperone, an English teacher named Wyn Sheffield, called the Strickland's house, but there was no answer. "I called several times and, since

there was no answer, I figured Vanessa must be with her parents," Ms. Sheffield said as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Notebooks on their desks sitting next to steaming cups of coffee, Jason and Badger delved into their notes again and again. All the statements checked out. No suspects. No clues. No nothing.

The door opened and Buzz Saunders walked in. His eyes were even more red-rimmed and blurry than usual. A lit cigarette dangled from his lips. He took it from his mouth, flicked the ashes into the trash can, then laid it on the edge of Badger's desk.

"She died about four," Saunders said, his voice almost as monotone as the Stricklands'. "Same MO. Blow to the back of her head. Strangulation marks on her neck. Traces of metal in the wound, looks like another outdoor saw. She was raped... after she was dead."

His first cigarette still burning on Badger's desk, Saunders reached into his chest pocket, drew out another and lit it.

"Buzz, you've already got one going," Badger said quietly.

Saunders looked down at the smoking butt. His eyes showed no surprise. "Oh, yeah. So I do," he said. But he didn't do anything about it. Badger picked up the smoked butt and ground it out on the lip of the trash can.

"I'm fucked, guys," Saunders said. "It's all the same thing. Dead kids and no clues to help. I'm losing sleep already. Having bad dreams. Seeing these kids in them. I'm fucked. Just fucked."

He walked out and closed the door behind him. Jason and Badger looked at each other in silence.

Norman Bibb's report was much the same. Forensics found no trace of fibers and only some smudged fingerprints. No clues. Back to square one. There weren't

even any footprints around the body.

Captain Silverman was livid. "There must be something!" he thundered at a staff meeting. "Did the fucker fly?"

"How did the killer know about Maxwell and Santucci and their comments about not falling asleep?" he demanded. "How did the Mercy Killer type up a note so fast? How did he create the green phosphorescent line that led from home plate to the note? There are answers to all of these questions. The answers are out there. You're just not finding them. Not thinking hard enough."

Silverman stopped for a moment, his face flushed.

"So go find them, goddammit!" he yelled.

For the question of how the Mercy Killer knew about Maxwell and Santucci, all the lab or Jason and Badger could come up with was that he must have been very close by, out of sight and perhaps using some sort of directional microphone to pick up what the police officers were saying. It was a weak, unsatisfying answer and a search around the high school turned up nothing to substantiate the possibility.

Forensics found no traces of substances in the soil to indicate some sort of chemical reaction to create the line.

"I am totally bewildered," Bibb said. "Reactions always leave trace elements. It's a law of physics. I don't know how this was done. It's almost as if it was never really there."

Neither did anyone have an explanation for how the note was typed so fast and attached to the sign so quickly. No one wanted to suggest that the Mercy Killer carried a typewriter with him, even though that seemed the most plausible—if it could be called that—explanation.

While the note's grammar and syntax indicated that it might be written by a

different person than the one who wrote the first two, forensics said it came from the same typewriter. "The Mercy Killer must be getting cocky. That would explain this new, snotty attitude," Jason speculated.

"That still doesn't get us any closer to discovering who he is," Badger said.

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!" Silverman almost screamed when the inconclusive reports were brought to him.

And so it went the day after Vanessa's murder. And the day after that, and into the third day.

While Badger went home at night to take care of his kids, Jason spent most of his time at headquarters. At one stretch, he stayed there for twenty-four hours straight, showering in the station's locker room and changing back into the same clothes.

He felt a personal responsibility for these crimes, a weight that bore down on him like a Tomahawk missile, never veering, never losing its target. The killer knew him, hated him, and somehow these murders were connected to that hatred. Jason racked his brain, trying to discover the link.

He reread all the reports on cases he had handled since coming to Gwinnett, hoping to find some clue. When that turned up nothing, he called the Boston Police Department and talked to Bill Katzopoulos, his old partner there, asking him to telex any case he thought might have a connection. Katzopoulos agreed, but warned it might take some time to round up all the old files.

A week after Vanessa's body was found, Jason finally got around to calling his father on the off chance that this might be family connected. He had intended to call his dad earlier, just to get his advice, but each time the thought crossed his mind, something distracted him and he forgot to call.

This time his hand was on the receiver, his finger on the first digit in his father's

number, when the phone rang underneath his palm. He answered to an unfamiliar voice.

"Jason Medlocke?" the voice asked.

"This is he."

"Mr. Medlocke, this is Dr. Janokowski, your father's physician."

Jason felt his body go cold.

"What's the matter?" he asked quickly. "Is Dad okay? What's happened?"

"First of all, let me say that I don't believe your father is in any serious danger. He's in the hospital, apparently suffering from some kind of virus."

"Apparently?" Jason said. "You're not sure?"

"To be perfectly honest, no. Your father called me yesterday. He was so weak he could barely talk. It actually took me a moment to recognize his voice. There was no way he could drive, so I called an ambulance. Once we got him here, we ran several tests on him. They all come up negative. It definitely wasn't a heart attack or a stroke. The neurological tests show his system is working fine."

The doctor paused for a second.

"It's a strange virus," he said. "I've never seen anything like it. It shows very few outward signs other than complete weakness. Your father spends most of his time sleeping. When he's awake, he's been insistent about calling you. He said he wanted to see if you were all right. Have you been ill or something?"

Jason hesitated. What could he tell this doctor that wouldn't seem crazy? He decided to lie.

"Yes, I have. But I'm over it now. Dad is a worrier," he said. "Have you called my sisters about him?"

"Yes, both of them are coming to see him tonight."

"Should I fly up?"

"I don't think that will be necessary. As I said, he doesn't seem to be in any danger. He's just terribly weak. About all we can do is keep a close watch on him and let the virus run its course."

"How long will that take?"

"Hard to tell. Most viruses hang on about a week. He's had this for a day or two, so I'd give it another five or so days."

"Okay, doctor. Thank you for calling. If anything happens, I'd appreciate you calling me immediately."

Jason hung up and stared into space. He couldn't remember the last time his father had been sick. Where did this virus come from and why couldn't the doctors diagnose it one way or the other? Calling it a virus was very generalized. Jason didn't like it.

"What's the matter?" Badger said, entering the office with a Coke in each hand. He put one in front of Jason.

Jason told him about the doctor's phone call.

"Shit, it's all I need," Jason said. "My father's sick and I need to be up there with him, but I can't leave here right now. Why do these crisis situations always hit at the same time?"

"You got me," Badger shrugged. "Some sort of cosmic bullshit, I suppose. But the doctor would've told you if your dad was really in bad shape. Besides, your sisters are going up there. And you know your dad will understand why you have to stay here for the time being. It's not as if you have a haircut appointment that you don't want to break."

Jason nodded without much enthusiasm. As he sat lost in his own feelings of helplessness, the phone rang again.

"Medlocke," he said.

"Hi there, this is Alex."

Badger's eyebrows furrowed as Jason suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair. All traces of fatigue vanished from his face and a smile actually broke across it.

"Uh, hi. How are you?" Jason stuttered.

"I'm fine," she said. "I was just calling to see how you guys were doing. After what happened in your office, I kind of feel like part of the action. I read all about the last... uh... development. I'm sorry you couldn't catch the guy."

"Is that Alex?" Badger mouthed. Jason nodded.

"Yeah, so are we," he said into the phone. "We don't seem to be getting any closer either. Lots of information, but none of it leading anywhere."

There was silence on the line and tension rose as the two tried to find something to say to each other. Finally Alex burst out: "How about dinner? I mean, would you like to get something to eat tonight?"

"Uh, well, I don't know," Jason stammered, shocked by her forthrightness. "This case has me all wrapped up. I'm not sure I can break away for dinner."

Badger grabbed the phone out of Jason's hand. "Don't listen to him," he said. "Of course he can break for dinner. He *needs* to break for dinner. He looks like hell and hasn't eaten a decent meal in two days. Take him someplace nice."

"Give me that phone!" Jason said in a hushed-but-angry tone as he jerked it out of Badger's hand. He put his ear back to the receiver.

"Well, is he right?" Alex asked with a smile in her voice. "Are you just giving me the runaround?"

"No, no, I'm not. Really I'm not," Jason said. "It's just that... well..."

He suddenly realized that he did want to go to dinner and to hell with all the

other problems in his life. By God, he needed a few minutes for himself.

"Okay, you got a deal," he said. "I'll pick you up about seven."

"Sounds good. Let me give you directions."

Jason scribbled the directions on a piece of yellow legal paper, then ripped the sheet off and put it in his wallet. "I got it. See you tonight," he said and hung up. "There, now was that so hard?" Badger asked.

Promptly at seven, Jason knocked on Alex's apartment door, wiping his palms on the sides of his legs immediately afterward. Luckily, he was wearing a pair of black denim Levi's and the sweat stains didn't show. As he heard footsteps approaching from behind the door, he quickly adjusted his gray herringbone sports jacket. It had been a while since he'd worn it and he hoped his quickie ironing job didn't look like a quickie job.

Alex opened the door. She still was dressed in what Jason assumed were business clothes, a crisp black skirt and fuchsia jacket with a white blouse and tasteful set of gold earrings and a matching necklace completing the ensemble.

"You're punctual. I like that in a man," she said as she let Jason in.

"Always ready to make a good impression," he said as he followed her into the kitchen. So far so good. He didn't trip over the doorstep and said something fairly intelligent.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked. "I ran a little late at work and just got here a couple of minutes ago. I need to throw on another outfit."

"What for?" Jason said. "The one you have on is fine."

"Humor me."

Jason shrugged and smiled.

"Anyway," she said. "Do you want a drink?"

"Got a Coke?"

Alex opened the refrigerator and drew out a can. She handed it to Jason, who popped the top and took a long drink. The carbonation burned his tongue then danced into the back of his throat. It hadn't occurred to him how dry his mouth was.

"It's obvious you're not from the South," Alex said as she pulled two glasses down from the cabinet and started filling them with ice.

"Why? What'd I do?"

"You asked for a Coke, instead of a Co-cola."

"My jig is up."

"Well, at least you didn't ask for a pop. I would've had to kick you in the shin if you had."

"Is that some sort of Southern rule?"

"Left over from the plantation days and the War of Northern Aggression. I bet you've never dropped salted peanuts into your Pepsi or had an RC and a moon pie, either."

"Gourmet treats I've lived my whole life without."

"Well, over dinner I'll dedicate myself to your education," she said. "Do you like pizza?"

"Of course, I'm just a damned Yankee carpetbagger, not a communist."

"That's good to know. Listen, I'll just be a minute changing my clothes. Make yourself at home."

Jason went to the living room and sat down on the couch. The apartment was sparsely furnished, he noticed, a couch, one chair, a coffee table, and a couple of

paintings on the wall. But what was there was nice stuff. He pulled up the cushion next to the one he was sitting on. A Park Place label was stitched onto the fabric covering the springs, indicating its level of quality.

Jason saw no TV, but there were several news magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U. S. News & World Report*—lying on the coffee table. He was glad to see there also were a couple of copies of *Rolling Stone*.

In a set of shelves on the far wall he saw a hefty collection of albums. He got off the couch and started browsing through her collection. It was about as eclectic as his. The only difference, so far as he could tell, was she favored classical over hard rock and heavy metal. As close as she got was a couple of Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith albums.

She needs a better musical education, Jason decided. "Are you going to criticize my music?"

Jason turned, ready to tell her that she and he had much the same taste in music. The words caught in his throat. Alex was dressed in a black leather miniskirt and a loose, long-sleeved cotton blouse. The sleeves were rolled up to just below the elbows, exposing tanned arms. The miniskirt revealed long, tanned legs that ended in a pair of open-toed high heels.

She had applied a thin coat of makeup and a touch of lip gloss and run a brush through her hair. She was the most beautiful thing Jason had been close to in eighteen months.

"God, you look fabulous," he blurted.

She blushed slightly.

"Well, I see being from the North doesn't prevent you from being a Southern gentleman," she said. "You ready?"

They took Jason's car, Alex providing the directions. Small talk filled the twenty-

minute drive and Jason directed it toward Alex.

She was from Montgomery, Alabama, and had moved to Atlanta about three years before. She chose Atlanta because Birmingham was too close to home and New Orleans was too muggy and too close to hurricanes. She was twenty-six and almost got married when she was twenty. He was the assistant manager of a grocery store and was in line for his own store within a year. But she didn't want to marry someone who was going to keep her in Montgomery or, God forbid, get a transfer to Selma or Dothan. He wanted her to have babies and stay at home, but there were dreams she wanted to chase before she was ready for that. They broke up to much anger and crying on his part and arguments between her and her parents, who thought he was a good, solid boy with his feet on the ground. "Feet on the ground is fine," Alex said, "but he was so firmly planted the bottom of his feet had roots."

The conversation steered away from her and onto him. He told her he was born in New Hampshire but had lived his adult life in Boston, then explained to her why anyone in his right mind would, as she put it, "want to be up to their ass in snow for half the year." He told her he came to Atlanta for the job with the Gwinnett police. He didn't mention Sarah or Claire.

"Isn't your job kind of depressing?" she asked. "I mean, as a cop you see the worst side of humanity anyway, but as a homicide detective, I guess you really see the slime that crawls out from under rocks."

"That's a good way to describe it," he said. "It's always bad, but some are worse than others. Like when there's a domestic killing, it's usually more pitiful than sickening because the person who does the killing wishes they were dead after they've done it.

"Sometimes, though, there are incidents that just make you angry, like if you

find the person who did it, you'd kill him right there. I'm surprised there aren't more cops charged with murder, 'cause a lot of us would like to snuff some of the scum we deal with."

"Really?"

"Well, we don't sit there quivering in our seats, having to hold ourselves back. But the senselessness and cruelty of some killings boggles your mind."

"Like the Mercy Killer?"

"Yeah. Exactly like that."

They arrived at the restaurant in silence and Jason hoped he hadn't screwed things up by talking about his job. Hell, it depressed him sometimes and he had been doing it for years. A normal person was in no mental shape to handle it. But it felt good to engage in conversation with an interested and intelligent woman. Once they sat down, the talk started again, and this time Jason directed it toward more middle-of-the-road topics like music, movies, and books.

He began to truly enjoy himself. Alex's wit was rifleshot and he worked fast to keep up. He stumbled a couple of times, but thought he was holding his own pretty well for having sat on the bench for almost two years.

When the waiter came, they ordered a large, thick-crust pizza with pepperoni, black olives, mushrooms, and Italian sausage. Along with the pizza, Alex ordered a light beer and Jason asked for a Coke.

"No beer?" Alex asked. "How can you have pizza with no beer?"

Jason shrugged, not really wanting to give the reason, but then seeing no real reason to hide it either.

"I don't drink," he said. "I had a little problem with it a while back."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Alex apologized. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. Way to go,

Alex. Open mouth, insert foot. Would you prefer if I got a Coke, too?"

"No, bo. It's okay. Really. Badger drinks beer whenever we watch a football or baseball game and it doesn't bother me at all. It's been so long since I've had a drink, I really don't even have the desire anymore."

He paused. "You see, I got drunk one afternoon—Badger and I got into a fight about my drinking, actually—and I roared off in my car to the nearest Liquor store. Bought a bottle, chugged most of it then slammed into some guy pulling out of his driveway. Didn't hurt him too much since he was driving an eighteen wheeler, but it almost killed me. I checked into a rehab center the day I got out of the hospital. Been sober ever since."

"I still feel as if I'm making you uncomfortable, as if I'm making you remember things you don't want to remember," Alex said.

"Don't be silly. My problems weren't your fault. And if I can't deal with them now, I'm in worse shape than I thought."

That's all he intended to say. He didn't plan to tell her about his alcoholism and certainly had no plan to spill his guts about Sarah and Claire. He still held the belief that bringing up their deaths would be like ripping a scab off an unhealed wound. He wasn't sure he could stand the pain. And, even if the pain was lessened, talking about it might resharpen its teeth. Better to just leave it lying rather than take the chance, Jason thought.

But something inside him wanted to talk to Alex. He felt she would understand and not be put off that he was opening himself up so much to a virtual stranger. He wanted her to know him better. Since the death of his family, his life had been a series of emotionally detached, coldly rational, and extremely boring decisions. Maybe it was time to take a chance. If it failed, it failed. He'd survived this long without a woman, he could make it a while longer.

But dear God he hoped it wouldn't flop.

"It started when my wife and child were killed in a car wreck," he began.

He told Alex about the death of Sarah and Claire, how it had made life hard to deal with for several months. He told it in a straightforward fashion. No histrionics; no putting his face in his hands and sobbing. His only outward sign of emotion was the lowering of his voice during the truly painful moments.

It wasn't as bad as he feared. In fact, it was a relief, like confessing to a petty crime you committed as a teenager. The statute of limitations ran out, but there was always the fear of getting caught. Yet, while there was pain, there also was joy.

Alex didn't say anything; she just listened. Her eyes were deep and concerned. Jason could see sympathy and compassion rise in them.

"It's taken me a while to even be able to talk about it," he said at the finish. "In fact, you're the first person who wasn't a close relative or a longtime friend that I've told. Thanks for listening."

Her left hand reached out across the table and crept into his. Her right rested on top. Jason's eyes, which alternated between looking into hers, looking at the table, and staring sightlessly into space, locked onto hers.

"I'm glad you did," she said softly, stroking his hand.

"I hope I haven't offended you," he said. "After all, I hardly know you. I wouldn't blame you if you were put off by all this emotional baggage I'm lugging around. I try not to let it show too much. But you're easy to talk to."

"My pleasure," she said. "I mean that."

Jason smiled, still holding her gaze. Without warning, she leaned across the table and kissed him gently but with an underlying passion. He kissed back.

As they drew away from each other, they looked up at an embarrassed waiter standing there with the pizza.

"Don't mind us," Alex said. "We're just getting to know each other."

"Looks like you're doing a good job," the waiter said as he placed the pizza on the table.

The rest of the meal was a jumbled joy of conversation to Jason. He and Alex talked like lifelong friends. The ice was not only broken, it was shattered and ground under a heavy heel.

The drive home was relaxed and cozy. There was no doubt what was coming. The knowledge was exciting and very comfortable. No pretenses needed to be made. Once or twice Jason wondered if he would still know how, but he figured he could wing it.

He parked his car outside Alex's apartment. They went inside, holding hands, neither speaking. She tossed her purse onto the couch and turned. Her arms enveloped his neck and her mouth met his in a deep, wet kiss. Her tongue darted into his mouth, probed then quickly retreated, only to enter again.

The blood thudded against his eardrums and he hoped his heart wouldn't race out of control. He felt himself stiffening and Alex pressed her thigh into him, rotating slightly. Jason took a rapid breath through his nose and pressed back. Pulling away, Alex took his hand and led him down the hallway to her bedroom. Jason was happy to discover he hadn't forgotten a thing.

Chapter 19



Jason spent that night at Alex's. And the next. And on through the weekend. When he arrived at work Monday morning, he was almost shocked to find a smiling, happy man staring back at him from the bathroom mirror.

For the next three weeks, however, his happiness with Alex was in direct contrast to the rest of his life.

Each day he and Badger pored over facts of the serial killings to no avail. Computer programs were useless. Interviews told them nothing. On a hunch, Jason called a few magic stores around Atlanta to see if there were some sort of illusion or trick that could create a green phosphorescent line that appeared and disappeared. No one had heard of anything like that. Badger, meanwhile, called sound equipment retailers in the area to see if there were a type of microphone that could pick up voices from a hundred or so yards away.

"Shit, man, we've got mikes that could hear a fly fart at half a mile," one store owner told him.

"Sold any lately?" Badger asked.

"Oh yeah," the man said. "We've got a ton of video outfits and recording studios around town these days and those kinds of mikes are in big demand. The TV news stations like to use 'em. So do private investigators. Hell, I've even sold some to police departments."

"Do you have a list of who has bought one in the last month or so?" Badger asked.

"Yeah, we keep those kinds of records. I guess you want me to look."

"It sure would help," Badger said.

The man promised to get back to Badger the next day. Badger went through the same routine with a dozen other sound equipment stores.

On his own, Jason spent hours trying to make a connection between the killer and himself. Nothing. Katzopoulos from Boston sent copies of Jason's caseload in that city, but nothing clicked. Murder is a state crime, not federal, but the FBI still was called in for assistance, placing over twenty officers—local and FBI—under Jason's and Badger's command.

As part of his daily pattern, along with playing with the disappearing ball trick, Jason called Boston General Hospital to check on his father. Each day he heard the same thing from his sisters: Dad was getting better but still was too weak to talk very much or to leave the hospital. The doctors couldn't figure it out, but his father seemed in no danger of dying.

One Monday morning, twenty-one days after his father had entered the hospital, Jason arrived at his desk and, as usual, immediately called his father. Dialing directly to his father's room, he expected one of his sisters to answer on the first or second ring.

"By God this is getting to be too much," he told Alex as he climbed from bed that morning. "If Dad isn't better, then investigation or not, I'm flying up to Boston."

His sisters had, until now, convinced him it was not necessary, and in those brief moments when he could speak to his father, Stephen had told him the same thing.

"Stay there," Stephen had said once. "You're needed more in Atlanta than here."

All you could do here is watch me sleep and watch them poke needles in me to try and figure out what's wrong. Not much run for me or you."

This time, the phone rang and rang with no answer. Uneasiness rose in Jason's throat. Where was his father? Why wasn't he in his room? Where were his sisters? Could Dad be well enough to be walking in the hallway?

Jason started to hang up and try again when a blast of icy static erupted in his ear. The noise was painfully loud and he wrenched the phone away. Even from several inches, he could hear the loud crackling. But it wasn't normal static. As he listened, it took on a strange, high pitch. It sounded like... laughter. He was about to slam the phone down when the static abruptly ceased and a female voice answered.

"Third floor. May I help you?" the voice said.

Jason sat silently for a moment, gathering his wits.

"Third floor nurse's station," the voice said again. "Is anybody there?"

"Uh, yes. Uh, I'm trying to reach a patient," Jason stammered.

"What is his name?"

"Uh, Stephen Medlocke," Jason said, regaining control. "I'm his son. He's supposed to be in Room 376, but I dialed the room number and no one answers. How did I get you?"

"After a certain number of rings, the call is automatically routed to the nurses' station," the female voice said. "This is Nurse Chomol. Your father is down in the lab. They're running some tests on him. He's perfectly all right, Jason."

Waitasecond, Jason thought. I didn't give her my name.

"How did you know who I was?" he asked suspiciously.

There was a split second's hesitation before the voice answered.

"Well, you said you were Stephen's son and he has spoken about you quite a bit," she said. "I feel as if I already know you."

"I see," Jason said. Inside he thought: How can he talk so much when he's asleep most of the time?

"Do you know when my father will be back?" he said.

"I really have no idea. But I'll be happy to take a message and make sure he gets it."

Jason hesitated. Something about this was wrong, badly wrong. He decided to play it safe. "Okay, tell him I'll call back later. I was just calling to see how he was."

"All right. I'll be sure he gets the message," the nurse said.

Jason thanked her and was placing the receiver in its cradle when the static roared over the line again. This time, there was no doubting: It sounded like laughter. Hateful, spiteful laughter. Jason yanked the phone back to his ear, but the sound vanished. Just a low rumble, like a cold wind blowing across a barren plain. He hung up slowly.

He sat quietly for a few minutes, staring into space, then picked up the phone and dialed Alex at work. She answered quickly.

"Hi," he said. "How are you this morning?"

"Feeling wonderful, but tired," she said. "I don't know how you do it. You go on for so long I feel as if my lungs are about to collapse."

"That's why we need to do it more," he said. "You've got to get into better shape."

"Mmmm," she said. "Fine by me. Are you coming over tonight?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure how long I'll be here today. I'm feeling kind of guilty about these cases, as if I'm not doing enough. I may need to stay

late to try to uncover something new."

"Baby, you've been living and breathing those cases every day," she said.

"There's no need for you to feel guilty."

His heart jumped at the word "baby." She'd never called him that before. He liked it. An idea entered his mind, but he hesitated to say it. What the hell, he decided.

"Listen, why don't you stay at my place?" he said. "I'll call the resident manager and tell her to give you a key. That way I can see you when I get home."

"You're sure you don't mind?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay, I will. See you when you get home. Do you know how late you'll be? I'll wait up."

"Nah, that's not necessary. I'll wake you up if you want."

"I want."

He hung up and smiled as a warm glow spread through his groin. Sex. What a wonderful creation.

The last few nights had been voyages of discovery. Not only did he learn more about Alex, he learned more about himself. He knew he was lonely, but until Alex came along, he never realized the depths to which he'd sunk. Sarah and Claire filled his life so completely when they were alive, he tried to turn off his emotional needs when they were gone, convinced no one else could fill them.

It almost made him sick to see what a waste he'd made of the last year of his life. The first months after the accident he could write off as mourning and alcoholic stupor, but the past eight were nothing but laziness. He hadn't made any effort to change. Alex opened the gateway. He felt close to someone again; there was

someone to share his thoughts with.

And, of course, there was sex, a vibrant and wonderful thing after so many months of abstention. He and Alex made love two or three times a night, their bodies wringing wet afterward.

Yet in spite of all his happiness, there was something else, something standing in the way of total contentment.

Himself.

When his thoughts wandered to Alex, they often were trampled by rampaging hordes of guilt. There was guilt that perhaps he didn't deserve such happiness. There was guilt that perhaps he wasn't doing his job well enough. And most of all, there was guilt about having so much fun with a woman other than Sarah.

Badger tried to smooth the rough roads.

"Are you happy?" he asked. Jason nodded.

"Then you know Sarah's happy," Badger answered. "And why shouldn't you deserve happiness? Your life's been pretty shitty for almost two years. Quit trying to fuck up a perfectly healthy, happy relationship."

Now Jason sat at his desk worrying about the upcoming night. Letting Alex come to his home was a momentous decision. He was allowing a woman into his inner sanctum. His photos of Sarah and Claire still dotted the landscape of his home. Their memory still was a major part of his life. How would Alex react? More important, how would he react?

For the rest of the day, he tried to steel himself, tried to envision all the possible scenarios. But he wasn't prepared for what he encountered when he arrived home about eleven. Alex was sitting on the couch. Crying.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he said, rushing to her and cradling her in his arms.

"What happened?"

She couldn't answer, tears got in the way. She pointed at the photo of Sarah and Claire on the end table, then at the others located around the room.

"Dammit," he said. "I should've taken these pictures out. I should've known they'd upset you. It's my fault. I'm sorry."

She shook her head vigorously.

"No, no, it's not that," she squeezed between sobs. "They don't upset me for the reasons you think."

She sobbed again, then took a deep breath.

"Seeing them makes me realize how much pain you must have gone through," she said. "It must have been awful, just awful. I don't know if I could've lived through it. I'm sorry, so sorry. It must've hurt so much."

Tears filled Jason's eyes and he looked toward the ceiling, trying to keep the drops from rolling down his cheeks. It was no use, there were too many and they poured down his face in a salty flood.

Alex reached out and touched one of his tears, wiping it across his face, then kissed him with all the feeling she could muster. Jason held her tightly. He knew he had fallen in love.

Their lovemaking that night was slow and tender. Just before she fell asleep, Alex whispered to Jason.

"Huh?" he said. "Did you say something?"

"Only that I love you."

Jason was stunned. A brick crashed through the plate-glass window of his soul. His tongue seemed to grow in his mouth until it filled it completely—a big, dry, lumpy chunk of useless meat. As his mind tried to decide what to say, his heart overran his mouth.

"I love you, too," he said. As he spoke the words, his body felt as if it was floating out of the bed and through the ceiling. His mind whirled like a leaf in a windstorm. All he could do was smile and keep playing those three words over and over in his head. "I love you."

It seemed so farfetched. He never swallowed those movies where two people meet, spend a few days together, then fall madly in love, soul mates forever. But here he was, smack dab in the middle of that exact situation. It made him happy, deliriously so. He couldn't think of a time when he'd been happier.

Then the first wave of guilt hit him. Sarah and Claire. His wedding to Sarah, the birth of Claire. He'd been happy then, too.

Oh God, he thought, am I forgetting them too fast? Am I leaving them behind in a cloud of dust? Thinking of no one but myself? How could I do that?

Tears threatened and he felt like a bastard. Would Sarah and Claire understand? Would they hate him?

He lay awake for almost an hour, his feelings cresting as he thought of his newfound love for Alex and hitting bottom when his relentless guilt returned in full force.

That night, while Alex slept deep and dreamless, Jason tossed and turned, mumbling incoherently, swatting vaguely at things above his head. Sometimes he cried out softly.

At six-thirty the alarm went off, and he climbed out of bed sleepily, feeling as if he'd just put his head on the pillow. Alex lay next to him, sound asleep. He kissed her on the cheek, then went to the kitchen to get some coffee. He could smell the freshly brewed odor in the hall and was halfway into a yawn when he froze, his mouth clamping shut.

The refrigerator door had opened. Someone was in the kitchen.

Holding his breath, he tiptoed back to his bedroom and eased his pistol from the holster on the dresser. Pressing his back to the wall, he moved slowly down the hallway, his feet silent on the carpet, gun ready. Sweat beaded along his hairline. The sound of someone humming flowed through the kitchen doorway. The tune was familiar to Jason, but he couldn't quite place it. Reaching the doorway, he peeked around. As he did, he remembered the song—Rosanne Cash's "Seven Year Ache." Sarah used to sing it all the time.

"Hello, darling," she said.

Sarah stood in front of the refrigerator, taking out eggs and bacon.

Chapter 20



Jason fell back against the doorway, banging his shoulder hard. The pain made him grimace, but it barely registered to his brain. His knees felt disjointed and he knew he had better grab something before he collapsed. He lunged for the counter and toppled against it.

"Honey, are you okay?" Sarah said, putting down the eggs and bacon and hurrying toward him. "What's the matter?"

"Stay away from me," Jason stammered, the gun hanging in his limp hand. "Stay away."

A look of pain crossed Sarah's face. "Why? What did I do? Jason, why are you looking at me like that?"

He stared at her, his lips numb, his mouth a desert. The room seemed abstract, rushing at him from a thousand different angles, only to pull away at the last second and zoom into the distance.

"You're... you're dead," he finally said. "You can't be here. You and Claire are dead."

"Dead?" Sarah said. "Honey, you must be dreaming. Is that what this is? Are you sleepwalking?"

She reached out and gently patted him on the cheek. "Wake up, honey," she said. "You're dreaming."

He pushed her hand away roughly. "I am not dreaming," he said. "You're dead. You died eighteen months ago in a car wreck. Both you and Claire. You're not here."

He rubbed his eyes. When he opened them and Sarah still was there, he dug the fingers of his left hand into his forearm until blood welled up underneath the nails.

"Jason, stop. You're scaring me," Sarah said. "I'm not dead and neither is Claire. She's asleep back in our bedroom. She slept with us last night because she had a bad dream. Don't you remember?"

Jason shook his head. He couldn't accept this. This wasn't true. But here was Sarah, talking to him the way she always had. He'd felt her hand on his cheek. She was alive. But she couldn't be.

"Sweetheart, come with me," Sarah said. "I'll show you. Claire's fine. She's asleep back here. C'mon."

She walked down the hall, motioning for Jason to follow her. He stumbled out of the kitchen as Sarah quietly opened the bedroom door and pointed. Making sure he didn't touch her, Jason peered over her shoulder. He almost burst into tears.

His little girl was sound asleep, her head on his pillow. As he watched, her right hand came up and gently rubbed her nose. Her face scrunched up at the tickle, then relaxed into the face of an angel. His heart seemed ready to burst from his chest.

"See?" Sarah whispered. "She's just fine."

She closed the door and took Jason by one hand, gently removing the gun from the other and putting the weapon in the pocket of her robe. This time he didn't resist. Was this somehow true? he thought. Could it all have been a bad dream on my part? Is my family still alive?

But what about Alex?

Alex? Alex who?

Alex... Alex... I don't remember.

All he knew was the touch of his wife's hand in his, her scent once again in his nose. Sarah turned and pressed herself against him.

"Honey, as long as Claire's asleep, let's take advantage of it."

She pulled him into the middle of the living room, then stepped back and opened her robe, dropping it to the floor. She was naked. Taking Jason's hand, she guided it to her breast, then took the other and placed it on the dark triangle between her legs. Jason could feel the warm wetness of her arousal. She ground herself into his palm. He felt himself stiffen and his hands began to gently knead and probe. Sarah took a rapid breath and moaned. Her hand reached down and grabbed him, stroking him to hardness. They crumbled to the floor, their mouths pressed together.

Jason's passion rose and he slid his hands up and down her body, over her buttocks and along her sides. She moaned and pushed her hips into his as their tongues wrestled. Her cool fingers on his boiling flesh made him jump, but the sensation made his blood pump even harder. Sarah slid herself up and on him.

He groaned with the slick warmth and closed his eyes. The feeling was exquisite and he pictured himself and Sarah as one person, forever joined in body and mind. If the ground opened up and swallowed them whole, he could die happy.

A searing blast of cold exploded in his groin, daggers of liquid nitrogen stabbed into his balls, rupturing them. His pelvic bone shattered like a cube of ice and his eyes flew open, wide with pain.

Sarah was no longer there. A huge, horrible beast sat on top of him, a dusky gold creature with a misshapen head and a wicked, tooth-filled grin.

"Hello, darling," the beast said. "Enjoying yourself?"

Rearing back, the creature brought its hands up and spread its fingers, double-bladed nails extending from their tips. Jason tried to roll from under the beast, but found he was paralyzed.

"Forget love, Medlocke, it won't work," the beast said. "There'll be no more Medlocke sons. You're the last and you're mine."

The claws plunged into Jason's neck.

From deep within sleep, Alex heard a low moan, like a wind picking up speed across the desert. As sleep slowly slipped off her, the moan became a howl and finally a scream.

She sprang upright in bed, wide awake, and instantly saw Jason wasn't next to her. Another scream came from the living room and Alex sprang from bed and ran down the hall. As she rounded the hallway, she saw Jason lying naked on the floor, twisting and turning, holding his neck with both hands. Lying next to him was a framed photograph of Sarah. The glass was shattered, bits of it on the carpet.

With a cry Jason jumped up, but his feet became tangled and he fell, scraping his chin on the carpet. Without getting up, he crab-scurried on his hands and knees to the nearest corner, flinging his back into it, throwing his arms out to the sides and spreading his legs wide. He was ready for siege. His eyes glazed and an expression of hatred and fear sat granite-like on his face.

"Jason, Jason," Alex yelled. "Wake up! You're having a bad dream. Wake up!"

He didn't answer as his eyes combed the room with a desperate look. His left hand came up to his throat, feeling, checking. Sweat trickled off his chin in several places and his limbs quivered. Finally he spoke.

"Come no closer or I'll destroy you. I'll send you back in tiny pieces to whatever hellish bog you crawled from. Leave this world and live. Stay and I'll rend you limb from limb."

The air in the room seemed heavy and waterlogged. Alex felt herself sinking below the surface. Not only was the speech outdated and odd, the voice was not even Jason's. It was deeper, with a European brogue. Chills scampered down her backbone and arms.

"Beast of hell," Jason shouted. "You will not reside in this world. The Medlockes shall see to that. Do your worst. We shall overcome."

Another speech, another voice. What's going on here? Alex asked herself. What kind of dream is he having?

"Jason, Jason, wake up," she called out. "You're having a nightmare."

He didn't acknowledge her and she started to approach him, deciding a good shaking might wake him up. God knows she didn't want to hear any more of this. She was within a couple of feet of him when Jason cried out again.

"You must be a real embarrassment to your family," he said. "What does it take to get through that malformed head of yours that you're a loser?"

As he finished the last sentence, Jason sagged to his knees. His head slumped forward until his chin rested on his chest and his arms sank to the floor, hands rolled up like a monkey's paws.

The sudden collapse alarmed Alex. She could see he still was breathing, but he looked comatose. She rushed forward to make sure he was okay.

She never made it.

From all corners of the room a roaring began, a trumpeting bedlam that made the hairs on her neck stand up and her blood flow cold as marble. Jason groaned but

did not awaken.

The roar grew in volume and Alex threw her hands over her ears. The walls shook, the windows rattled in their frames. She could feel the basso profundo thunder making her organs tremble.

She looked around the room, trying to find the source of the sound. But it came from nowhere, everywhere. Under the sofa, on the ceiling, behind the door, outside the window.

As the roaring continued, the room became bitterly cold. Alex's breath came in clouds and her skin burned in the freeze. Tendrils of ice crept across the windowpanes. With the dropping temperature, a foul odor rose, causing her to gag. It was the smell of wickedness, age-old and unforgiving.

Then the roar changed from a mindless, keening din to a single word.

"Meeeeeedlooooocke."

All the hate and evil of the universe was contained in the utterance of that name, as if the speaker wanted to tear it from the fabric of reality and smash it into a thousand pieces. There was nothing human about the voice, nothing merciful. It seemed envious and jealous of mankind, as if humans grasped a prize forever out of its reach.

Bathed in these horrifying emotions, Alex felt the room swimming out of control. Yet just as she thought terror had reached its zenith, just as her sanity appeared ready to tear loose from its moorings and sink into the pit of lunacy, things got worse.

In the far corner of the room, near the ceiling, a greenish glow began to ooze. It spread across the ceiling and down the walls like a massive amoeba. Even in her horror-stricken state, Alex thought of a can of paint tossed into the corner then allowed to drip.

Mesmerized, she stared at the center of the glow and watched with dread as a form began to take shape. The outline of a head appeared, a head unlike any human. While the rest of the head remained wispy and vague, two burning silver eyes opened in the middle. They glared at Jason.

"Medlocke, I'm here," the eyes hissed.

Alex's thoughts spun and she wanted to faint. But her mind wouldn't give her the relief. Instead, her knees gave out and she sat back heavily on the edge of the sofa, her hands spreading out behind her to keep her steady. She groaned loudly and the eyes turned toward her. Hate hit her in a wave. She wanted to scream, but couldn't. Fingers of terror wrapped around her throat in a vise.

Inside the cloud, a bloodthirsty smile spread across the face and a chuckle danced about the room. An arm of greenish-white mucus emerged from the glow and snaked toward the couch. Alex sat petrified, her eyes dry and scratchy from not blinking.

If this is a dream, please, please let me wake up, she prayed. Please, please, please.

When the tendril was two feet from her face, it began to mutate, to blossom. A hand sprang from the end, a huge hand with long fingers. Double-bladed nails split through the skin at the fingertips, emerging with a sucking, ripping sound. Black blood dripped to the carpet. The fingers became longer and longer as they edged toward Alex's throat.

I'm going to die, she realized. It's going to kill me and I don't even know what it is.

The knowledge snapped her out of her paralysis. Like a cornered animal, she flung herself backward, away from the hand, scrambling down the sofa until her back crashed into the lamp on the end table. She continued to push backward

until her spine rested against the wall.

Still the hand came on, the fingers curling and uncurling, nails hungry for flesh. Alex searched desperately for a weapon, but the only thing within reach was a sofa pillow. She grabbed it with both hands and swung it, every muscle in her body behind the effort. When pillow and hand met, the room erupted with a blaze of white light. The pillow exploded, throwing Alex against the wall, the back of her head crashing into it with brain-jarring force. Green sparks flew about the room, bouncing off the walls and landing with small sizzles on the carpet. Alex wasn't sure if they were real or just the products of her rattled brain. But the tiny, hard pieces of debris that hurtled into her face were definitely real. Ice. The pillow had exploded into chunks of ice.

"You'll have to do better than that," she heard a voice say. "You aren't at a slumber party and this isn't a pillow fight."

Two more tendrils snaked out from the cloud, surrounding Alex on both sides, corralling her to the end of the sofa. She had nowhere to go.

The muteness that locked her throat vanished.

"Jaaaaaasooooon," she screamed.

In the corner, Jason raised his head and blinked several times. Confusion registered on his face. What was he doing in the corner? Why was his head so fuzzy? Where was Sarah?

He turned his head toward the couch and a glacier flowed into his stomach. Dear Jesus. Alex. Alex. He saw the blazing silver eyes and a tiny spark burst to life within him. He saw the hand reaching for Alex's throat and the spark became a flame.

"Stop," Jason said softly. The eyes swiveled his way and the hands edging toward Alex stopped. Cackling laughter reverberated off the walls and he felt

malice unburdened by conscience cascading over him.

Yet he felt no fear. Instead, as the hatred of the eyes slammed into him, the flame inside him erupted into a bonfire. He felt a hate of equal intensity burning a hole in him. Hate and something else. Righteous indignation. How dare this thing attack him? How dare it threaten the woman he loved?

Anger swelled, violent electricity burned in his veins. It was a madness demanding to be released or his body would rip apart with the depth of his emotions. He felt his body tremble and his eyes rolled up in his head.

Inside the green cloud, the eyes tightened with a look of puzzlement. A flash of uncertainty swept briefly across them.

Still sitting on his knees, Jason brought his hands up over his head and crossed them at the wrist. He threw his head back, splitting the air with a deep-throated cry.

Alex felt warm wind blow across her hair. Then the wind turned into a gale. The curtains bucked and danced, standing at right angles to the walls, blown sideways by the cyclone. Although deathly afraid of taking her eyes off the hands, she was unable to control herself and cut her gaze in Jason's direction. Her mouth gaped.

Jason sat within a golden, spinning vortex. The cone spun in a rainbow, throwing off streams of red, purple, orange, and yellow. Sparks flashed in the swirling light. From inside, Jason brought down his hands and opened his eyes. Alex gasped again. There was no white to his eyes, no iris, no pupil, only a blue-white radiance raging in the sockets.

Jason's face contorted with anger and he sprang to his feet, raising his right hand and pointing two fingers at the ectoplasmic hands groping for Alex's neck. His jaw clenched and beams of gold burst from his fingertips. With the power of a

celestial locomotive, they slammed into the hands, laying them open with surgeon's efficiency. An explosion rocked the room. Lamps tumbled from the tables and the entertainment center tipped over, falling with a crash.

A howl erupted from the green glow as blood sprayed the room, splattering the walls, the furniture, and Alex with its hot drops. She cried out as the thick liquid burned her skin.

Jason fired again and two more bolts tore into arms, slicing their way upward, splitting them with a clothlike tearing sound. The golden light spewed from the arm into the cloud, tinting its green with a pure, gilded glow.

Shades of green and gold rolled and tumbled inside the vapor. The edges bulged as the combatants struggled for domination. With a Herculean groan, a split opened in the side of the cloud and a bolt of radium green crashed into the cone of light surrounding Jason. The cone held, but the strength of the attack threw Jason off balance and he stumbled into the wall.

From the tear in the fog, another hand emerged, palm up, holding a dripping mass of golden sludge. The hand tightened into a fist and the golden mass oozed between the fingers, falling to the carpet in globs. The silver eyes flamed with renewed hatred.

"Good, Medlocke, very good," the voice said. "But you're going to have to do better. I may have underestimated you this time, but I won't again."

The cloud began retreating into the wall like a film in slow-motion reverse. The eyes were the last to go, their malevolence flaring until the final second. When the fog finally vanished, the frigid cold and odor disappeared along with it.

Alex let out a moan and fell forward. She lay on the sofa, her mouth slack and her eyes blank. She looked at Jason and her eyes widened. The cone of gold was slowly dissipating, being absorbed back into his body.

Jason stood motionless, leaning against the wall. His breath came in short gasps. He didn't think he could move. He didn't know if he wanted to move. His brain was unable to accept what had just taken place, what he had done. He felt as if he were standing outside himself, staring at a man he didn't even know and was pretty sure he didn't want to meet.

His hands hung at his sides, clenched into tight fists. As he drifted back to reality, he felt something jabbing into the palm of his right hand and slowly opened his fingers. The disappearing ball trick lay in his palm. A slight golden glow surrounded it.

"I think I'd better call my father," he said.

Chapter 21



The wind blew cold across the barren wasteland, a gritty wind pushing grains of sand and slivers of ice in its path. To be hit by it was to be nearly flayed alive.

The sun—what little there was—fought its way through layers of dense clouds. Only the barest trace of warmth made it to the ground. Few things grew, only tall, yellow thrush grass and stunted bushes whose blighted, brown leaves made the land seem even worse because they hinted at what might have been.

The land was livened mostly by occasional shades of rust-red iron and splotches of yellow where sulfur rose to the surface. But at the eastern horizon, a line of fire hundreds of miles long burned continuously, turning the low-hanging clouds a bright orange. The fires were disgorged from the land's deepest recesses, flames that destroyed the world at its core, yet never died, never diminished.

On the western horizon rose the peaks of a huge, primeval mountain range, cutting off the land like a fortress wall. Several pinnacles towered more than thirty thousand feet, their tips lost in the grimy clouds. The peaks that could be seen were covered with murky, dun-colored snow.

Every so often, a reptilian bird soared across the purple-gray sky, emitting a skittering screech as it looked for its food, which mainly consisted of the tiny lizards that scurried over the sand and rock. The birds neither knew nor cared that the lizards were close cousins, only a few million years further down the evolutionary ladder.

Neither did the birds notice the rock-hewn structure sitting at the edge of the wasteland. It was the only building as far as any eye could see, yet it blended almost perfectly with the surroundings. It sat at the entrance to a dead riverbed, off to one side to avoid the wind which picked up speed as it rushed between the narrow rock walls.

The building was hardly more than a hovel, rectangular in shape, a doorless opening near the far end of one of the long walls. There were no windows. A hole in the center of the thatch roof vomited a thick column of gray smoke. Anyone coming near the building—few ever had—would have heard a loud voice coming from inside, a voice tinged with anger.

"So, Medlocke," the voice said. "You've more powers than I thought. That makes things interesting."

Anyone looking inside—few ever had—would have seen a large, golden beast squatting beside a small fire. With bright silver eyes, the creature looked at its wounded hands. Large holes gaped from the palms, and jagged gashes ran upward to the elbow, exposing bone and muscle. A wide pool of blood soaked the dirt floor.

The beast stared at its wounds for several minutes, then clenched its fists tightly. The crunch of bones and severed tendons could be heard and a spout of blood arched through the air, splattering one of the walls. The beast only grunted.

A greenish glow enveloped the arms, obscuring them from view. The emerald glow rippled and swayed, as if something were fighting inside. Within a minute the glow faded and the creature held up its arms, palms inward. The wounds were gone. Only scars, still glowing green, were left.

"Power," the beast sneered. "You don't know the meaning of it, Medlocke."

The creature moved to the doorway of its hovel and stared at the flames in the

distance. They were closer now than they had been a few days earlier, and closer by far than a few weeks ago. The destruction of its world was increasing in speed. Only a short time remained before the fires would erupt through the rock and earth and completely engulf the land, destroying all life, what there was of it.

"Yes, my world is dying and I must move quickly," the beast said to itself, "but there is another world still wonderfully alive, still available if one had the skill."

The beast had tasted that world and enjoyed its flavor. It wanted to gorge itself on its offerings.

It could move between the worlds easily enough. Whenever one of the humans who thought himself an experienced sorcerer or avowed satanist called upon the so-called lords of the netherworld to send them a creature of destruction or vengeance or power, the doorway between the worlds opened. The beast could step through at that time. And there certainly was no dearth of such callings since there was no dearth of stupid humans attempting things they should best have left alone.

But the beast didn't breach the other world each time a call came through; others of its kind answered some of them. No, it bided its time, entering only when it thought itself ready, only when it had thoroughly plotted its revenge.

Others of its kind had tried, as it had, to establish footholds in the living world, but they were weak and stupid and had failed miserably. Yes, its previous attempts had failed, too, but it was not its fault. It was the cursed Medlockes. If not for that hated clan, it would be there now, saving its cadaverous world and its brethren.

One of the beast's hands reached up and touched the M-shaped scar gouged across its left cheek. The beast snarled. A Medlocke gave that to it, the first one, Glendon. The pain was not great, but the humiliation was unbearable.

Ah, but this time its plan would work. It knew it. Decades had been spent in its formulation, in its fruition. The time was near.

It was true that staying in the other world caused its race physical pain, made the skin burn as if the fires of their world were licking it. Yet bathing in human blood helped relieve that agony, and it was no small part of its current plan that such blood was plentiful each time it entered the other world. It found it both interesting and amusing that the blood of innocents helped alleviate the pain for the longest periods of time.

Once the damned Medlockes were out of its way, it would position itself in ultimate rule of the living world, throwing wide the gateways between it and its own. Once it and its brethren had control, there would never be any shortage of blood, it vowed. They would domesticate the weakling humans, force them to breed and multiply like the inferior animals they were.

"Others will follow and obey me because I was the one to lead them out of this dying world," the beast said.

A low rumble shook the building and the beast grimaced as it looked out the door. A storm was approaching from the eastern horizon. Great black clouds lanced lightning across the sky. A huge dust storm preceded the storm, its walls of thick, choking dust rose thousands of feet high. The beast knew the dust carried the heat of the hellfires that burned in the distance.

A series of long, low howls trailed over the roof of the house. They came from the hills running along the edge of the dead river. A look of concern crossed the beast's face. The howls were the sound of the three-headed Cerebrians roaming in deadly packs around the wasteland. They were running before the storm, trying to catch whatever was unlucky enough to come across their path. They killed as much for pleasure as for food.

The beast listened for a few seconds, then turned and went inside. Waving its right hand, a green doorlike barrier formed over the opening. Its powers were great, but a pack of the tri-heads caught up in the bloodlust might be able to bring it down and tear it to ribbons before it could protect itself.

We are tough, resilient creatures, the beast thought. We must be to live.

Then it sneered.

"Live," it said. "Mostly we just struggle for survival.

"You humans are matchsticks before my flame," it said to the air. "Evil, you call me. Your concept of evil is a horned demon with cloven hooves and a pitchfork. A fallen angel of your so-called god. So be it. In your world I can be a god for two races. The savior to mine and the devil to yours. I'll be your Lucifer. I'll show you hell. "And I'll build my throne from Medlocke bones."

Chapter 22



The Boeing 757 taxied smoothly down runway number two at Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport. Stephen stared out the window as the hostess reminded passengers to please stay seated until the pilot signaled all clear. As that message came over the loudspeaker, several people already were up and getting their belongings from the overhead compartments.

One of these days, Stephen growled to himself, the stewardess is going to say that, people are going to stand up anyway, and the plane is going to smash headfirst into the terminal and all these jokers will be flopping in the aisles like chickens hit by a Mack truck. Serves 'em right.

Stephen was not in the best mood of his life.

After a week in the hospital, he'd had enough. Fatigue still ruled his body, but he damn sure wasn't going to spend any more precious time lying on his back in a near-paralyzed state of exhaustion. Dr. Janokowski never figured out what was wrong with him, but Stephen knew. The beast was buying time, playing games, torturing his intended victims. No more, Stephen swore to himself.

Besides, there was no more time to waste.

At three that morning, Stephen was shocked out of a deep sleep by a horrible dream. All he could remember about it was that Jason was in trouble and he was unable to help, unable to wake up. When he finally pulled himself into wakefulness, the sheets were drenched with sweat and his hair was plastered to

his temples and the base of his neck. A familiar, evil taste lay fresh on his mind. During his three weeks in bed, Stephen told his daughter Anna to bring him a suitcase containing a couple of changes of clothes plus his toiletry items. He said he wanted them when he was strong enough to use them. He also told her to bring his wallet. When he left the hospital and climbed into the taxi he had phoned, he had everything he needed.

Stephen knew the doctor would refuse to release him, so he released himself. He simply got up and walked out. He was already in the elevator when the phone in his room started ringing.

"Logan Airport," he told the cabbie outside the hospital. At three in the morning he boarded a direct flight to Atlanta.

As Stephen waited for the plane to unload its passengers, his nerves remained tightly drawn. The muscles in his jaw clenched so hard they were making the top of his head hurt. The dull heat of exhaustion burned his eyes.

Damn, damn, double damn. If I had told Jason everything when I should have, this wouldn't be happening.

Of course it would, another voice inside him said. The beast hasn't given up in five hundred years, why should he give up now?

Well, then, damn, damn, double damn for not telling Jason sooner so he could have been more prepared.

The other voice was silent.

Stephen stood up, pulling his coat and suitcase from the overhead compartment. Walking off the plane and into the disembarking tunnel, his head hung low. God, he felt old, weak, and helpless. The picture of his own death kept flashing through his mind. Despite his fervent belief in an afterlife and his hopeful belief that he would end up in heaven, he wasn't sure he wanted to see God just yet. It

wouldn't hurt to spend a few more years on earth, would it?

He caught a taxi in front of the airport, gave the driver Jason's address and lay his head back on the seat. He fell asleep instantly. The cabbie woke him an hour later.

Stephen walked slowly up the stairs to Jason's apartment.

The sun was beginning to rise and birds chirped happily in the nearby trees.

I wish I felt so happy, he thought as he dragged himself up the steps. Stop that, he quickly told himself. It won't do Jason any good if you're looking defeated.

He straightened his posture, put rigidity in his spine and firmness in his jaw.

Look the part, he thought, even if you're not sure you're capable of playing it.

Standing before Jason's door, he dropped his case with a groan and looked at his watch. Six-fifteen. Would Jason even be awake? Too bad if he wasn't, because he would be soon.

Stephen knocked. The door opened less than ten seconds later. A shocked look split Jason's face when he saw his father.

"Dad!" he exclaimed. "What... how?"

"I had this feeling you needed to talk to me," Stephen said with a weary smile. Then he collapsed into Jason's arms.

When Stephen awoke, the first thing he saw was a beautiful woman standing over him. He smiled weakly.

"I'm going to assume you're a friend of Jason's," he said. "I'm his father. My name's Stephen."

"Hi. I'm Alex," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Like hell. But that's an improvement."

"You gave us quite a scare," Alex said. "But I'm glad to see you're okay. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Some hot tea would be nice," he said.

"You got it," she answered.

Stephen looked around. He was lying in bed. Jason must have carried me in here, he figured.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"About eight hours," she answered. "Jason's been pretty frantic. He's phoned his work, told them he won't be there today. Now he's in the other room, talking to your doctor."

Stephen frowned. "Damn. Now I'm going to get it from both Jason and Janokowski. I feel like a little boy who did something wrong."

She laughed. "I'll try to keep Jason from lecturing you. Let me go get that tea," she said and started to leave.

"Alex?"

She turned to face him.

"Something awful happened here last night, didn't it?" Stephen said. "Something neither one of you understands."

Her eyes widened and she shivered. Wrapping her arms around her chest, she nodded slowly.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"It sort of runs in the family. After you get that tea, you and Jason come in here. I'll try to explain."

When she was halfway through the door, he spoke again.

"You're a brave woman to stick around," he said.

"I love Jason," she said simply. "What else could I do?"

A few seconds later, Jason raced into the room.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?" he asked. "Do you need a doctor?"

"Easy, easy. Calm down," Stephen said. "I'm fine. Just a little weak. The flight took it out of me."

"Dr. Janokowski is incredibly pissed at you," Jason said. "He said you must have a death wish. He says to keep you in bed even if we have to nail the covers down."

"We don't have that luxury," Stephen said somberly. "You and I have a lot of things to talk about. A lot of ground to cover. Starting with: What happened here last night?"

Jason jumped slightly. "How did you know about that?" he asked in a whisper.

Behind him, Alex entered the room carrying a tray holding a steaming cup of tea, a bowl of sugar, and a slice of lemon. A can of Coke also sat on the tray.

"I didn't know how you liked it so I brought everything, Stephen," she said.

"A dab of sugar and lemon is fine, thank you," Stephen said. He liked this woman already.

Alex handed the Coke to Jason and began to prepare the tea. "Did you tell him about last night?" Jason asked her.

"He already knew," she said.

Jason looked at his father in amazement.

"I'll explain later," Stephen said. "First tell me your story."

Jason started speaking in a numbed monotone, but the horror of it soon crept into his voice. The story chilled Stephen, but didn't surprise him.

As Jason spoke, Stephen noticed Alex stood behind his son, massaging his neck, stroking his hair. They often leaned against each other.

His son was in love again, Stephen thought. How wonderful. And what shitty timing.

"So what does it all mean, Dad?" Jason asked after finishing. "Alex and I stayed up all night talking about it, trying to reach some reasonable conclusion. We couldn't. Nothing was reasonable; nothing made sense. But you know what's going on, don't you? You can explain it, can't you?"

Stephen sighed deeply.

"Yes, I can," he finally said. "But I doubt if the truth will seem any more reasonable or believable."

Stephen looked at Alex.

"You're a strong, courageous woman, Alex," he continued. "Even looking as rough as he does right now, I can tell how much you've helped my son and I'm grateful for it. Because of that, I'm giving you the chance to get out while you can. Whatever you thought happened last night, the truth is worse than anything you've imagined."

Alex's face drained of blood, but she looked into Stephen's eyes as she handed him the tea. They were calm, unjudgmental, but compassionate, too.

"I'm staying. Until the end," she said.

Stephen stared hard at her for a few seconds, then nodded.

He still felt hesitant. Ever since Jason's birth he had dreaded this moment, and here it was, staring him down. But the expressions on Jason's and Alex's faces were strained, drawn tight by worry, fear, and fatigue. They were good kids, Stephen thought. They deserved to know. To have a chance. Dammit all, he had

put it off long enough.

"So tell me, Dad, what the hell's going on?" Jason asked.

Stephen shifted on the bed. The corners of his mouth set into a firm line, then he looked up and smiled humorlessly.

"Basically, Son," he said, "you're a witch."

Chapter 23



"A witch?" Jason said as the Coke supped from his fingers and onto the carpet, releasing a river of foam and fluid. He and Alex just sat there, staring at Stephen, who pulled himself up, reached down and righted the can, putting it on the nightstand.

"Where are your paper towels?" he asked. "We need to clean this up or it'll stain."

"What?" Jason answered blankly.

"Paper towels," Stephen said. "Go get some paper towels or just a plain towel, Jason."

"Oh, oh yeah," Jason said and got up. He wandered into the bathroom and returned with a hand towel. Kneeling, he blotted the mess on the carpet until it was gone. Tossing the towel into the bathroom, he sat back down on the mattress and stared at his father.

"You can't be serious," he said.

"I'm completely serious," Stephen said. "You're a witch. I'm a witch. Most of the men in our family have been witches, or at least the firstborn sons. Technically, we're warlocks since we're men. But the end result is still the same. You have powers that most people don't have and few understand or accept."

Jason's mind sputtered and spit like a badly tuned engine. This just couldn't be. Even with all that occurred last night, he had secretly hoped for some sort of

rational explanation, despite a little part of him that kept saying there was none. But a witch? That was insane. There were no such things as witches. He couldn't accept this. He wouldn't. He felt his face turning a deep, burning crimson.

"Are you shitting me?" he said, his voice rising in pitch. "Are you trying to fuck with me? This is not funny, Dad. If you think it is, then you're sick. I don't need this kind of shit."

He started to stand but Alex gripped his left arm.

"I think you'd better sit down," she said. "Sit down and calm down."

"Why?" he practically screamed at her. "So I can sit and laugh at my father's perverted sense of humor? I needed explanations, not jokes."

"I don't think he's joking," Alex said. "Think about last night. Was that a joke?"

"You believe him?" he asked. "Then you're as fucked up as he is."

"What did you expect?" Alex asked, her anger rising. "Some sort of logical reason for everything? You're the one who's fucked up, not me. Not your father. You're the one who won't accept the truth when it's right in his face. Pace facts, Jason."

"Why are you swallowing all this shit so easily?" he asked. "How can you believe crap like this?"

"I grew up in rural Alabama, remember?" she explained. "For a long time there were spots where electricity didn't reach, and when it did, some of the older folks thought it was just this side of magic. My grandmother was one of those people. She believed wholeheartedly in the devil and his demons, in wood nymphs and ghosts and witchcraft. And I have reason to trust her opinions."

Alex took a deep breath.

"One time when I was staying with her, I heard a low thumping noise in the

middle of the night," she said. "It came from out in the woods behind her house and it was accompanied by what sounded like moaning that rose and fell in volume. It woke me from my sleep and I sat up terrified, absolutely quaking in my sheets. I ran into her bedroom and jumped into bed next to her. She was awake, too, and she hugged me tight against her. I asked her what the noise was. She said not to worry about it, it would go away soon. It did and I fell asleep next to her.

"The next morning she said she wanted to go pick some blackberries in the woods and asked me to come along. We walked through the woods for a while, passing several blackberry bushes without stopping, and came out into a small meadow, one I'd never seen before even though I'd been to her house a hundred times. In the middle of the meadow was a circular grass-covered mound about twelve feet high and thirty feet around.

When I got a little closer to it, I saw the grass around it had been pressed flat, as if a lot of people had trampled it.

"Indians were dancin' here last night, child,' she told me. 'It was their drums you heard.' I couldn't see any footprints, not even in the bare spots, so I said, 'Where are the footprints?' 'These Indians don't leave footprints,' she said. 'They ain't nothin' more than shadows that float above the ground. Been gone from these parts for 'bout a hundred years. 'Cept for that burial mound there. They come out every so often when the moon is right and the stars are lined up.'"

"And you believed her?" Jason asked.

"Totally. I'm not saying I believe every story she told me, but it's not as if I think they're all bullshit, either. Even folklore has some basis in truth. And I'm not so conceited as to think the human race understands all things about this universe."

"She's right, Son," Stephen said calmly. "I didn't come all this way to lie to you. I

didn't think you'd take this well, but it's something you've got to know if you're going to protect yourself."

"The only thing I need to protect myself from is more of your bullshit," Jason said as he stormed toward the door.

Stephen raised his right hand, palm outward, a bright blue glow forming around it. As the glow grew to a blinding intensity, Stephen clenched his fist. The door slammed shut and a flaming yellow corona formed along its outer edges. Sibilant hissing sizzled around the opening. When the light died a few seconds later, the door was gone, only a blank wall remained—except for the doorknob, which stuck out incongruously.

Jason lurched to a halt, his whole body trembling. Then he walked to the wall and wrenched on the doorknob. It wouldn't turn. He yanked on it with all the muscles in both his arms. It wouldn't budge.

Frustrated, he began feeling along the wall, trying to find the edge of the vanished door. Nothing was there. He began pounding on the wall with his fists, leaving indentations where his hands pummeled the Sheetrock. Small puffs of white dust spewed forth each time his fists hit.

"That won't do any good, Jason," his father said. "You'll only end up bruising your hands, or hitting a stud and breaking something. You could bring the door back yourself, you know. You have the power. But you have to calm down first."

Jason slowly turned and faced his father. His face drooped as comprehension finally took hold. How could this be? Why hadn't he known? Why hadn't his father told him?

"Why?" he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Why haven't you told me this before? You've known. You've known ever since I was born, haven't you? If I've got these amazing powers, why did you wait until now? Why didn't you tell me

before, so I could've been prepared."

Fury, confusion, and fear all combined, and Jason erupted, grabbing his father's biceps and squeezing.

"Goddam you to hell, old man!" he almost screamed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Stephen gently pulled his son's hands off his arms. He could already feel the bruises forming. He pushed himself out of the bed and moved toward his son, but Jason backed away from him. Disgust, anger, and hatred were on his face. Stephen stopped. To pursue his son any more was useless.

"You couldn't have saved them," Stephen said. "Even our power cannot raise the dead. Whether or not you knew about it would've made no difference. I said it then and I'll say it now: There was nothing you could do."

"Maybe I would have sensed what was going to happen to them. I might have been able to prevent it," Jason sobbed.

"No, you couldn't," his father said. "We can't see into the future. There are too many variables. Our gift operates in the here and now."

"But why?" Jason asked again. "Why haven't you told me until now?"

Stephen's shoulders slumped as he walked back to the bed and sat down, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. Finally he looked up. Age crept around the corners of his eyes and the edges of his mouth.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," he said. "This power sometimes skips generations. I really didn't know if you had it until now. There'd been some indications, but nothing concrete. Sitting here, with twenty-twenty hindsight, I now realize there were times when it was obvious you had the power. I just didn't want to believe it so I attributed it to something else."

"For instance," Jason said.

"Remember the time you got caught out in the snowstorm? You always wondered how I could've found you so far off the trail and buried under the snow. It wasn't just luck. I felt you, felt your heartbeat, heard your calls for help. I thought it was me, my power reaching out and finding you. Still, I knew it felt different, the energy was not like anything I'd ever experienced before. I figured it was my emotional state making me feel strange. Now I know it was you. I didn't find you; you found me."

"But you're a priest," Alex said. "How can you be a witch, too? Aren't the two on opposite ends of the spectrum?"

"Personally, I don't like the term witch or warlock," Stephen said. "It implies something evil. That's not true. There's nothing evil about the power. You're simply born with it. It's an ability, a genetic trait, like the ability to throw a football one hundred yards or to figure vast sums in your head. You've either got it or you don't. I prefer to see it as a gift of God, a wonderful and powerful gift that can easily be abused, but a gift nonetheless."

"So are you saying that witches and evil don't exist?" Alex asked. "That it's just good people doing bad things?"

"Not at all," Stephen said. "Evil definitely exists because Satan exists. It's his method to make basically good people do evil things, things that make them turn away from God. Misusing this power falls into that category. In that way, people lose faith in themselves, in right and wrong. Eventually they lead to their own downfall, sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Leading someone into misusing this power is one of the things Satan can do.

"As for witches, it's sort of a matter of semantics. To some, the power that I have, that you have, Jason, is horrifying. They don't understand it, so they seek to define it in generalized and inaccurate terms. In that sense witches do exist, but only in the minds of those who don't understand the true nature of the gift."

"How do you know Satan isn't making you think this power is a gift from God?" Jason asked. "All the good you've been doing may have been satanically directed."

"Good point," Stephen said. "One I've thought a lot about. The only answer I have is that I believe in my faith and I believe in the goodness of the lord. The times I've used the gift have all been for righteous and legitimate purposes. I've never used it to further my own wealth or position in life. I've only used it to help others and, in helping those others, I believe I've done the work of God."

"Sounds like massive rationalization to me," Jason said.

"Could be," Stephen said. "But the only way I'll know is when I die and stand before God, or Satan, as the case may be. I believe in the former. Your mother did, too. That's why she stayed. That and her love for me."

Stephen looked at his son. "It was your mother who put in the strongest vote against telling you. She didn't want you to know unless it was necessary."

A faraway expression entered Stephen's eyes.

"She convinced herself it wasn't right up to the very end. Then it was too late."

"Mom knew all about it?" Jason exclaimed.

"Of course she knew," Stephen said. "The same as Alex knows now. My father told me about the gift before he died. But I didn't tell Maureen until after we were married. She wouldn't leave me. She even knew about Moloch, but she wouldn't leave. It would've been so much better if she had."

"Moloch?" Alex said. "You mean the Phoenician god of death? The one who demanded child sacrifices?"

"Precisely," Stephen said, impressed. "That's the name of the creature that attacked you last night. How did you recognize the name?"

"My father was a nut about Egyptology," she said. "That naturally spilled over into the history of the entire Middle East.

"And if I remember right," she continued, "Moloch demanded firstborn sons as the children of sacrifice."

"Exactly," Stephen answered.

"Getting back to the matter at hand," Jason interrupted. "What *is* this Moloch? Where does it come from? Is it really the same god that the Phoenicians worshipped?"

"I doubt it, although I don't really know what he is. He's strong; his powers rival our own. In some ways they're stronger, because he has no mercy, no conscience to rein him in.

"As to where he comes from, my guess is he lives in a parallel world, an alternate universe to use an old *Outer Limits* term. Whatever you want to call them, they're real. It's my opinion that most demons, hobgoblins, and other supernatural creatures come from alternate worlds."

"So where does this Moloch enter into the picture?" Jason asked. "Why does he want to kill me? Why does he hate me?"

"Moloch doesn't hate just you. He hates me, too. He wants to hurt anyone associated with the Medlocke family," Stephen said.

"Why?"

"Because for almost five hundred years, the Medlockes have kept him from establishing a foothold in this world. Once he did, it would only be a matter of time before he would be powerful enough to start bringing over more of his kind."

"You mean he wants to rule the world?" Alex said. "Isn't that a bit of an outdated, grade B movie concept?"

"Ask Hussein," Stephen said. "If Khomeini, Hitler, Napoleon, and the Roman emperors were still alive you could ask them."

"Why did we get the job of keeping Moloch out of this world?" Jason said.

"Because we're the ones that brought him here in the first place."

Stephen cleared his throat.

"It goes something like this," he said.

Chapter 24



Glendon Medlocke fell backward onto the dirt floor of the blacksmith shed, exhausted by his efforts. For a few moments after he opened them, his eyes were foggy and unfocused as his strength regenerated. When his sight returned, he looked at the forge and his mouth dropped open.

Reaching easily to the ceiling, a huge, blood-red chrysalis stood in the middle of the forge. Glendon watched in amazement as the chrysalis expanded and contracted like a living lung. Then with a meaty ripping sound, four fingers pushed through the pulsating skin, each finger topped by double-bladed nails with glinting, sharpened edges.

A beast from nightmares stepped out, standing directly on the red-hot coals, but apparently unfazed by the heat. Tall, dusky gold skin rippled with muscle as the creature looked about. Huge fists clenched and unclenched. Bright eyes squinted with anger and amazement, and its large, elongated head scanned the strange creature sitting before it.

A quiver ran through the creature's body and it rubbed its arms, legs, and torso, a grimace of pain on its mouth. Dozens of needle teeth sprang into view.

Then the beast spoke.

"*Aridiach carchron bynidria?*" it said in a guttural hiss. The words sounded like a question, but Glendon didn't understand.

The beast repeated the same phrase. Glendon shook his head.

Its brow furrowed and its throat growling low, the beast leapt off the forge and stalked toward Glendon. As the beast's fingers touched him, a blue aura sprang up around Glendon and the smell of charred flesh filled the shed. The beast howled in pain and backed away, shaking its hands.

Caught in amazement, Glendon still managed to clamber to his feet and flee backward into the shadows. Just as he disappeared in the darkness, the front door to the shed was kicked open.

Three soldiers burst into the shed, swords and pikes ready. They took only a few steps before confronting the beast inside. Their faces went slack and their weapons drooped useless in numb hands.

"What are you stopping for?" bellowed a voice from outside. "Kill him! Kill him!"

William Morven strode into the shed, chest thrust out, a sneer on his face. Shoving his way through his men, he fumed: "Where is Medlocke? Is he not here? I heard someone scream. He must be in..."

His voice trailed off as his eyes fell on the beast. He tumbled against the wall and small choking noises emerged from his throat.

Before the soldiers could react, the beast grabbed the nearest, driving its fingernails into the man's temples until its fingertips rested on his skull. The man screamed, while blood gushed down the creature's fingers, drenching its arms until the liquid threatened to drip off at the elbow. Before one drop could fall, though, the creature's skin became spongelike, absorbing the blood, wasting none.

The creature stared intently into its victim's eyes as a greenish glow enveloped the pair. The glow lasted for several seconds, then disappeared. As the light

faded, the beast tossed the man into the corner where he lay limply, a used-up washrag.

The creature turned to face the rest of the men.

"Ah, that's better," it said. "Now I can speak your language."

It looked around the shed.

"Where am I? What world is this?" it asked. "Why does my skin burn as if it had been dipped in liquid hellfire? I don't like it."

The beast held up its hands before its face. Crimson wetness still covered them until it was sucked through the skin.

"How interesting," it said. "The fluid from your bodies alleviates my pain."

It eyed the soldiers a few feet away. One had fainted, the other stood paralyzed by terror. The beast eyed them, then the blood on its hands. It smiled and grabbed the conscious soldier, clutching him by the throat. Spying the row of tools hanging from nails in the overhead rafters, it plucked out several nails with its left hand. Tools fell to the floor with dusty thuds, but the beast ignored them.

Carrying the soldier to the nearest wall, the creature moved its hand from the man's neck to his right wrist. "Open your hand and press the back to the wall," the beast said.

The man did as he was told and the beast's left hand slammed down, thrusting a nail through the man's palm and pinning him to the wall. The same was done to his left hand then the beast stood back to admire his crucifixion.

"I don't think you'll be going anywhere," it said and bent to lift the unconscious soldier.

Holding the man's head between its hands, the beast wrenched quickly to the right. The head snapped off as blood spurted from the stump of the neck and the

body crumpled to the floor. The beast casually tossed the head away and hoisted the body, holding it so the neck pointed in its direction. For several seconds, the man's heart continued to beat, pumping flumes of scarlet onto the beast, which sighed in pleasure as its skin soaked up the fluid.

Disconnected from the brain, the heart soon quit pumping, long before the body was drained. The beast stared in confusion at the body and shook it like a baby trying to get the last drop out of a bottle. When no blood came forth, it dropped the body to the ground.

"Apparently I need to keep the head connected to the body for a bit longer," it said. "Well, one lives and learns."

Three feet from the door, hidden in shadows, Morven squatted like a statue. His pants were wet from his emptied bladder and the seat of his pants was full. He knew his mind was close to snapping and if he were to escape it must be soon. Stars twinkling in the velvet sky beckoned outside, symbols of freedom if only they could be reached. One hand in front of the other, he crawled a foot, then two. His right hand went through the open doorway, then his left. As the rest of his body entered the doorway, the light spilled across him.

"Here, here," he heard a guttural voice say. "What's this? Trying to leave so soon? Before all my questions are answered?"

Like a striking cobra, the beast's right arm snapped out and grabbed Morven by the right leg. Whipping its arm upward, the creature slung Morven through the air like a rag doll. His neck landed in the left hand of the beast, which raised him above its head, flattening his back against the shed's roof.

"Please, please," Morven whimpered. "I'll answer any question you want. Tell you anything you want."

"I know you will," the beast said. "Let's start with something easy. What world

am I in?"

"You're in Scotland," Morven stammered.

"Scotland? Is that the name of the entire world?"

"No, no, Scotland is a country," Morven said. "A part of the world. We call this world Earth."

"Earth," the beast said. "Ah yes, I have heard of it. Others from my world have been here before. But it has been a long time."

It looked at Morven. "Is your race the main inhabitant of this Earth?"

"Yes, we rule the planet," Morven said.

"A weak race to rule an entire planet," the beast said. "But it is obvious you have knowledge of the power."

Morven shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"The power, fool," the creature said. "The ability to bring me here from my world."

"No, not all of us have it. It was him," Morven cried, pointing into the shadows behind the creature. "It was Medlocke who brought you here."

The creature turned around, still holding Morven above him. "You are Medlocke?"

"I am Glendon Medlocke," Glendon said, stepping into the reddish light of the forge.

The beast was worse than anything Glendon dared imagine. An inhuman, amoral demon. Was he capable of controlling such a devil? Whatever he did, he knew weakness was something he must not reveal.

"What are you called?" he asked.

"Hmmm, that is a good question," the creature said. "I am known by many

names, but I will use the one that others of my race have been called when they visited this world. Call me Moloch."

"Well, Moloch, I am the one who controls you," Glendon said. "It is my orders that you will obey."

A high-pitched cackle erupted from Moloch.

"Control? Obey?" it said. "Strong words for such a little man. You do not control me. I take no orders from you. If anything, it is the other way around. If you are the only one capable of bringing me here, then this is a weak world indeed. I think I'll stay."

"Yes, yes, stay, and I can help you," Morven cried.

Moloch glanced upward.

"Why should I need your help?" it asked.

"This is a strange world, with strange customs," Morven said. "You will need a guide. I can be that guide. I can teach you the ways of our world."

"Are you a man of power? Of status?" Moloch asked.

"Yes, yes, I am. I have both and I can give them to you."

"If a weak, sniveling worm like you is evidence of the power in this world, then I'll need no guide. What I need is your blood."

With a flick of its left wrist, Moloch's fingernails slit cleanly through Morven's throat, shredding the windpipe and the major arteries of the neck. Morven gurgled as his life gushed from his body. Moloch stepped under the river, letting it wash down over its head and shoulders. It opened its mouth to let the liquid flow down its throat.

"That feels much better," it said when Morven's body was drained. Then it faced Glendon.

"So, you control me, Glendon Medlocke?" it asked sarcastically. "And what exactly am I supposed to do, master?"

Glendon looked at Morven's white-skinned body. A wave of nausea crashed over him. There was no feeling of victory, no feeling of vindication, only a sickness in his heart that would never completely disappear. A part of him had been ripped out and now lay on the floor with Morven.

"You've already done it," Glendon said.

Moloch glanced at Morven. "Oh, a little vengeance in your heart?" it said. "Perhaps there is hope for your paltry race after all."

Glendon looked at Moloch with a stern stare.

"I see now I was wrong to ever have called on you," he said. "It was a grave mistake. My soul may already be damned, but I command you to return to wherever it is you belong."

"I don't think so," Moloch said, smearing the blood over its body. "It seems to me that this world is ripe for harvesting. My world is dying. All that could be done has been done long ago. I seek new adventures. Your world offers them.

"You, however, are a problem. Since you have the power, it would be foolish of me to let you live. You would undoubtedly become an adversary. But I promise to make your death quick and merciful."

"I think you will find it harder to kill me than you expect," Glendon said, although he felt none of the confidence his voice contained.

"We shall see," Moloch said.

Its left hand whipped up, the index finger aimed at Glendon, and a green flash shot from the fingertip. Glendon knew time was too short to prevent it from striking. He closed his eyes, prepared to receive a death blow.

It never came.

He felt a jarring thud and opened his eyes. The blue aura enveloped him. Instinct had taken over, rejecting the creature's assault.

"Very good," Moloch sneered. "You aren't just a lamb waiting to be slaughtered. But you're still too weak to defeat me. I don't need my power. I can kill you with my bare hands."

Moloch took a step forward, its toes landing with a squish in the blood-drenched mud. Glendon searched desperately within himself for the power to repel the attack, but couldn't channel his thoughts. He was too unfamiliar with the breadth of his powers and there was no time to learn.

His eyes flickered frantically around the shed and landed on the handle of the M-shaped brand still sticking a few inches above the lip of the forge. Glendon leapt for it, grabbing the iron without considering the possibility that he might brand himself. But when his hand wrapped around the metal and pulled it from the forge in a shower of sparks and coals, he felt no pain. The halo once again protected him.

Holding the brand like a sword, he stood his ground as Moloch advanced.

"You expect to kill me with a metal stick?" Moloch asked. "Give that to me before you hurt yourself."

Glendon sprang forward, shoving the head of the brand into left side of Moloch's face with all the force he could muster. A blistering hiss arose and smoke poured from the beast's flesh. The creature roared in pain and wrenched the brand from Glendon's hand, slinging it across the shed. With a horrible chucking sound, it speared the soldier crucified to the wall, piercing his heart, and emerged dripping on the outside wall of the shed.

The beast paid no mind and instead gingerly touched the bubbling wound on its

face. When it looked at Glendon, a hideous grimace split its face.

"You'll pay for that," it said quietly. "No longer will your death be quick. I will kill you slowly, tearing off one limb at a time, bathing in your blood and listening to you beg for mercy."

Glendon retreated around the forge, keeping it between him and the beast. If only I can get to the door, I can escape and have time to think. I can get away into the night and...

"Papa?" a sleepy voice said from the doorway. "What're you doing?"

Glendon spun around in horror. Cameron stood there, rubbing his eyes with the knuckles of his fists.

"Are you all right, Papa?" the boy asked.

Glendon turned to face the beast, which stopped its attack. A smile cut across its face.

"A little one," it said silkily. "Yours, I presume? How delightful. I love children."

"Stay away from him," Glendon warned.

"Oh, I do believe you sound serious," Moloch answered. "How paternal."

"Papa? Am I dreaming?" Cameron asked from the doorway. "Who is that strange person you're talking to?"

"Yes, you're dreaming," Glendon said. "Go back to bed. Everything will be all right in the morning. I'll explain it to you then."

"No, stay little boy," Moloch said. "Come here, I want to tell you a secret."

Raising its arms in a friendly, inviting manner, the creature slowly walked toward Cameron.

"It's a good secret. Don't you want to hear?" it asked.

Cameron's eyes widened in fear and he ran to his father's side, hugging his leg

with fierce tightness.

When Moloch took its first steps toward Cameron,

Glendon expected absolute terror to fill his heart. With the death of Adeleen, his son was all he had left, his only reason for living. And the boy was about to be torn from this world by a creature from another.

Instead of fear, however, Glendon found only white-hot fury blazing in his heart, an anger so heavy and intense he thought his bones would break. Deep inside, he felt the fire burning out of control. A tingling ripped through his body.

No one was going to harm his son. Ever. By God or by Satan, he would spill every last drop of blood from any man or beast who tried. The corona flared with a phosphorescent light, fed by the power of his conviction.

"Stay away from him," he said and pushed Cameron behind him. "I warn you. Come no closer or I'll destroy you. I'll send you back in tiny pieces to whatever hellish bog you crawled from. Leave this world and live. Stay and I'll rend you limb from limb."

Something in Glendon's voice made Moloch stop. It looked intently at him, studying him, sizing him up. A momentary expression of hesitation crossed its face. Then it sneered.

"Merely talk," it said. "If you could've destroyed me, you would have. I think you're nothing but a charlatan and a buffoon. You may have the power, but you have no idea how to use it. I, on the other hand, have spent a lifetime with it."

A shimmering green light burst forth around Moloch, turning the interior of the shed a sickening shade of putrescence. Even the beast's eyes turned a virulent shade of green.

"Watch and grow wise," it said.

Turning around, Moloch cupped both hands and scooped them deep into the forge, scattering red-hot coals along the earthen floor. Coals filled both palms as it clasped its hands together into a single fist. Red light spilled from between its fingers and mixed with the green nimbus surrounding its body, making its fists look like the heart of a diseased animal.

For several seconds it stood there, tensing and untensing its hands, like a sculptor molding clay. Glendon stood in rapt attention, his left hand trailing back to rest on Cameron's shoulder. The boy stood frozen, peering around his father's waist. Moloch finally looked up and smiled, teeth glittering in the reddish-green light. From inside its hands came strange clicking noises mixed with a whirring buzz. "Look at my lovely creation," it said, opening its hands into a bowl.

Glendon gasped and moved backward. In the process, he bumped into Cameron, almost knocking the boy down.

A huge scorpion rested in the center of Moloch's palms. Mostly red, but flecked with iridescent specks of green, the arachnid was almost a foot long, longer if the segmented tail was included. Its eight legs twitched with evil energy and venom dripped from the inch-long stinger bobbing and darting on the tail's end. Its multiple eyes glowed with almost conscious intelligence and two monstrous pincers clicked with deadly intent.

Adding to the horror were two dragonfly-like wings jutting from the middle of the scorpion's torso. They buzzed as the scorpion tested their strength.

"Even in my world, these are considered dangerous," Moloch said. "Let's see what it can do here. I think your son will make an interesting experiment."

"You'll have to get through me," Glendon said.

"I don't think so," Moloch answered.

Raising its right leg, the creature brought its foot down on the shed floor with a

force that rattled the tools on the walls. A deep rumbling shook the rafters, sending cascades of dust falling in dry waterfalls. Holding tightly onto Cameron to keep them both from falling, Glendon thought his teeth were going to vibrate out of his jaw.

From the tip of Moloch's toe, a small crack split the ground, rifling toward Glendon. So, the beast plans to drop me into some hellhound crevice, Glendon thought. He tensed the muscles in his leg and tightened his grip on Cameron, planning to leap to safety when the crack opened beneath them. But when it reached them, the crack stopped. Glendon looked down in puzzlement. The split was no more than two inches wide. What did Moloch have in mind?

The rumbling of the ground became an earthquake. The shed rattled and began to fall apart, unable to handle the stress of the shifting earth. Tools clattered to the ground, their nails shaken from the posts in which they were hammered. The forge began to split in several places. Coals spilled out in smoking mounds.

With a violent rending, the two-inch crack at Glendon's feet broke wide open. Glendon thought he heard the earth moan in pain. Before he could think again, the crack became a three-foot hole with Glendon's toes resting on the outer edge. He tried to back away, but the edges crumbled underneath his feet. Unable to stop his fall, he shoved Cameron to safety and, grasping at the air, plunged into the hole.

"Papa!" Cameron screamed.

Desperately, Glendon flipped around, his hands shooting out to grab the lip of the chasm. His wrists popped as they took the full weight of his body, and his chest slammed into the wall, knocking the wind out of him. He groaned in pain, but was able to pull himself halfway out of the hole, resting his upper body on the ground.

Cameron rushed to his father, falling to his knees on the edge of the hole. "Papa! Papa!" he cried.

"Cameron, get out of here," Glendon sputtered, using what little breath he had recovered. "Run away."

"No, Papa," the boy said. "I won't leave you."

"Such loyalty is touching," Moloch sneered. "But I'm afraid you should have listened to your father, boy."

Moloch tossed the scorpion into the air. Its wings buzzed into activity and the scorpion sped around the shed in circles, picking up speed.

"The boy," Moloch said.

The scorpion turned in mid-flight and hovered for a moment, its pincers clicking in anticipation and its tail whipping back and forth in a blood frenzy.

Then it attacked.

On his knees, Cameron sat unmoving, his eyes wide and his fists jammed into his mouth. The scorpion was coming straight for him, its stinger aimed at his head.

Glendon's right hand shot upward at the last second. The scorpion slammed into his open palm with a force that broke several bones in his hand. Prevented from hitting its target, the beast buzzed its wings angrily. Enraged, it clamped its pincers down on Glendon's index and little fingers. Blood flowed from the bone-deep cuts. Latched on firmly, the scorpion raised its tail and plunged the stinger deeply into the flesh of Glendon's wrist.

The pain tore through him like a red-hot nail. He could feel the venom pumping into the wound and had no doubt that it would reach his heart within seconds.

Cameron would be next. His boy would die.

Anger once again flared within him. No! Cameron will not be killed! Glendon felt his blood boiling and an image formed in his mind. He saw the venom in his veins pumping back into the scorpion, along with a surprise of his own.

Despite the pain in his wrist, he clutched the scorpion tightly, visualizing his desire. The aura around him brightened in intensity. The beast in his hand began to jerk and shudder, but Glendon held fast. The creature's pincers released his fingers and began snapping shut on empty air. The tail lashed about, stinging Glendon's hand and arm again and again but to no avail. From the scorpion's eyes, a blue-white light began to glow. The segmented body began to swell, its plates splitting with pops like broken tree limbs. Glendon's fingers were forced apart as the beast grew in size. Just when he thought his hand couldn't hold it anymore, the scorpion exploded, raining gore into his face.

Wiping the remains of the scorpion on the dirt, Glendon pulled himself over the edge of the chasm, his shoulders bucking with the effort. He rolled himself onto his back and sat up, breathing heavily. The cobalt aura slowly faded.

"Well, well," Moloch said. "You're right. I did underestimate you. You have a certain, how should I say it—stubbornness—that I admire. But I tire of playing. If my powers won't kill you, perhaps something more concrete will. My guess is that you're too tired to do much about it one way or another."

Bending down, Moloch pulled a twenty-pound hammer out of the dirt. It beat the head of the tool in the palm of its right hand a few times, testing its killing power.

"Yes, that will do," it said and moved along the side of the crevice toward Glendon.

It's right, Glendon thought. I am too tired to do anything about it. My arms feel like leaden weights and my legs are like willow limbs. I can't concentrate. I can't even raise the protective aura.

Cameron threw his arms around his father, holding his tiny cheek next to his father's beard.

"Papa, do something," he cried. "It's going to hurt you."

"Stand aside, boy," Moloch said. "Your turn is coming soon enough."

Moloch raised the hammer above its head, the muscles in its arm rippling with the weight. Glendon had no doubt it could kill with one blow. He refused to close his eyes, however. By God, if he was to die, he would die defiant.

"No, you stay away from my papa," Cameron cried, standing up. "Don't you try to hurt him."

The little boy jumped between Moloch and his father. A wave of nausea and pride enveloped Glendon. He tried to pull Cameron out of harm's way, but when he lifted his arms off the ground, he tumbled backward like a bag of barley. Oh dear God, he cried to himself, let him die quickly and painlessly. This time, he did close his eyes.

From the blackness behind his eyelids, he heard a scream. Yet it wasn't the high-pitched scream of a little boy. It was a scream of pain. And it was from Moloch. Glendon opened his eyes and saw a miracle.

Moloch was standing in the shed, swatting at what looked like a thousand tiny blue-white fireflies swirling about its body. They were stinging the beast, over and over. They covered its eyes, its torso, its legs and arms. Each time it swatted a hundred away, a thousand more took their place. Thousands of bloody knots were forming on its body.

But where are they coming from, Glendon thought. Who... ?

He looked at Cameron. A blue-white halo surrounded the boy, who stood inside with a look of sheer hatred on his face, a look directed at Moloch. From inside the aura, thousands of fireflies emerged each second, winged vengeance from his

son's nest.

"Bastard child," Moloch screamed. "I shall kill you and eat your heart. I shall rip your eyes out and shove them down your throat."

Cameron didn't hear. His eyes were fixed on Moloch and a smile creased his childish face.

My God, Glendon realized. He's enjoying this.

Glendon crawled to his son and clasped his arms around the boy's waist. The boy didn't seem to notice. His full attention was on Moloch.

Now is the only chance I'll get, Glendon thought.

He pulled his son close to him, closing his eyes and clearing his mind. He pictured the two of them together, one body, one mind, one purpose. With a rush that took Glendon's breath away, he felt his son enter his body, a glowing, exuberant mass of unbounded energy. Glendon's heart raced with unfettered joy. He and his son were one, now and forever. Even after they parted, they would still be one; nothing could remove this feeling.

There was no time to revel in the pleasure.

Cameron, Glendon said without speaking.

Yes, Papa.

Do you know what we must do?

We must get rid of this awful beastman.

That's right. Do you know how?

No. But you'll tell me.

Concentrate on making it disappear. In your mind, watch it fade away like smoke in the breeze. You must concentrate very hard. Can you do that?

Yes, Papa.

Together, their minds joined and attacked. The fireflies disappeared, leaving Moloch free for a moment. Grabbing the hammer, it started toward the pair, but only managed two steps before it crashed to its knees.

"Nooooooooo," it screamed. "You can't. I won't let you."

It flung the hammer, but the tool bounced harmlessly off the corona surrounding Glendon and his son. As the hammer tumbled into a far corner, Moloch began to dissipate. First its arms became transparent, then its legs, then its torso, and finally its head. The last thing to fade from view was a pair of flaming silver eyes and a glowing M-shaped scar.

"Medlocke, you are not rid of me," came a rapidly fading voice. "I'll have you dead. And if not you, then your son. Or his son. I shall not rest. If it takes eons, I shall not rest until I bathe in your blood."

Then it was gone.

Chapter 25



Stephen sat back and looked at his watch. The story of Glendon had taken almost two hours. Detailing Moloch's visit to his bedroom a few weeks before took another thirty minutes. His jaws ached.

He glanced at Jason and Alex, still sitting next to each other on the edge of the bed. Their hands languished in their laps and their faces looked as if they were fighting severe bouts of indigestion.

No doubt it was tough to digest, Stephen thought. Like swallowing a nuclear bomb. One explosion and wham! your whole world was gone and another—one that was a helluva lot more dangerous—was in its place. But to let Jason go on uninformed was even more dangerous. Stephen wanted desperately to protect his son, but it seemed the best protection was to throw him into the wide-open truth. If you were blind, walking into a pit of snakes wouldn't scare you, at least until the first one bit and you didn't know what it was.

Stephen shrugged inwardly. Everywhere he turned things sucked.

"Any questions?" he asked.

Alex said nothing, but her face told a story of confusion and awe. Jason's expression traveled from perplexed to blank to stunned. He opened his mouth to speak, but uncertainty brushed across his eyes and no words came out.

"That's the most fantastic, unbelievable story I've ever heard," he finally croaked.

"I don't know. I just don't know what to believe."

"Believe it," Stephen said. "It's all true. What happened here last night should be all the proof you need. But if you need more, just look at where your door used to be."

Jason looked at the doorknob sticking out of the blank wall. Behind him, Stephen made a quick sweeping gesture with his left hand. With a hiss and a quick, cobalt flash, the door reappeared.

Jason shook his head. It was all too much. He felt his hands moving fitfully from his knees to his face to his chest, touching, resting only for a moment before darting somewhere else. He felt them, but was unable to control them.

"So what now?" Alex asked.

"Now comes the hard part," Stephen said. "I have to train you, Jason, as fast and as thoroughly as I can. You have power. Judging from what you told me about last night, you have as much or more than anyone I've ever heard of in our family. But it's undirected, unfocused. You don't have any idea how to use it.

"Last night was pure instinct. That will only get you so far. You need to harness your power so you can plan strategies. Moloch is well aware of your limitations and it will plan its attack around them."

"How much time do you need?" Alex asked.

"A lifetime," Stephen sighed. "But I figure we've got a few days. After the licking you gave Moloch last night, it's probably conserving its power for a while. We need to start as soon as possible."

After some discussion, it was decided that Alex would go to her parents' house in Montgomery to keep her out of harm's way. Stephen surmised that Moloch would concentrate more on him and Jason, as long as Alex was out of the picture. He and Jason would need someplace secluded, Stephen said, and Jason

immediately thought of Badger's cabin on Lake Altoona. He called police headquarters. Badger answered.

"Hey, bud," Badger said. "Your dad okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine, just resting," Jason now said. "Listen, pal, some important business... family business... has come up and I need a favor."

"Fire away."

"Can I borrow your cabin for a few days? Dad and I have some things we need to discuss and we need peace and quiet. It's really important. That's why he came down so suddenly."

"Well, yeah, sure. It's yours for as long as you want," Badger said, hesitation in his voice.

"What's the matter?" Jason asked. "You seem unsure."

"Have you cleared this with Silverman?" Badger asked.

"Not yet, I figured I'd talk to him after I got off the phone with you."

Jason paused.

"But that's not what's really bothering you, is it?" he asked. "C'mon, Badge. What is it?"

Badger was silent for a moment before speaking. "I don't know, Jazz," he said.

"This investigation is real hairy. You know that. Everybody and his brother is breathing down our necks, demanding a suspect. Newspapers and TV want daily updates. Residents are calling just to find out what we know. And the politicians around here are getting really antsy. You know Quintard would just love to nail our asses to the wall. He's already making a lot of huffing and puffing noises. I got a feeling he's wearing something up his sleeve, and whatever it is, I know it won't be good for us."

Badger took a sip of something. Jason assumed it was coffee.

"And the nuts are starting to crawl out of the woodwork to confess," Badger continued. "I know it only takes a couple of seconds or a little research to knock holes in their stories, but it's just one more piece of shit to deal with. I don't know, Jazz. Now seems to be kind of a bad time to take a break. It's getting to be almost like a witch-hunt around here."

Jason's eyes widened at Badger's choice of words, then he relaxed. No need to get upset. His friend was understandably nervous and just letting off a little steam. Jason knew that Badger wanted to solve these murders as badly as anyone. Hell, if he called me and told me he was splitting for a couple of days, I'd feel as if I were being left all alone and lonely, too. He smiled.

"I know, pal," he said. "Believe me, I'm feeling the stress, too. I'm sorry about this. I know you must be feeling kind of abandoned, left out in the cold. But you know I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't completely necessary. And it is. Really. There's nothing going on with the investigations right now. All the trails are ice cold. And what I'm going to do with my father is no picnic. This isn't a fishing trip, or a chance to kick back. I've got some ... some serious family problems to hash out. Really serious shit."

"Anything I can do?" Badger asked. The sincere tone of concern in his friend's voice gave Jason a twinge.

Badger deserved to know the truth. God knows he had been there plenty of times in the past when things got rough. But Jason knew this was rougher than anyone could imagine, and anyone associated with him stood a good chance of getting killed. Leaving Badger out of the picture was unfair and ungrateful, but it might also save his life.

Until I'm better acclimated to the truth myself, I don't think I should drag Badger

into it, Jason decided.

"Naw, man, there's nothing you can do," he said into the phone. "I'll tell you all about it when I get back. And listen, if anything breaks on the Mercy Killings, you call me immediately, okay? How about transferring me to Silverman?"

After a few questions, Silverman gave his permission, saying he understood family problems, having come from a crew of five brothers and three sisters.

"Besides, you're getting pretty crispy around the edges from this investigation," he said. "A few days off might loosen you up."

Knowing what he was heading into, Jason didn't think he'd come back any less crispy.

Jason packed quickly and in fifteen minutes he and his father were climbing into the car. After his father settled into the car, Jason hugged Alex tightly and kissed her deeply.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear.

"Love you, top," she said.

He hugged and kissed her again and got into the car, waving to her in his rearview mirror as they pulled away.

"She's a fine girl," Stephen said.

"I know."

Jason and Stephen drove in silence for a few minutes, both lost in the enormity of their thoughts. Jason thought about all that had happened to him in the past two years, how his life had turned one hundred eighty degrees away from where he was just before Sarah and Claire died. It was a new life and a new world and he wasn't sure just how much he liked it.

And these powers of his, these awful, fascinating powers. They were so foreign,

so frightening, and yet... they excited him. All these years he was capable of so much, yet was totally unaware of it. It opened a door he hadn't even known was there. Trouble was, a lot of what lay on the other side he'd rather not know existed.

What about the power itself? Where did it come from? Was it evil? He'd never thought much about God or the devil, but if they existed, which one was in charge of people like him and his dad?

Damn, you could go crazy tossing those questions back and forth in a game of spiritual badminton, he thought. Think philosophy later. It was better to just accept the fact that he had the power and learn to use it. If he lived, there was more than enough time to figure out whether he was good or bad. If he died, it didn't mean shit anyway.

Jason took the U.S. 41 exit off I-285 and headed north, away from Atlanta, toward Marietta and beyond that to Acworth and Lake Altoona. After a few miles, they passed the Big Chicken on 41 North. His father got a big kick out of the thirty-foot-tall white-and-red chicken that used to advertise Kentucky Fried and now, with the Kentucky Fried gone, just sat there because it had become an institution.

"If I were a hen, I'd hate to see that big boy coming at me with romance in his eyes," Stephen said.

As the laughter subsided, Jason became serious when a question suddenly occurred to him.

"Dad," he said, "could I use the power to find the killer of these children?"

Stephen sat silently for a moment, pondering the question. He finally shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess it's possible. But probably not in a concrete, no-

doubt-about-it fashion. The power allows you to feel deep emotions of people closest to you, and sometimes that ability spills over into those around you. I suppose if the killer was in the same vicinity, you might pick up something. But I think it's a long shot and I certainly wouldn't depend on it to solve the murders."

They stopped at the Big Star in Acworth and picked up a few supplies, then left civilization behind. The drive to Badger's cabin led through heavily wooded areas where the asphalt road seemed to squeeze between the trees rather than carve a path through them. Eventually, the pavement turned to dirt. They drove by a few cabins and trailers sitting here and there by the edge of the lake, but these quickly petered out and nothing was left but woods. Silent, heavy, and lonely.

"This is plenty secluded," Stephen said.

A black mailbox marked the entrance to Badger's cabin, and Jason pulled the car into a long, rambling dirt driveway that was hardly more than a goat path.

Branches slapped against the car windows as Jason eased down the driveway.

The path suddenly ended in a wide, open area, the middle of which was filled by the cabin, a concrete block rectangle painted gray.

After Jason found the key in the oak tree knothole—being scared nearly shitless when a chipmunk darted out of the hole just as he was putting his hand into it—he and Stephen unloaded the suitcases and went inside.

The interior consisted of one great room. Against the far, short wall were two single beds with a nightstand between them. Jason threw his bags on the dining room table, which sat a few feet from the foot of the beds. Stephen wandered over to the living room area, tucked into a corner to the right of the beds. He dropped his suitcases on one of two well-worn couches, early American in design. In between the sofas was a chipped wooden coffee table marred by dozens of water rings.

"Nice and cozy," Stephen said. "All the conveniences of home."

"It's good and quiet, too," Jason said. "I've yet to meet any of the neighbors and I've probably been up here twenty-five times."

They put their clothes into the two pine chests of drawers, got themselves a couple of Cokes and went onto the sun deck. Bracing their hands on the rail, they leaned forward and breathed the lake-sweetened air. The cabin was nestled into a small, secluded cove, and speedboats rarely plowed through, dirtying the water and the air with exhaust fumes. Jason explained that about the only boats that ever came in belonged to early morning fishermen who chugged in and out with barely a sound.

"I could learn to live like this," Stephen said. "This is just as beautiful as the Massachusetts shoreline or the Green Mountains."

"Glad you approve," Jason said, patting his father on the back.

Stephen took a long swig of Coke, and cleared his throat. "Son, I have a couple of things I need to tell you about Moloch. About some of the things it's done, things it's capable of doing."

"Like what?"

"It was Moloch that killed your mother," Stephen said.

Jason sat unspeaking while he absorbed this new information. Everywhere he turned, Moloch was there. Every part of his life seemed affected in some way by the creature.

"How?" he finally said. "You always told me she died in a fall off Backbone Ridge. You said she slipped in the dark while walking up there."

"That part's true," Stephen said. "But I never told you why she was up there in the first place."

Stephen paused, drawing in a long, shuddering breath.

"It attacked one night when I was the only one home," he said. "Your mother was in Boston shopping and all you kids were away at summer camp. Moloch and I went round and round for almost two hours. Almost destroyed the house."

Stephen paused and smiled grimly. "I guess I lied to you about never using my powers for my own behalf," he said. "I used them later to repair the house."

"What about Mom?" Jason pressed.

"Well, Moloch was beaten and it knew it. I was just about to send it back to its world when Maureen came through the front door. It grabbed her and ran into the woods. I followed, just as it wanted."

"It ran into the woods and up to Backbone Ridge and was waiting for me up there—with her. It was pitch-black. All I could see was the green glow Moloch puts out when it's fighting. It was standing there with one of its fingernails pressed to her throat.

"I managed to knock it back enough for Maureen to wriggle out of its arms, but being unfamiliar with the terrain, she ran off Backbone Ridge."

"What happened between you and Moloch?" Jason asked.

"I really don't know," Stephen said, taking another sip of Coke. "When I saw her fall off the cliff, I remember hatred of unimaginable magnitude building within me. I wanted to see Moloch shatter into a million pieces. I remember thinking that very thought, then everything flashed blue and I went blank. I woke up the next morning, lying on the edge of Backbone Ridge. It must have been a helluva battle. Trees were snapped in two, the earth was scorched. Even a few of the big granite rocks that have been on that mountain for millions of years were just gravel. But Moloch was gone."

Stephen took another mouthful of Coke and Jason did the same. They stared out

at the lake, neither speaking, until Stephen cleared his throat again.

"Jason, there's something else you should know. Something I wasn't even sure of until just recently."

He put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Moloch killed Sarah and Claire," he said. "It told me when it came to my room a few weeks ago."

Jason felt his body stiffen. Emotions poured through him like quicksilver—pain mixed with hatred, fury combined with sadness. He wanted to reach in and tear his heart out, anything to stop the pain. As the maelstrom of emotions subsided, one remained. Hate. Jason felt an electric tingling coursing through his cells; power of unbelievable strength and unquenchable thirst welled up inside him. Stephen's eyes widened as a golden aura enveloped his son. Golden. My God, I've never seen golden, never even heard of it, he thought. It meant something, something important.

Stephen knew his aura was blue. He'd always assumed—somewhat conceitedly—that blue meant purity of spirit. Moloch's aura was a diseased shade of green. The inborn evil of the creature left no doubt about the meaning of that color. But gold. Iridescent, near-blinding gold. The possibilities boggled the mind.

And also were a little frightening.

"Jason, Jason," Stephen said. "Relax. Calm down. Save that energy for later. You're going to need it."

Jason turned his head toward his father. Stephen took a step back in momentary surprise. His son's eyes were gone, replaced by a shimmering incandescence, the flash of ultimate power mixed with intense anger. Jason's face was granite, a stony look of fury carved into his skin. Instinctively, Stephen reached out for his son, but the golden halo prevented him from touching him.

"Jason," he said in a loud voice. "It's me. It's Dad. Jason, come out of it. Let it

go."

Jason blinked and the light began to fade. The burning glow left his eyes and the aura dissipated. Jason leaned heavily on the deck rail. He was breathing hard and sweat dripped down his temples. He turned his head and looked at his father.

"Dad, can I be taught to use that, to direct it?" he asked. "Or is it too late?"

"It's never too late, Son," Stephen said. "Even though I knew more than you, I didn't realize what I was capable of until Moloch killed Maureen."

"Does that mean somebody I love has to die before I'll know what I'm capable of?" Jason asked.

"No, I'm going to try to make sure you know enough to prevent that from happening," Stephen said. "And I'll be here every step. If he goes for you, he'll have to go through me first."

Jason tried to smile, but couldn't. He didn't like the connotations of that last statement. If Moloch got through his dad, what chance did he have?

Chapter 26



Frog Webster took a deep drag on the cigarette then stubbed it out against a tree. He blew the smoke in twin columns from his nose. The slight breeze picked it up and carried it away.

Fuck, this is borin', he said to himself.

He peered between the branches of the dogwood trees he was hiding among. The lights to the cabin still were on. He looked at his watch, pressing the button that illuminated the liquid crystal face. Six-thirty. A-fuckin'-M. The gray light of the coming day was beginning to brighten the eastern sky. This was the third night in a row they'd stayed up all night. What the hell could Medlocke and his old man be talkin' about for that long? Didn't they fuckin' sleep? He sure wanted to.

Webster reached into his shirt pocket for the tenth time that night and drew out a packet of white powder. Dipping his little finger into the bag, he scraped his long fingernail through the cocaine and held it under his right nostril. With a quick sniff, it was gone. A few seconds later, Webster felt the buzz start to rise.

Good shit, man.

He'd followed Medlocke and his father all the way from Atlanta, keeping what he considered a discreet distance behind them. When the pair had stopped at the Big Star, he'd tailed them inside. It never occurred to him that the facial resemblance between Medlocke and the old man meant anything until he heard Medlocke call the old guy Dad.

Since this was such a pissant job, Webster rushed outside to call Quintard, hoping to be told to go home, that it wasn't worth any more effort.

Wrong.

"I want you to follow them wherever they're going, find out why they're going there, what they're up to, what's taking Medlocke away from this investigation," Quintard said.

"But it's just him and his dad," Webster whined. "Maybe they're just comin' up here to fish and shoot the shit."

"Well find out!" Quintard shouted. "I want to know for certain."

Fuckin' bastard Quintard, Webster thought as he pressed his back to one of the dogwoods and sat down. Well, they hadn't done jack shit since he'd been here. 'Course, he'd leave for a few minutes every now and then to get somethin' to eat, but mostly that was at night and he'd try to stock up enough Little Debbie cakes, Ding-Dongs, fried pork rinds, and beer to last during the day.

The only time he'd gone to get food during the day was when Medlocke and his father first arrived at the cabin and came out on the deck. But hell, all they were doin' was

drinkin' Cokes and talkin'. Nothin' goin' on but a guy and his pop catchin' up. Nothin' to hear or see.

Webster looked again at his watch and then at the cabin. Several times the first night he thought he saw flashes of blue light through the windows. By the second night, the blue flashes were joined by bright, yellowish flashes. Webster had snuck up to the windows to peek in and see what was causing the flashes, but each time all he saw was Medlocke and his father talking intently. Finally he decided the lights were just his eyes rucking with him because of the lack of sleep and the amount of coke he was snorting.

And now he'd spent his last night sittin' on his butt in the damp leaves and freezin' his ass off. By God, he was goin' to blow this popstand and go home. He stood up to leave, brushing the dead leaves off his pants. He'd tell Quintard that nothin' happened. It'd be the truth even if he didn't see it for himself.

The slap of a screen door against the jamb spun him around. Medlocke and the old man were back out on the deck.

Damn! Well, maybe he'd watch them for a few minutes, try and sneak close enough to hear some of what they said. Then, if it seemed as innocent as it looked, he'd take off.

Winding his way quietly through the trees, Webster snuck closer to the cabin. He was behind the left shoulders of Medlocke and his father, so they'd have to turn around and stare directly at him to know he was there. When he reached the edge of the woods, about fifteen feet from the cabin, he stopped. If he really wanted to hear, he needed to get under the sun deck, which stood about ten feet off the ground that sloped away downhill to the lake. The coke making him aggressive and cocksure, he waited for a moment, then sprinted to the corner of the cabin. After a couple of quick, panted breaths, he tiptoed under the deck.

Home free, motherfuckers!

He sat stone still and listened intently. But what he heard didn't make much sense.

"I don't know, Dad," Medlocke said. "Am I ready to do this? All that stuff we've been practicing seems kind of small-fry compared to this. I'm still not sure I know what I'm doing."

"Well, the power should be instinctual to an extent," his father answered. "If you have to think too much about it, you may take too much time, especially if you're facing Moloch. You've done very well so far. You've learned quickly."

Moloch? Who the hell is Moloch?

"What should I try?" Medlocke asked.

"See that stone over there, the big one sticking about halfway out of the ground?"

Webster looked up between the cracks of the deck's planking and saw the old man pointing off to his right. His eyes followed the finger to a large block of granite about the size of a kid's wading pool. Like an iceberg, the main part of the rock was under the ground, only a small portion of it stuck out above.

"Yeah," Medlocke said, "I see it."

"Move it."

With what? A fuckin' bulldozer?

"Dad, that's a pretty big order," Medlocke said.

"Just try it."

Webster expected to hear Medlocke's feet walking back across the deck, getting ready to come down the stairs. A moment of terror gripped him. I can't be seen, he thought frantically. Where do I run?

He started to sprint back to the edge of the woods and to hell with who saw him when he realized he wasn't hearing the footsteps. Silence. A puzzled expression on his face, he looked back through the cracks in the planking.

Medlocke was just standing there, his head tilted back, his eyes closed. Beads of sweat were rolling down his temples.

What the fuck is he doin'? Meditatin'?

Then Webster saw.

Beams of golden light began to flow downward, between the planks. Motes of dust danced in it Swirls of color swam around it, rising and falling in rainbows. Webster was mesmerized, thrilled, hypnotized.

Where's it comin' from?

He looked upward, following the golden light back to its source, back to...

Medlocke! The golden light surrounded that bastard! It covered his whole body, weaved in and out of his skin. Webster squinted from the brightness, his eyes watered. He felt his jaw going slack in awe, but didn't think to close it.

A wrenching noise to his right drew his eyes from Medlocke. His jaw dropped another inch. The golden light was wrapped around the granite boulder. As he watched, the rock tugged and jerked and slowly rose from the ground, clods of dirt and grass falling away as it climbed—one foot, two, three, five. At eight feet off the ground, it stopped, hovering in mid-air.

"Now smash it," Webster heard the old man say.

Medlocke grunted once and the boulder exploded into a thousand tiny pieces. Yet there were no shrapnel-like shards flying about. All of the remains hung near each other inside the golden glow, floating, swaying.

"Holy fuckin' shit."

Webster was horrified when he realized the words came from him.

The golden aura vanished and the chunks of rock fell to the ground with a rainfall of thuds.

Christ, what a dumbass! Webster thought. He turned to flee as fast as his spindly legs would carry him, but as he took one step, he felt his limbs freeze. Nothing moved, nothing worked. He couldn't even turn his head.

What's the matter with me?

Although he couldn't budge his limbs, his eyes still moved and he glanced down at his hands. He gasped. A blue glow enveloped both of them and extended back up his arms.

With a jolt, he felt himself moving. But I'm not walking, his mind screamed. I'm not even moving my legs.

He floated from under the sun deck, moving to the front, then slowly rose until he was on the same level as the deck itself. Medlocke and his father stood there staring at him. Once again he gasped, this time at the sight of the blue glow emanating from the old man.

"What have we here?" Stephen asked.

"Shit, that's Frog Webster, a fence down in Gwinnett," Jason said. "What's he doing here?"

"I'd say spying on us," Stephen said. "Weren't you?"

Webster said nothing.

"Oh, that's right. You probably can't talk, can you?" Stephen said. "Here, I'll fix that."

He snapped his fingers.

"Now, what are you doing here?" he asked again.

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all," Webster jabbered. "I was just walkin' around. I'm just up here relaxin' at the lake. Like ya'll."

"Relaxing under our sun deck?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, I... I... was takin' a shortcut back to my car."

"I think you'd better tell us the truth, my good man," Stephen said.

"That is the truth, I swear on my mother's grave," Webster said. "I ain't ly—"

He was cut short. like a bear hug, the blue glow contracted around him. He tried to breathe, but could only get short gasps. In a few seconds, flashes of light erupted in front of his eyes. His ribs began to quiver with the pressure. They felt as if they were going to break.

"Now, are you going to tell us the truth?" Stephen asked.

Webster nodded. The blue glow retreated.

"Very good," Stephen said. "Now again. What are you doing here?"

"I'm up here for Quintard," Webster said. "He's had me followin' Medlocke the past few weeks. He wants me to try and get somethin' on you, somethin' he can use against you. He don't like you much."

"No kidding," Jason said.

"Well, I don't think it'd be a good idea to let Mr. Webster take what he's seen back to town and tell Quintard," Stephen said. "But I think I can prevent that."

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Webster pleaded frantically. "I don't know what you are, but I promise I won't say nothin' to him. This shit never happened. I never saw nothin'. Please let me go."

"What're you going to do, Dad?" Jason asked.

"I'm just going to talk to this man a little while, try to convince him of the error of his ways, of how he's lost the path of God and—"

The phone inside the cabin began ringing. Jason's eyes widened.

"It's either Alex or Badger," he said. "I hope it's Alex; Badger would call for only one reason."

He ran back inside and the ringing stopped.

Outside, Stephen gazed directly into Webster's eyes. "Now listen very carefully, Mr. Webster. I want to make sure you hear everything I'm saying. You don't remember anything about this. This never happened. It's all disappearing inside your mind..."

In a quiet, insistent monotone, Stephen continued. The blue glow intensified around Webster's floating body, and the little man nodded periodically at

Stephen's commands.

About a minute later, the screen door swung open again and Jason stepped out. Webster was no longer in front of the sun deck. Jason looked around and saw him walking back toward the woods, his gait stiff and uncoordinated.

"He'll be all right in a couple of minutes," Stephen said. He looked at the wan expression on Jason's face.

"It was Badger, right?" he said.

"Yeah. We've got another one."

Chapter 27



The body of twelve-year-old Kenny Ortega dangled eighty feet up, perched on the apex of the clock tower in the old red-brick courthouse in downtown Lawrenceville. A piece of nylon clothesline held the body to the four-pronged iron weathervane that topped the tower. Once again, duct tape held the boy's head to his body.

While several officers clambered up the inside ladders that led to the tower, none was willing to risk the vertical climb it would take to reach the body once one exited a window near the top. And even after struggling to the top, there was the eighty-degree pitch of the tower's shingled roof as a deterrent. The fire department's hook-and-ladder truck had to be called in.

"How the fuck did he get up there with a body on his back?" Badger asked no one in particular as he stared at the tower in disbelief.

With the death of the boy, the volcano blew its top.

Stories about the Mercy Killer investigation became front-page stories and lead items on the evening newcasts nationwide. Newspaper editorials brought up the Atlanta Child Murders of 1981 in which twenty-eight children turned up dead, the writers asking whether the same thing was happening again.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Badger raged. "Give me a break. Four killings are bad, but we're nowhere near twenty-eight."

The fact that the killer could get away so easily made him look a great deal smarter than the police, something neither the cops nor their critics had any problems picking up on.

And Jason was in turmoil beyond the new murder. His mind was torn between finding the Mercy Killer and dealing with his newfound powers which ultimately led to dealing with Moloch. The threat of death permeated everything in his life it seemed.

He learned much in the three days at the cabin, secrets that would blast the minds of lesser people. He was stronger, much stronger than he ever hoped.

"It's frightening," his father told him. "You've picked up on things that took me years to learn. And the scope of your abilities doesn't seem to have any limits."

"What are we going to do, Dad?" Jason asked as he and Stephen drove back from the lake cabin. "I'm going to be wrapped up in this case for a while. I don't know if I'll have much time for lessons."

"Yeah, I figured that," Stephen said. "But I thought I might hang around for a couple more days. Maybe at night we can get in a few things, teach you how to use the power correctly. If that's okay with you."

But Jason was doubtful that he could use the power correctly. Schoolwork was fine, but on-the-job training was the key. He knew he needed more training, a chance to build his confidence, but the murder of Kenny Ortega made that impossible, at least for now. He could only focus on the new murder.

He and his father never got a chance for another lesson. Things proceeded to go downhill at a spectacular rate.

Police were becoming increasingly embarrassed to admit they had nothing to go on. The scene at Kenny Ortega's murder was as clean as the others. Since the second murder, forensics had perfected the scouring of the crime scene into an

art form. Whereas even the most complicated crime scene usually took no longer than eight hours to search, they now spent sixteen to twenty-four hours, dusting everything, making ESDA searches in ever-widening circles. Dozens of rolls of film were taken, technicians in surgical masks and scrub suits padded around on their hands and knees, tweezers in their hands, as they looked for something—fingernail scrapings, a print, a chip of paint or metal—anything that might link the scene to the killer.

Jason and Badger spent a couple of hours at the crime scene, talking with Saunders and Bibb, then headed out to do their own work, interviewing parents, friends, schoolteachers. By this time, their hopes of the killer making a mistake were small, but there was always a chance, so they retained just enough hope to be severely disappointed when it was smashed.

Once again, all efforts came up empty with Kenny Ortega. There were no hairs or fibers on the body; only the smudged glove prints. No telltale evidence was found around the body. Jason's and Badger's interviews revealed nothing of substance.

The only thing that was different this time was the Mercy Killer's message. Like the others, it was pinned to the little boy's shirt with no prints or hairs left on it. Like the other messages, it was typed on an old IBM with a skewed *a* and *r*. But this time its message was slightly different. "Brethren," it said,

Once again we meet. Or do not meet, as the case may be. I am beginning to enjoy this. Not just the cleansing deaths, not just the washing away of pain in showers of innocent blood, but the cat-and-mouse chase. I find it stimulating; it stokes my fires.

Poor Jason. You have no idea what you're up against. You think I'm insane; you

think I'm deranged. I am neither. I am simply resolute, with a long memory and the patience to wait—for centuries if need be.

So my friend, we shall meet. And soon. But it will be on my terms, at my discretion. At that point, all will be clear to you.

And then you will die.

Still at the office at five the next morning, Jason and Badger went over the message together.

"Now he's threatening you," Badger said. "He talked directly to you in the last message, but threatening you is a new angle. He obviously knows you. Can you think of anyone who hates you this badly?"

"Well, sure, there are plenty of people who don't like me, people I've arrested or what-not," Jason said as he toyed with the disappearing ball trick, "but I can't think of any whose feelings reach this level of depravity. You'd have to be an inhuman beast to..."

Jason stopped. You'd have to be an inhuman beast. A monster. Oh dear God. It couldn't be. Could it? A chill shook his body.

"Hey, what is it?" Badger said. "Your face looks like a ghoul's. What's the matter?"

Jason stared at Badger, his brain reeling. How much could he tell him? It all came down to that. How much trust could he place in this man? He'd trusted him with his life. Wasn't that as much trust as you could place on another human being? But this was so much more. So much more.

Besides, this was only speculation, Jason told himself. Only a wild hunch. Moloch might have nothing to do with the murders. Probably didn't have anything to do with them. But it certainly explained a lot, made the pieces fit

neatly—how the murders could be done so cleanly, the mysterious glowing green line at Brookwood High School, the note on the computer. It all clicked. But it was all too much. He needed to talk to his father. Had to talk to him. He reached for the phone. As his hand touched the receiver, it rang.

"Shit on a stick," Jason said as he jumped. He slowly lifted the receiver.

"Medlocke."

"Hi baby," Alex said in a dull monotone voice.

"Hi," Jason answered. "Jesus, you sound awful. What's wrong?"

"I feel like hell," she said. "I guess I've caught some sort of virus. I've been throwing up every morning and feeling awful the rest of the day."

"Have you been to the doctor?" he asked.

"I'm trying to get an appointment, but it'll probably take a couple of days before they can squeeze me in," she said. "There's something going around down here in Montgomery."

"Why don't you stay down there a little while longer? It's safer and it'll give you time to get better," he suggested.

"I've got to be back to work soon," she said. "But you're right, I need a few days to get over this creeping crud. I don't feel hike driving anyway, and besides, if I came back now I'd probably just give it to you."

"Okay, but call me after your appointment and tell me what the doctor says," he said. "I'll talk to you then. Love you."

"What's up?" Badger asked as Jason hung up.

"Alex is sick. Got some sort of virus. She's going to stay in Montgomery for a couple more days."

"Good idea. No sense her being on the road if she feels bad," Badger said. "Now,

back to the issue at hand. You obviously had something on your mind a minute ago, something that looked as if it made you sick to your stomach. What was it?"

Jason looked at Badger. He couldn't tell him everything. Not until he checked it out first. And even if it was true, he wasn't sure he could tell Badger, wasn't sure he'd believe it. Shit. Just melt a door or something, he'll believe.

But that had to come later. For now, he had to tell Badger something. But he couldn't lie to his best friend.

"It's something I need to check out with my father first," Jason said. "It has to do with those family problems I told you about before we went up to your cabin. There may be something, I mean someone, from my family's past. I'm not saying it has any connection to these murders at all. But it's a possibility I need to investigate."

"Details, give me details," Badger said.

"I can't. Not yet," Jason said. "It may all be just a strained, bullshit guess on my part. But I'll let you know."

"Now this is bullshit!" Badger said, anger in his voice. "I'm your partner. What you know, I should know. There are no secrets, no—"

The door swung open and Silverman's blanched face peeked in. "Get your shit together. This guy's getting busy."

"Oh Christ," Badger said. Jason simply closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

The body of eleven-year-old Nina Bartlett leaned against the front door of J.G. Dyer Elementary School, not one hundred yards from police headquarters. Her head looked behind her through the glass doors that led inside the building; her hands sat neatly on her knees as if she were waiting for her parents to drive by and pick her up.

"The son of a bitch must've run the whole fucking way between this one and the last," Badger fumed. "It's not humanly possible."

Jason winced at Badger's choice of words. He's right, Jason thought, it's not humanly possible.

If the top blew off the volcano over Kenny Ortega, the whole mountain exploded in a fireball over Nina Bartlett.

Phone calls swamped police headquarters, demanding that something be done. PTA meetings became battlegrounds, the parents who thought the police were doing all they could siding against those who thought the police were sitting on their butts, thumbs firmly implanted in their assholes. The *Atlanta Constitution* called the latest crime "a slap in the face of the Gwinnett County Police Department, one they cannot ignore."

After reading the editorial, Badger flung his cup of coffee into a nearby wall.

In the middle of it all sat Anson Quintard, playing the whole thing like a maestro. He was in the papers almost daily, firing vindictive attacks against the police department and especially against Jason and Badger. Wherever he went, he'd speak about the subject, whether he was at church, at the grocery store, or at the gas station.

And people were beginning to listen.

"Five killings in five weeks. What is wrong with our police department?"

Quintard said during an aluminum recycling drive at North Gwinnett High School, an event he made sure would be covered by the local news media. A few phone calls did wonders, especially when he told them he'd be making a major announcement about the murders.

"Why can't they catch the lunatic responsible for these crimes?" he cried as the cameras rolled and the pens scurried. Like a Shakespearean actor, he threw

himself into the performance, thrusting his fist into the air and wiping sweat from his brow. He put what he thought was just the right amount of righteous indignation in his voice.

"Our children, our flesh and blood, are being horribly murdered, yet the police say they have no leads. This monster drops a child's wretched, mutilated body a few feet from police headquarters, yet the police say they have nothing. What are they doing? What are Detectives Medlocke and Franklin, the ones in charge of the investigation, doing about all this? It seems apparent that the one thing they're not doing is their job. If they were, would this horror be happening?"

"In the interest of gathering information that we will then relay to you, the County Commission has requested Detectives Medlocke and Franklin to come to our regularly scheduled meeting next Tuesday. They will face our questions and answer to you. The people of Gwinnett demand it."

When Quintard got back to his office at the Justice and Administration Complex, he wanted to throw his hands up and whoop with joy. Things just kept getting better and better. The only thing he could hope for would be one more murder before the county commission meeting in three days. But that was just wishful thinking.

Besides, Webster came through with some very interesting information, tidbits about Medlocke's affair with one Alex Cotton and, even better, his recent trip to the lake. Although Webster said Medlocke and his father didn't do anything but drink Cokes and talk at the cabin, the news was valuable in and of itself.

Armed with the information, Quintard picked up the phone and dialed a number he hadn't called in about a month. It was answered quickly.

"Anthony Bradley."

"Anthony, this is Anson Quintard. I've got another tip for you."

"I told you before. I don't want any more of your tips," Bradley said.

"Don't be so sure, boy," Quintard said, an edge in his voice. "Just pay me the courtesy of a listen."

Bradley was silent for a few seconds. "Okay, go ahead," he said, grudgingly.

"I understand that until the murder of that little Ortega boy, Medlocke hadn't been in the office for several days, that he was up on Lake Altoona," Quintard said. "It makes me wonder what a detective is doing on vacation when there's a murder investigation going on. What do you think?"

"I've already gotten a tip on that," Bradley said. "I called both Captain Silverman and Detective Franklin. Both said Medlocke was handling some family emergency at the lake with his father. Silverman added that he thought Jason could use the days off to recharge his batteries. According to what I heard, there was nothing working on the investigation. They'd exhausted all their leads, run down all the possibilities. I knew Medlocke was gone, but I don't see that taking a few days off affected the investigation one way or the other."

"I disagree," Quintard said. "If he had been here working, instead of off gallivanting, maybe these latest murders wouldn't have taken place. I don't think he was doing his job."

"Is that why you requested that he and Franklin come to Tuesday's commission meeting, so you could bring this up, throw it in his face?"

"That request was made by the commission," Quintard said.

"Yes, but according to the county clerk, it was a request that originated with you. You were the one who had her put it on the agenda."

"I just want the people of this county to know what's being done about these killings," Quintard said.

"Is that all?" Bradley said.

"That's it," Quintard said. "Can I expect to see you at the commission meeting?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

Quintard hung up and reached into his drawer for the always-present bottle. He took a slug straight from it.

The wheels were in motion and they were going to crush those fuckers Medlocke and Franklin like dogs on the freeway. No way those two could refuse the request to appear before the commission, not if they wanted to keep some semblance of dignity and respect from the people in Gwinnett.

He'd have their asses at best, but at the very least he intended to have their jobs. He'd get them out of Gwinnett, perhaps out of Atlanta if he could. Then there'd be no one to stand in his way.

He raised the bottle of Jim Beam to the ceiling as though giving a toast.

Thank you, Mr. Mercy Killer, he thought as he gazed at the treetops outside his office window. Thank you for being so smart and so hard to catch. I owe you one.

Chapter 28



What Quintard didn't know was that the Mercy Killer had finally made a mistake. A big one.

As the forensic technicians examined the scene around Nina Bartlett's body at the old courthouse, they found a huge dent in one of the dumpsters sitting in back of the building, as if someone had backed a car into it. The day before the body was found, the dumpster was emptied during routine pickup about seven in the evening. Jack Edelman, the man driving the garbage truck, said there was no dent in it then.

Technicians carefully scraped a trace of metallic brown paint off the blue dumpster and rushed the evidence back to the lab. Examination under the electron microscope and chemical spectography computer revealed the paint came from a 1984 Chevrolet Caprice.

"Oh goddamn, oh goddamn," Badger kept saying, pacing back and forth from his desk to Jason's. "We've got the sonuvabitch. We've got the bastard cold. How many brown 1984 Caprices can there be in this county?"

Twelve, according to the list transmitted from the Department of Motor Vehicles. Jason and Badger hovered over the teletype machine as the alphabetized list rolled off. Their eyes froze on the third name down.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Badger whispered.

"Oh, it can't be that fucking simple," Jason said.

Joseph Benton.

"I don't remember seeing a Caprice in his driveway," Badger said.

"They have a garage," Jason said. "It might have been parked in there. Or he might have had it hidden."

"Let's check it out," Badger said.

The two practically ran to the car. Badger floored it coming out of the station and headed toward Benton's accounting offices off Peachtree Industrial Boulevard. When they pulled into the office park, a seemingly never-ending series of low-slung beige buildings, they scanned the parking lot in front of Benton's office for a brown Caprice. There was none.

"Maybe he's at lunch," Badger offered.

A secretary said Benton might be at lunch, but not in Georgia. He had driven to Charlotte Sunday to handle some business for a client, she said. Then the phone rang and she excused herself. She spoke into the receiver for a moment, then said, "Let me check on that." Getting up, she went into Benton's office. The sound of a metallic file drawer being pulled open came from inside.

Badger poked Jason hard in the ribs and Jason almost grunted from the force of the blow. "What the fuck are you doing?" he whispered in a hard voice. Badger nodded his head toward the open door of Benton's office. A desk was visible through the door, a typing table next to it. Sitting on the typing table was a typewriter—a huge, gray IBM that must have been at least twenty years old. Jason felt his heart begin to pound.

The secretary came back into the reception area, closing the door behind her. She picked up the phone and spoke into it for a few seconds before hanging up. Then she turned her attention back to Jason and Badger.

"I expect Mr. Benton back this afternoon," she said. "Can I give him a message?"

"No, thank you. It's just business related, nothing really important," Jason lied.

"We'll call back later in the day."

"Can I have your names?" she asked, but Jason and Badger already were on their way out the door.

Once they arrived at headquarters, Jason relayed a message to the dispatcher: Tell all patrol cars in the area to keep an eye on Benton's office and to report immediately if his car returns. He also told patrol to cruise by Benton's home just in case he went there instead of the office. Under no circumstances was Benton to be accosted or arrested, he said. Just keep him under observation and report back.

Badger started pulling together a background check on Benton, seeing if there were any abnormalities in his past, any time spent in mental hospitals, any previous arrests. Nothing turned up. His background was exactly what one would expect from a man like Benton—dull and routine.

While Badger was doing the background check, Jason spent his time trying to determine Benton's whereabouts over the past two months, to see if any patterns emerged, to see if he could pinpoint Benton's whereabouts on the day of each murder. It was not easy to do without arousing suspicion and he didn't want anyone to alert Benton. So Jason gently poked and prodded without any conclusive results.

According to Benton's wife, he'd been asleep in bed next to her every night since Amanda's death. Of course, she'd had a little trouble sleeping so she generally took something to help her, she said. Nothing strong, you understand, just something to relax her. Jason recognized the slurred speech of someone who'd been drinking heavily for a long time.

Yes, her husband had worked some late nights at the office, but he'd always done that. As a CPA, his tax crunch time began well before April fifteenth and lasted long after. "Why all the questions?" she finally asked.

"Just making sure our records are complete, Mrs. Benton," Jason said. "This is strictly routine. We're going back over everything trying to see if we've missed something. Apparently we haven't in your husband's case. Thank you for your time."

Benton's secretary was more suspicious than Mrs. Benton, probably because her mind wasn't fogged by alcohol and drugs, Jason reasoned. At first she wouldn't answer any questions, saying Benton himself would be the one to talk to. But Jason gently persuaded her that the only reason they needed this information was to know where Benton was in case they needed to get in touch with him quickly.

"That'll be hard to do," she said. "There are many days when Mr. Benton is out and about for a good part of the day, visiting clients at their offices, down at the library looking up tax laws, attending meetings. Your best bet would be to call me because I always know where he's at."

"Does he have a beeper?" Jason asked.

"Yes."

"May I have the number? That might make it easier to contact him."

The secretary hesitated a moment, then relented. "888-0983," she said.

"That number is similar to mine," Jason lied casually. "Is that a Circuitron beeper?"

"No, it's from Advance Plus Systems," the secretary said.

Jason thanked her for her help, told her he'd be back in touch if he needed any more information, then immediately turned around and called Advance Plus.

When he asked for a list of the phone calls that had been made to Benton's

beeper over the past three months, the owner of Advance Plus stonewalled.

"That's privileged information," the man said.

"I know and I can get a court order to have you release it, or you can streamline the whole process by just giving it to me," Jason said. "The latter is much easier and more pleasant, but I'll leave the final decision up to you."

The man was silent, then said: "I'll need to speak to my lawyer. Can I get back to you?"

Damn! Jason said inwardly, but over the phone he calmly and amicably said: "Certainly."

The next hour or so passed excruciatingly slowly. Pencils tapped and knees quivered nonstop. The cold front that dumped an afternoon of rain on the city did nothing to liven most of their spirits.

Jason, however, was feeling a little better about things.

The fact that a concrete suspect—a human one—had been found was like a godsend to him. If Benton was the man—and Jason was beginning to believe he was, if only for his own mental well-being—it meant that his fears about Moloch being involved were unfounded. The whirlwind of activity of the past several hours had prevented Jason from calling his father to discuss the matter, but now it seemed as if he didn't need to. There was nothing supernatural about these child murders. They were the work of insanity.

About three in the afternoon, the phone on Jason's desk rang. He almost knocked it off his desk lunging for it.

"Medlocke here."

"Hi baby," Alex said in a wispy voice.

"Oh hi," Jason answered. "What's up?"

"I went to the doctor this morning," she said.

Jason noticed a different quality to her voice, a faraway note, as if she were floating somewhere in the ozone.

"And? What did he say?" he asked. "What's the matter with you?"

"The matter with me is you," she said. "Or rather something you gave to me."

"What? Am I some sort of Typhoid Mary? What'd I give you?"

"A baby."

Jason almost choked on the sip of coffee he had taken. He sucked some of the liquid down his windpipe and sprayed it all over Badger while coughing it up.

"Goddamn!" Badger hollered as he was showered with coffee. "Cover your mouth."

It took several seconds and several more coughs before Jason could speak again. When he did, his voice was a croak.

"A baby?" he whispered. "You're pregnant?"

Badger's head shot up from his chest where he was wiping the coffee off with a napkin. An expression of both alarm and joy registered on his face. He jumped up from his chair and started bouncing around the office like an overgrown teddy bear on springs.

"A baby? Oh fuck, that's great," he said. "Or is it? That's good, isn't it? I mean, you want one, don't you? I mean, you love her, don't you? I mean, a baby. Jesus, that's great. Isn't it?"

Jason waved his hand at him, telling him to shut up.

"Alex, is he sure?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, he's positive," she said, then paused. "The pills I've been taking weren't strong enough. I'd been off birth control for a while and got back on it

just before I met you to try to regulate my periods. My gynecologist and I still were trying to find the right dosage when I found you."

Jason didn't say anything.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Alex said.

"What do you mean what are we going to do?"

"I mean, what are we going to do? We're not married, you remember. Are we going to get married?"

"I... I don't know. I mean, I guess that'd be the thing to do. I just hadn't thought much about it I mean, I had, but not really..."

"Jason, don't you want this baby?" she asked.

"Well, sure. I mean, yeah. Damn, Alex, this is a total shock. What do you want me to say?"

Alex waited for a few seconds before she spoke again.

"Jason, there's something I haven't told you yet, but now seems to be the time," she said. "I had an abortion when I was sixteen. I got pregnant from my high school boyfriend. I'm not going through that again. Whether we get married or not, I'm going to have this baby. I want you to be its father, not just a biological father, but the one that raises his child, who's there when a knee gets skinned or a hug is needed. Are you willing to do that?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I am," Jason stammered. "It's just such a surprise. I don't know what to say. Listen, can you come home today? We need to talk about this and I'm wrapped up in this case. I'm expecting a very important phone call any second."

"Yeah, I was going to come home today anyway," she said. "I'll call you when I get in. Will you be at home or the office?"

"I don't know. Try both. I'll be at one or the other."

"Okay, I'll call you later. And Jason? I love you."

"I love you, too," he said and hung up.

Badger was standing over him, a huge grin on his face. When he saw Jason's expression, the smile faded around the edges.

"Hey, this is great, buddy," he said, slapping Jason on the back. "A baby. You virile stud you."

Jason smiled—sort of.

"I guess you're right. I don't know. Shit, Badger. One more thing on my shoulders. like I don't have enough problems already."

"Hey, this isn't a problem," Badger said. "It's a solution. Man, I've been watching you for almost two years, ever since you lost Sarah and Claire. You can hem and haw and say it's too soon, and you're not ready, but that's bullshit. Your mood has improved one hundred percent since you met Alex. She's the best thing that could've happened to you. I mean, it's not as if you have to get married, at least not yet. Plenty of couples have babies without being married. And I suspect that, given a few weeks to think about it, you'll decide marriage is right for you anyway. You're not exactly the bar-hopping type."

"Maybe," Jason said. "But wouldn't Quintard just love to get his teeth into the fact that Alex and I aren't married but we have a baby?"

"Fuck him," Badger said. "Bringing up something like that up will only make him look like a fool. People around here don't much care for having their private lives snooped into, especially if you're just an average guy and not a politician."

Despair filled Jason's eyes and he looked up at Badger. "But what about Sarah and Claire," he asked. "Am I staining their memories?"

Badger sat down on the edge of Jason's desk. His face got serious.

"You love Sarah and Claire," he said quietly. "You'll always love them. And they'll always love you. There's no way they'd want you to pass up a chance for happiness. I know Sarah wouldn't. She wasn't that kind of woman."

"Maybe," Jason said. "Maybe."

The conversation was interrupted by the ringing phone. Jason answered it.

"Medlocke."

"Detective Medlocke, this is Anthony Bradley from Channel Two. Have you got a minute?"

"Is it about Benton?" Badger whispered.

Jason shook his head and Badger sat down in his chair with a sigh and a whispered "Fuck."

Jason felt disappointment, too, and let it color his voice.

"Yeah, I got a minute, but that's about all," he said coolly.

Bradley hesitated for a moment and Jason could hear him taking a long breath. God, here comes some shit, he thought.

"First of all, I want to apologize for that incident a few weeks ago," Bradley said.

"I realize I went too far. I shouldn't have asked such personal questions. They had nothing to do with the investigation. It's just that I'm new to the station. I was trying to make a good impression on my bosses. Be a hard-assed reporter, ask the tough questions, and all that. But my editor reamed me out when he heard what happened. Said I'd acted like an asshole. And I had to agree with him."

Jason was taken aback by Bradley's honesty. He hardly knew what to say.

Reporters are humans, too, he figured, and everyone acts like a dipshit sooner or

later. Can't hold that against a person for the rest of his life.

"Well, I agree that you acted like an asshole, but I accept your apology," he told Bradley.

"Thanks. I appreciate it. Maybe one of these days I can buy you lunch and we can start over on a fresh footing."

"Is that all you wanted, to apologize?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I was calling to see if you were going to accept the commission's invitation to attend the meeting tonight," Bradley said.

Shit, Jason thought, I forgot all about that. Although he probably shouldn't attend, he didn't see any way to get out of it. If he didn't show, the public would think he had something to hide. If he did show, chances were Quintard was going to pull some shit out of his hat and try to embarrass him. Either way, the equation figured against him.

"Yeah, I guess I'll be there," he said. "But to be honest with you, I don't see any way that it will help things. It will only throw gasoline on an already hot fire."

"I think you're right," Bradley said. "You know this request was issued by Quintard."

"I'm not surprised," Jason said.

"Well, for all his windbag tendencies, he seems to be a pretty shrewd wheeler-dealer," Bradley said. "He's made it almost impossible for you to refuse. One other thing—and I'm probably violating all the rules on reporter ethics here, but I feel I owe you—Quintard called me about your recent trip out of town with your father. He wanted me to investigate it, said he thought it was dereliction of duty."

"Great," Jason said. "All I did was take a few days off to be with my father, who came to visit. Are you going to report on that?"

"If he brings it up at a public meeting, I pretty much have to. But I told Quintard I'd already checked into it and gotten comments from both Captain Silverman and Detective Franklin. I said I didn't think there was anything wrong with a detective who was burning himself out on a case to take a few days off. I also told him I thought maybe he had a vendetta against you and Detective Franklin. It seemed to shake him up a bit, so maybe he won't bring it up."

"Oil, hell bring it up all right. Anything to embarrass me," Jason said. "He doesn't care much for Badger or me. We don't kiss his flabby ass. And he'll figure he can bullshit his way out of any story that you write. All that, of course, is off the record."

"Sure," Bradley said.

"Did Quintard say anything more about my trip to the lake?" Jason probed, wanting to know if his father's work on Webster had succeeded.

"Nope, just said he thought it strange that you'd go up there for some R and R when this case was so hot," Bradley said. "Like I said, I disagreed with him."

"Well, I just thought I'd let you know what was going on."

Bradley said. "I'll see you tonight. The show starts at seven."

Jason hung up and rubbed his eyes. Things were just getting too damned complicated. One thing right after the other. This kind of stress was what made people end up on a water tower, picking off passersby with a high-powered rifle.

"What's up?" Badger asked.

"That was Bradley, the reporter whose pants I trashed the other week," Jason said. "He asked if we were going to be at the commission meeting tonight. I told him we'd be there."

"Personally, I'm looking forward to making Quintard look like a raving shithead," Badger said. "I want a chance to be heard in public."

"In that case, you'd better let me do the talking," Jason said. "You'll get too hotheaded and say something that'll sound bad on the evening news."

"Hotheaded? I'm not fucking hotheaded," Badger said indignantly.

"Oh yeah, like that time you called Quintard on the phone to ask him about the bracelet on the drug dealer. Or slinging your coffee cup into the wall when you got pissed off the other day. You're a real cool customer," Jason said. "You're liable to get up in this meeting and ask him to step outside so you can whip the shit out of him."

"Look buddy," Jason continued, "I'm just saying let me take the heat on this one. I need you to keep an eye on things in case anything comes back about Benton."

"Okay, I get your drift," Badger said. "I'll be a good boy. But motherfucker, I wish we'd hear something."

They didn't for the next three hours and then it was time for Jason to leave for the commission meeting.

"Okay, here's how we'll work this," Jason said. "You haul ass over to keep an eye on his house, see when he gets home. I'll head to the commission meeting. If you find out anything, you come running to the J and A building."

After Badger left, Jason went into the rest room, combed his hair, and washed his face. He adjusted his tie and wished he had brought a sports jacket with him that day. It would've made a better impression.

"Well, if Badger doesn't get back with good news, there's not much that's going to help," he told his reflection in the mirror. "No jacket in the world is going to make you look good. That's going to be up to you."

Grabbing his Levi's jacket off the back of his chair, he headed for his car. He arrived at the J and A Complex about quarter to seven. The parking lot was full,

including a healthy array of TV news vans. He knew most of the vehicles were here for the upcoming circus, with him as head clown.

Taking a deep breath, he opened one of the center's glass doors and walked in. Something was wrong with the door's spring-loaded hinges and, instead of quietly shooshing shut, it slammed with a thump. To Jason, it sounded ominously like the closing of a cell door.

Chapter 29



Shaped like an amphitheater, the five-hundred-seat auditorium bulged at the seams. Each seat had someone in it and about two hundred people stood along the back or sat in the aisles. The air-conditioning system was straining to keep everyone cool while makeshift newspaper and magazine fans waved throughout the crowd.

Fifteen minutes before the meeting got under way, commission assistants stood at the doors, turning people away. There was no more room. Many would-be spectators got angry and demanded to be let in anyway. Finally, police officers were called to keep the peace.

A young man tried to prevent Jason from walking in, but relented with wide-eyed apologies when Jason gave his name.

Holy shit, Jason thought, I feel like a steak about to be tossed on the grill. As he walked down the wide steps to the dais at the bottom, his eyes fell on the circular wooden table that builders used to spread their blueprints on so commissioners could see. To Jason, it looked like an Aztec sacrificial table. Where's the curved knife that's going to carve out my heart? he wondered.

He nodded to four of the five commissioners sitting behind the curved, glossy wood podium. The fifth was Quintard and Jason gave him a brief, cold stare, then kept his eyes averted. Each of the other commissioners nodded back and Jason detected no animosity in their faces. A couple, Pauline Carrington and

chairman Bill McCracken, even smiled as if to say: Sorry about this.

Quintard sat like a satiated tick on the far right-hand side of the podium. He wore a gray suit with a ridiculously loud tie that practically shouted: Look at me! Look at me!

McCracken motioned for Jason to come closer.

"Hello, Jazz," he said. He offered his hand and Jason shook it. A rumble rose from the crowd.

"I don't think they like you fraternizing with the enemy," Jason said in a low voice.

"To hell with it," McCracken said in a Southern drawl that disguised his Harvard law degree. "I think this is a steaming pile of Quintard's horseshit. I wouldn't even have allowed it on the agenda, but he pulled an end run by leaking the information that it was on there. He must've walked right to a phone booth and started calling TV and newspapers the minute he put it on the agenda. Anyway, by the time I'd heard about it, the whole county was buzzing. It would've caused more of a ruckus to remove it than to let it stand."

McCracken smiled ruefully. "Sorry, Jazz, but sometimes politics make us do shitty things simply to save our asses. But I tell you what, I don't intend to let this get out of hand. Although, to be honest, I would like to pose a few questions myself and I think some of the other commissioners would, too. We're all as interested in this as the next guy. Still, you don't have to answer anything that will jeopardize the case."

"Thanks, I don't intend to, but I appreciate your support."

"We're saving you for last," McCracken said. "There are about five items ahead of you, so it'll take about thirty minutes to get through those. You can sit over there where the department heads usually sit."

Jason looked at the two desks at each end of the podium.

"Which side?" he said.

"Whichever one you think will be the easiest to defend in case of a frontal attack," McCracken said, smiling.

Taking his seat at the end of the podium, Jason gazed into the sea of faces. Some were hostile as hell—grim, angry faces looking for a scapegoat. It was difficult to direct hate at a faceless killer and they needed someone to blame. Jason was it.

Other faces, though, simply looked interested. Many people came seeking information and answers. They weren't mad, just confused and curious. Terrible things were happening around their homes and to their children and they desperately wanted assurances that everything possible was being done, that it probably wouldn't happen to them. Jason couldn't blame them. He felt confused, too, and wanted someone to give him assurances and answers, too.

Maybe Badger was getting some answers right now, he wished. He hoped so.

It was a wide cross section of people who came tonight, he noticed. Everyone from businessmen in pinstriped suits to blue-collar workers still in their greasy work clothes. Farmers with overalls, CAT Diesel Power caps, and callused hands sat next to housewives with children on their knees.

Murder knows no social or economic boundaries, Jason thought as he looked at the faces. It touches everyone and every—

His heart stuck in his throat and he thought he heard himself gasp.

Joseph Benton was in the audience.

He sat about halfway up the middle section, staring into space with a blank expression, as if his body was in the room, but his brain was not.

God, if that guy is the killer, he's got the largest balls on the planet, Jason

thought.

But there was something strange about Benton. His face twitched uncontrollably, first his right eyebrow, then his left cheek, then his lips, on and on. The movement never stopped, it just migrated from place to place. Brief glimpses of pain darted across Benton's face, as if he were being punched by tiny fists, and his skin was the color of sculptor's clay.

Death must look better, Jason thought. Shit, he can't be the killer; he's too nervous.

He'd have to be one cool operator to come here, supremely confident that he could keep his composure, Jason reasoned. What could he be thinking?

Maybe you can get an idea, a voice inside said.

His father had taught him rudimentary lessons for reading other people's emotions. He'd been pretty good at detecting what Stephen was feeling, but he could read his father's facial expressions about as well as he could read his hidden emotions, so it really wasn't an accurate litmus test.

Can I do it here without giving myself away? Jason thought. One look at Benton and curiosity overcame nervousness.

Dropping his eyes, Jason cleared his thoughts. The noise of the audience began to blur and fade into a voiceless drone. He washed his mind clean except for the picture of the sweating, twitching Joseph Benton.

Jason felt part of his mind leaving his body, like an arm reaching out. A collage of emotions swept into Jason—fear, anger, confusion, hate, sadness—the emotions of the audience as a whole. It was too heavy, too much, and Jason felt as if he were drowning. The emotions sucked the life from him. He began to lose identity, his sense of self, becoming only a nameless part of the faceless whole. The thought terrified him and he yanked himself back, shutting out the fear,

slamming the door.

He sat silently for a moment, recovering. He must refocus, sharpen his mental eye, block out everything but Benton. He gave it another try.

Concentration making his temples throb, he zeroed in on Benton. This time he found him easily.

At first, Jason wasn't sure what he had latched onto. It was almost alien in its confusion, in the depth of its sickness. Its blackness was impossible to dispel, a feeling of utter doom and despair.

This is Benton? Jason thought. The man's sicker than I thought.

At the heart of the darkness, though, Jason detected a quiet core, an oasis in the middle of this stygian desert. But the core grew smaller each second, its brightness dimming, as though being swallowed by an inky night.

Swimming through the blackness of Benton's soul, Jason moved closer. He reached out to make contact with it. Then he touched it.

Help me. Oh God, help me please. The pitiful voice speared Jason's mind.

Whoever you are. Get me out of here.

Get me out of here or kill me.

Jason thought he might throw up. The despair was a living thing, a drowning succubus that wanted to grab him and climb to freedom. Jason released his hold and scrambled backward in desperation. A wave of sheer hopelessness crashed into him as he fled and he heard one more, wretched *Oh God help me* before he was back in his own body.

He shivered as reality enfolded him. With a shaking hand, he wiped the beads of cold sweat forming along his hairline.

Dear God, the man is going through the tortures of the damned. It almost felt as

if two people were in there, good fighting evil. And evil was winning. Is that the mind of a killer? How could he live like that?

It was the same question Joseph Benton asked himself. How could he live feeling like this?

He felt worse than sick; he felt diseased, as if he were covered in filth. He woke up every morning feeling unclean and even five showers a day didn't make him feel any better. Was this what insanity felt like?

Sitting in the auditorium, he knew there was something wrong with his being here. He should leave, but he wanted to know what the police were doing on Amanda's case. What they were doing to find her killer. Her killer—the words made him retch slightly. He swallowed the vile liquid that filled his mouth.

He hadn't slept much lately, usually waking to awful dreams with only nauseating remembrances of a hideous high-pitched cackle and blazing, incandescent eyes. Yet now some of the worst images came when he was awake. He'd be sitting at his desk, poring over some numbers, when horrible sounds would begin, terrible gagging noises as if someone were being strangled. Other times, he was swamped with the smell of blood, as if a tub of it had been dumped on him and couldn't be washed off.

The worst ones, though, were the childrens' voices he kept hearing. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but the tone was pleading. Every time he heard those, whatever he'd eaten that day would fly back up. More than once he filled his office wastebasket.

He was sleepwalking, too, something he'd never done in his life. He'd fall asleep in bed only to wake in the backyard, in the garage, or in the basement, even standing in front of the fireplace watching a roaring blaze. Those were the times

he really couldn't understand. Although fall was approaching, it still was hot outside. Why would he start a fire? What was he burning? It wasn't wood. He didn't have any. And he never woke up before everything in the fireplace was devoured by flame.

And that huge dent on the back of his car. Where did that come from? Can people drive their cars while sleepwalking? If he had, where had he gone? What had he done? That was the most frightening question of all.

His wife had never questioned his strange behavior, because she was either knocked out by tranquilizers or too sloppy drunk to notice. And yesterday she'd moved in with her mother in Toccoa, so she wouldn't be around any longer. He expected the divorce papers to arrive any day.

A rapping brought Benton out of his daydream. McCracken was calling the meeting to order.

"I know why most of you people are here," McCracken said, "but we have a few other items of business to handle first."

A groan arose from the seats.

"Don't worry," McCracken said. "We'll get through them as quickly as we can."

Approvals of the construction of a warehouse and a Baptist church and the granting of three new liquor licenses—which Quintard voted against—and the commission was finished with the busywork part of its agenda. It took thirty-five minutes. Sure went by quickly, Jason thought.

The room started to buzz with anticipation and the arc lights of TV news gathering clicked on, bathing the room in artificial light. The rustle of paper could be heard as reporters readied their notebooks.

Jason felt the nerves of his stomach start dancing. Badger still hadn't showed up. He was on his own.

"Now we will address the next item on the agenda, the one I suspect all of you have come to hear," McCracken said. "But before we start, I have a few words for the audience.

"I understand your concern over this matter," he said. "I'm concerned, too. I have three children of my own. However, this is not a public hearing and questions from the floor will not be allowed. Neither is it a kangaroo court and sentence will not be passed. This is an information gathering meeting, part of the commission's normal business, and we will treat it as such. If there are any outbursts, any attempts to disrupt these proceedings, the persons making the outburst will be escorted out. Detective Medlocke does not have to answer any questions that may jeopardize the investigation. Is that clear?"

"What investigation?" a man in the audience cried. "They haven't done shit."

"That's the kind of disruption I'm talking about," McCracken said, his voice taking on an icy edge. "Officer," he said, pointing to the man who had yelled out, "please ask that gentleman to leave quietly."

"You can't make me leave," the man said as the officer came toward him. "I have a right to be here."

"Not when you trample on the orderly flow of this meeting," McCracken said.

"Do that and you give up your right to be here. You just did."

The man left, but not before directing a few obscenities at the podium.

"Now, does that make my position clear?" McCracken said as the door closed on the man's swearing.

Many in the crowd nodded.

"Fine," McCracken said. "Now we will begin. Since I am chairman of the commission and I have the gavel"—he smiled mischievously—"I will start."

Sonuvabitch McCracken, Quintard thought as he shifted in his chair to get a better view of Jason.

Quintard knew it would be difficult to get the crowd involved, get them on his side, now that McCracken had thrown one person out. Obviously that was McCracken's intent. Nothing like a few cries of anger from the audience to turn the tables in his direction, Quintard knew. And he had developed a few questions to make that happen. Now he'd have to try another tack.

And now the bastard is taking the first question. He's trying to take this out of my hands. Quintard vowed not to let that happen.

"Detective Medlocke," McCracken said. "Can you fill us in on where the investigation into the child murders stands?"

"At this moment, we are following a few leads from the last two incidents," Jason said.

"What leads?" Quintard burst in, eliciting a scornful look from McCracken.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss them. Doing so may jeopardize their usefulness."

Jason decided to be civil to Quintard, at least at the outset. But he'd be damned if he'd let Quintard run roughshod over him. And he wasn't giving anything away with Benton sitting a few rows up.

"Are you close to apprehending the killer?" Quintard asked.

"Let me say this: In any murder investigation, you're always one small step away from catching the murderer. It only takes one misstep on the murderer's part."

McCracken cleared his throat to ask another question, but Quintard jumped in.

"Detective Medlocke, this killer doesn't seem to be making any missteps,"

Quintard continued. "In fact, he seems to be doing a good job of spitting in the face of the police department. He left one boy's poor, wretched body only a few

feet from the doorstep of police headquarters. And yet you say you still can't catch him. Not even when he's that close?"

"Commissioner, closeness makes no difference if we don't know he's there. And we are not physically capable of having someone positioned at every spot in the county where a body may be found. I wish we could. We've got our patrol officers doing double shifts, trying to keep an eye on things."

"Why not use the FBI?" Commissioner Carrington asked.

"We are," Jason said. "The FBI has cooperated with us in every way possible, allowing us access to their files, their computers, their expertise. But murder falls under state laws, not federal, so it's not in their jurisdiction and they have other cases they must allocate their manpower to solving. Still, we talk to them almost every day, just to keep them abreast, to get their advice."

"I think the bottom line is, Detective Medlocke, are you capable of finding the killer?" Quintard said. "If so, why haven't you? Is there something wrong at the police department? Why is it so hard to catch someone who already has killed five? Don't you feel responsible?"

Jason sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. This was an important answer.

"I feel responsible in the same way that any detective feels responsible when a killing takes place on his beat," Jason said. "Ever since the first killing, there've been many nights when I've lain awake, trying to figure out if I missed something somewhere, overlooked a clue, neglected a possible lead. But I haven't found any. Detective Franklin has done the same thing, and so have many other officers in the Gwinnett County Police Department. When murders like this take place, it affects the whole department. We all work at finding the killer. But whoever is doing these killings—and we are assuming it's one person—is very intelligent, very crafty. He's covering his tracks well."

"Does that mean he's more intelligent than you and Detective Franklin?"

Quintard asked.

Jason smiled. Motherfucker, Quintard thought.

"Let's just say that, at this moment, he's been luckier," Jason said. "But that will change."

"Are you saying that you're hoping for luck to catch this killer?" McCracken asked.

"Isn't that a rather superstitious and inconclusive way to handle a case?"

Quintard quickly added.

"Believe it or not, luck plays a major role in many investigations," Jason said.

"An unexpected tip from a witness you didn't know existed, a clue found in an out-of-the-way place, an anonymous phone call, all those can be counted as luck.

"But no, we're not placing all our hopes on a lucky break. That would be foolish. As I said before, we're tracking down a few leads at this moment. And we're going by the book in the investigation, using every scientific and investigative tool at our disposal.

"Believe me," Jason continued, directing his statement to the audience, "no one wants this murderer more than the police do. Nobody wants him more than I do. I lost a daughter in a car wreck about two years ago, so I understand what the loss of a child does to a parent. It rips out your soul. We at the department are doing everything we can to catch this killer."

Damn him, Quintard thought. He's playing this too slick. Why wasn't Franklin here? With his hot head, he could get a sarcastic or biting response to turn the crowd his way. Medlocke was too cool. It was time for his trump card.

"Well, Detective Medlocke, you say these killings are horrible to you and that you're doing everything you can to solve them. If that's so, then why were you at

a cabin on Lake Altoona for the past five days, enjoying the scenery while our children were being murdered around our homes?"

The crowd rumbled with the new information. Jason waited for the noise to die down. He was expecting this question.

"The explanation is simple," he said smoothly. "First of all, I was up there for only three days, not five. Second, I was up there with my father, taking care of some urgent family business. It was business that required solitude and the lake seemed a good spot. I cleared the days with my superior, Captain Silverman. There was nothing new working on the investigation, and my partner, Detective Franklin, was fully capable of handling the day-to-day checkups on the case. Third, I needed the break. Like anyone else who works for a long time on a single task, I was getting too close to the investigation. I needed a few days to recharge my batteries, come back with a new perspective."

"But can't something new break on the case at any time?" Commissioner Carrington asked.

"Yes it can, and I gave my partner strict instructions to call me the moment anything did," Jason said. "He called me less than an hour after the fourth child was found. I came back immediately."

"What sort of business did you and your father discuss?" Quintard asked. "Why was it so important?"

"It was business of a personal nature," Jason answered. "What it was is not relevant to this investigation. Let's just say it was some old family business that needed to be taken care of."

"Perhaps if you had been doing your job instead of pursuing personal business, the last two killings would not have taken place," Quintard said.

Jason had had just about enough. There was no real information being dredged

up here. Quintard was just trying to trip him, make him look like a fool. It was time to put this to rest, but it must be done with skill.

"Let me ask you, commissioner, since you seem to have such a firm grip on what is and isn't being done, what could we do that we haven't done already?" Jason asked.

Quintard blinked several times. He hadn't expected Medlocke to go on the offensive. The question caught him off guard and he stammered for an answer.

"Well... it's... it's not my job to find the killer, it's yours," he said.

"Precisely, commissioner," Jason said. "It is my job. And I'm doing the best that I can. The whole department is doing the best it can. Look at the bags under my eyes or the eyes of any other officer on the force. If you want to know how hard we're working, take a look at the amount of overtime that's been authorized to work on this case. We're all working our tails off. So why don't you stop badgering us, hounding us with useless things like this, and let us do what we're paid to do?"

A smattering of applause broke out across the audience. Quintard reached up and wiped sweat from his forehead. This wasn't going well at all. He heard the crowd grumbling with displeasure. "What the fuck is Quintard doing?" one voice whispered. "He's jerking us off," came the answer.

With their anger unfocused, Jason was no longer the target. Quintard realized the crowd was turning on him. He was losing control of the situation. He could see his future political plans blowing away on their anger. He had to do something and he went for his last shot.

"How does your alcoholism affect your handling of the case?" he asked.

The audience rumbled again, but Jason just gave Quintard a cold stare. He'd been expecting this question, too.

"It doesn't affect me," he said. "I haven't had a drink in almost a year. At the time of my drinking problem, I had just lost my wife and child in a car accident. That's no excuse, but it's a reason."

"Didn't you almost kill a man in a car wreck while you were drinking?" Quintard asked.

"Yes, myself," Jason answered, then squared his shoulders. "But I assume you're talking about the man whose truck I hit. He escaped without any injuries at all. I was in the hospital for weeks. Afterward, I entered a rehabilitation clinic."

Once again, Jason turned to the crowd.

"I've never tried to keep my alcoholism a secret. Everyone who has been around me, my superiors, my co-workers, even the reporters who cover this beat, are aware of it. It's simply a problem that I deal with. It doesn't affect my job."

The crowd murmured and fretted. Quintard looked at it with horror. All he saw was a ravenous beast ready to pounce. The beast was angry and irritated, wanting to taste blood and catching only air. Quintard had promised, but not delivered.

"I believe that's enough," McCracken said. "I'm satisfied with Detective Medlocke's answers. I recommend that we adjourn. Do I hear a second?"

"No!" Quintard protested. "I have more questions. Important questions."

"I doubt it," McCracken said as several people in the crowd chuckled.

"But I want to know about Detective Medlocke's connection with a woman named Alex Cotton," Quintard blurted out. "Someone he's been spending a great deal of time with, time perhaps better spent on these murders."

Jason felt his face flush and the tingling erupted in his muscles. How dare this fat bastard bring up Alex's name! He began to rise but forced himself down. At the same time, a dark cloud rumbled across McCracken's face.

"That is enough," McCracken roared. "I will not have Detective Medlocke's personal life dragged through these proceedings for your benefit, Anson. I move that we call this meeting to a close."

"Second," Commissioner Carrington said.

"All in favor say aye," McCracken said. Four ayes were heard.

Quintard silently fumed, seeing nothing but the remains of his career crumbling before his eyes. That and black hatred.

Before McCracken could slam the gavel down to officially close the meeting, someone in the audience stood up. Jason, who had been looking at McCracken, turned his head to see who had risen.

Joseph Benton.

The man still looked deathly ill, his face covered in a sheen of sickly sweat, his eyes glassy and dull. As he stood, he swayed unsteadily, but he managed to keep his feet. Everyone in the audience froze; those beginning to get up slowly sat back down.

"Detective Medlocke, my name is Joseph Benton. My daughter is... was... Amanda Benton, the first child to die. I'm sure you recognize me."

Jason nodded.

"Mr. Benton, this meeting is over," McCracken said. "I'm sure if you wish to speak with Detective Medlocke, you can schedule—"

"I only have one question," Benton intoned. "Why?"

" 'Why,' Mr. Benton? I'm not sure I understand," Jason said.

"Why did my daughter die? Why was she choked to death? Why was her head cut off and her eyes gouged out? Why was she raped after she was dead?"

The crowd gasped at these new revelations. Not everything had been printed in

the papers or broadcast on TV.

"Why does this devil call himself the Mercy Killer when he kills innocent children? Why not a more appropriate name... like Moloch?"

As the name rippled across the lips of the crowd, Jason almost lost his composure. The room started to spin and he could feel the blood begin to sink from his face. If he didn't regain his composure soon, his skin would turn pale and waxy for everyone to see. Closing off the outside world, he called upon the power, felt it rise slowly inside him. But not too much, just enough to maintain, just enough to get back to an even keel.

"What do you mean, Moloch?" Quintard asked, leaping at this final offering. When Benton stood there zombielike, he turned to Jason.

"What does he mean, Moloch?" he demanded. "Is that the name of this killer? Are you hiding something from us?"

"No," Jason said, trying to sound calmly assured. "Mr. Benton obviously knows something about religious mythology. Moloch is the Phoenician god of death. He demanded child sacrifices. And yes, we came across it in our research into these murders only because the computer kicked it out when we were looking for links between religion and ritual killings."

Quintard said nothing, but his eyes shot poisoned darts at Jason. Judging from the look on Quintard's face, Jason didn't think he believed his story. But Jason didn't give a rat's ass. All he was focusing on now was Benton, who'd brought up the one name Jason did not want to hear.

Jason's mind hummed with the implications. Was it just a random name that Benton pulled out of his memory? Or was it something more? Dear God, was it something more?

Faces in the crowd turned toward Benton, but the man remained silent. For

several seconds he swayed precariously back and forth, then stumbled down the aisle and up the steps. He almost fell, but caught himself on the back of one of the seats. A man leaned over, asking if he was okay, but Benton didn't answer, he just stared uncomprehendingly at the man.

I've got to follow him, Jason thought. He started to rise, when a hand tapped his back. He turned and found himself standing face to face with Quintard. A smile was on Quintard's face, a plastic clown grin meant to hide his anger from the voters in the crowd. He grabbed Jason's hand and pumped it in a furious grip.

"You bastard," Quintard whispered, smiling all the while. "You think you're such a slick shit. You've cost me my credibility and very likely my seat on the commission. That affects my future plans. I warned you and that dumbass partner of yours once before and I'm telling you again. I'm going to skewer your asses on a stick. I'm going to make you pay."

Jason just stared in disbelief. Then he shook his head.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he said. "I can't believe you're for real. Get away from me Quintard. Whatever's fucked you up may be contagious."

Jason pushed past Quintard and headed for the exit, not looking back. He didn't feel Quintard's eyes burning lasers into his back. He was too busy speeding up the steps, trying to keep up with Benton.

Chapter 30



Almost sprinting, Jason weaved his way in and out of the people jamming the aisles.

"Excuse me, excuse me, please, sorry, excuse me," he blurted as he tried desperately to get to the top of the stairs.

Squeezing through one of the double doors at the top, much to the irritation of others trying to get through it at the same time, he was dismayed at the swarm of people milling about in the carpeted hallway outside the commission chambers. For twenty yards in either direction a sea of heads was visible. Twisting his eyes back and forth, he searched for Benton.

People made it nearly impossible. Supporters kept coming up, wanting to shake his hand and offer encouragement. "I think you guys are doing everything you can," one man said. "That Quintard is a moron," a woman offered.

Jason tried to be nice, smiling and making noncommittal comments, but his patience wore thin as more and more came forward. The whole time he shook their hands and thanked them, his eyes darted back and forth.

Finally he spotted Benton, leaning against the curved glass windows that formed the outside wall of the building. Sweat still covered his cheeks and forehead. His left hand rubbed his face, as though checking for fever. His shoulders suddenly hunched forward and his cupped palm shot to his mouth, but nothing came out. He straightened himself, wiped his face one more time, and headed for the exit.

Shit, Jason thought, I need time to find his car in the parking lot. But how to stall?

Jason's eye caught the flare of TV lights coming to life to his right. It was Anthony Bradley, interviewing Bill McCracken. Jason cut an abrupt beeline through the crowd. The reporter was finishing his interview when Jason grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Oh, hi," Bradley said, a little startled by Jason's approach.

"I need a favor and I need it now," Jason said.

"What is it?"

"See that guy moving this way, the one who looks as if he's about to puke?"

"You mean Benton, the father of the first girl who was killed?" Bradley asked.

"Yeah, that's the one. I want you to interview him, keep him busy in here for about five minutes. Can you do that?"

"Sure, no problem," Bradley said. "I was planning to interview him anyway, since he stood up at the meeting. But I need to get you on camera, too. When can I do that?"

"That'll have to wait a few minutes," Jason said. "Right now, I want you to keep him here."

"Why do you want him stalled?" Bradley asked.

"I have my reasons," Jason said.

Bradley looked deeply into Jason's eyes, then back at Benton. "I don't understand, but I'll do it," he said.

"I promise if you do this for me I'll give you the whole story afterward. But you've got to keep him here for a few minutes."

"You got it."

Jason clapped Bradley on the back and headed for the doors to the outside. As he did, a couple of other reporters tried to corral him for a statement. "Not right now. Give me a couple of minutes. I need to make a phone call," he lied.

A cool front had passed through that afternoon and already was lowering the temperature. Although it was late summer, the air was decidedly cool and its briskness caught Jason in the face as he rushed outside. The beads of sweat felt like cold diamonds along his hairline. Without trying to seem frantic, he walked hurriedly across the building's plaza, aiming for the parking lot.

It was a little past eight-thirty, and the sun was going down. A half-light of orange and purple hung over the building, but it was dark enough for the photosensitive cells in the parking lot lights to flicker on.

Five minutes, Jason thought as he looked-out over the parking lot, that's about all the time Bradley can take. It's not nearly enough. That lot is huge and practically full. I can't check all the cars in five minutes. But he had to try.

Breaking into fast-paced strides, he moved down the first line of cars. He tried not to look conspicuous to the people filing from the building to the parking lot, but it was hard to keep from breaking into a run. Time was so precious.

The first two rows came up empty, but on the third, Jason spotted something one row over. It was hard to be sure in the dimming light, but as he walked hurriedly over, his suspicions were confirmed. A brown Chevrolet.

Jason rushed to the rear quarter panel and squatted. He found himself staring at a large dent crumpling the metal from the tire well to the back bumper. Several deep scars sliced down to bare metal.

Keeping his head low, Jason reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet, pulling a dollar bill from it. He folded the bill into a V shape and held it

in his left hand while he fished around in his right front pocket and drew out a quarter. Gently he scraped some paint from the damaged quarter panel into the dollar. Carefully folding the bill into a tight square, he placed it carefully in his wallet. Afterward, he stood up and walked to the front of the car, where he bent down and ran his hand along the tread of the front tire.

"Sonuvabitch," he said. "This guy needs an alignment something fierce. Two for two. Three for three if that typewriter matches."

Jason looked at his watch under the streetlight. About three minutes had passed. He quickly walked back to his car and grabbed the radio microphone and recited Badger's ID number.

A few seconds later, Badger spoke back.

"Yo," he said.

"Where are you?" Jason asked. "No names. Let's keep things tight."

"I'm here at the rabbit's hutch," Badger said. "The rabbit's not come home yet."

"I know," Jason said. "He's here at the J and A building. Listen, pal, I think we've got something hot, but I've got to get some samples back to the crime lab to be sure. We can't afford to let the rabbit out of our sight, so I'm calling for a patrol car to tail him. I'm betting he'll head home, but if he doesn't, I'll instruct the blue-and-white to call you and tell you where he goes. Got that?"

"Gotcha."

Jason signed off from Badger and radioed dispatch. "I need a patrol car at the J and A and I need it now, like yesterday," he said. Within thirty seconds a yellow-and-white county car roared into the parking lot and stopped next to Jason's car. Rolling down his window, Jason instructed the officer to tail Benton's Chevrolet, but he didn't give any names.

"Not too close. We don't want him to know we're keeping an eye on him," Jason

said. "When he gets to wherever he's going, radio Badger and fill him in. Don't make too much radio noise on this one; use Badger's ID number, not his name. We want to keep everything kind of quiet for right now. Refer to the suspect as the rabbit. Got it?"

On the way back to headquarters, Jason thought about his promise to talk to Bradley and the other reporters, but decided he'd handle that later. He radioed the dispatcher again and told her to call the crime lab. "They've all gone home, Jason," she said.

"Well tell them to get back down there," he said. "No excuses. I want them there."

When he got back to headquarters, several technicians already had arrived, including Norman Bibb. "I heard your call over the scanner," Bibb said. "You sounded serious. What have you got?"

Jason handed him the dollar bill and explained what was in it. Bibb took the bill and walked back into the lab. "It'll take a couple of minutes to prepare this," he said. "Go get a cup of coffee or something. I'll call you when it's ready."

Jason had finished his first cup of coffee and was pacing about outside the lab with a fresh one when Bibb stuck his head in the door. "C'mere," he said.

"We've got an exact match," Bibb said, positioning himself on the stool in front of the electron microscope. "There's no doubt this paint came from the same car that backed into the dumpster. The microscopic patterns are exact. That only happens with paint that's been sprayed on the same car at the same time."

Jason peered into the microscope. All he saw was a wild array of slopes and valleys, like the landscape of an alien planet. "You're absolutely sure?" he asked.

"No doubt in my mind," Bibb said. "Besides, we fed samples of both paints into the chemical spectography computer and it came up exact, too. Complete with

the same road debris and deterioration spectrum. I'd say you've got your guy."

"Not yet," Jason said. "This is only a piece of the puzzle, but it's enough to bring someone in for questioning. Package these up and write down your findings. I'm going to call Silverman."

It was almost eleven when Jason got Silverman on the phone.

"I'll be damned," Silverman said when Jason explained the situation.

"I want to bring Benton in for questioning," Jason said.

"Hell, yes, bring him in. Go get him this second. I'm on my way down."

Jason sprinted to the dispatcher's office and grabbed the microphone. He called Badger.

"Right here," Badger's voice crackled over the radio. "I'm sitting at the end of the street. The rabbit came right home to his hole and stayed there."

"I'm on my way," Jason said. "Make sure the rabbit stays put."

Snatching his jacket off the hook in his office, Jason flew out the back door of headquarters. He hit the door with such force, it slammed into the brick wall behind, sending several chips of brick flying.

Twenty minutes later he pulled in behind Badger's car, which was parked on a side street in clear view of Benton's home. Jason quietly opened his door and walked to Badger's rolled-down window, pulling on his jacket as he walked.

"He came straight home from the J and A," Badger said. "I was sitting right here when he pulled in. The cherry top radioed me a minute or so later to confirm that Benton didn't make any side trips. I sent the unit back on patrol, but told him to hang loose, we might need him again.

"He went into the basement a few minutes ago," Badger continued. "I saw the lights come on through the windows. I guess he's still down there because the

lights still are on."

"Let's go get him," Jason said.

"Aren't you calling for backup?" Badger asked.

"Not yet. I don't think we'll need them. And I don't want a lot of noise over the radio. No need to let everybody in the world in on our little secret."

"That's completely against procedure."

"You didn't see him tonight. He looked sicker than shit. I don't think he could put up a fight even if he wanted to. If he does, you and I can handle him."

"Not if he's got a shotgun in his hands," Badger said. "I think we need some backup."

"No," Jason said, a bit more harshly than he intended. "This is our collar, our case. We're the ones catching the heat for this. Let us be the ones to ice it down."

"Goddammit, he's killed five kids. Anyone who'd do that is capable of anything," Badger argued. "You're still keyed up over Quintard's bullshit tonight. You're wanting to show him up and it's fucking with your head. I want about a hundred cops standing behind me with riot guns and Smith and Wessons aimed at Benton's scrawny little body. I'm not ready to die. I've got two kids, a mortgage and—"

The sound of a car engine firing up stopped the argument. The garage door of Benton's home moved up its automatic opener and gray-blue exhaust fumes rolled from underneath. When the door stopped rising, the backup lights of Benton's Chevrolet came on.

"Where's he going?" Jason said.

"Get in; we'll follow."

Benton backed out of his driveway, turned right at the end of his street, and

headed directly at Jason and Badger. They ducked as his headlights speared their cars. He drove past without stopping.

"Do you think he saw us? Recognized our cars?" Badger asked.

Jason shrugged. "Didn't seem to."

As Jason climbed in, Badger flipped the ignition switch and put the car into drive, cutting a U-turn and heading after Benton. They stayed well back, but if Benton knew they were there, he didn't let on. He made no sudden moves to lose them, took no roundabout, multi-turn routes to throw them off the track. He just drove.

And drove.

And drove.

For more than an hour he meandered around Gwinnett, taking side roads, main highways, interstates. He never stopped, never pulled in anywhere.

"Man, I can't figure what this guy's up to," Badger said. "Either he's out driving for a breath of fresh air, or he's lost his mind and doesn't know where he's at."

"Look, he's pulling in," Jason said.

They were driving east down Pleasant Hill Road and Benton's right blinker was on. He turned into the driveway of Berkmar High School.

"What's with this guy and schools?" Badger wondered out loud.

"Turn in here," Jason said, pointing at the entrance to a two-story, Colonial-looking office building a few hundred yards away from Berkmar's entrance.

"Let's wait here and see if he comes back out."

Five minutes passed. Benton didn't return.

"He's up to something," Jason said. "Let's find out what. We'll cut through the woods on foot." His door was open before Badger could say anything.

"Wait a second, I want backup," Badger called out the window.

"No time," Jason said. "Suppose he's got a kid in the car?" Then he was off and running.

"Shit, shit, shit," Badger grumbled and got out.

The two cut around the office building and headed up the slight slope to the woods behind. Tall grass brushed at their pants cuffs and cockleburrs stuck to their jackets. The ground still was wet from the recent rain, hiding the sound of their footsteps. There were no lights, making it impossible to see any holes or ditches and both men stumbled several times before reaching the trees.

Pushing their way through the sticky, prodding needles of the Southern pines, they soon reached the heart of the trees. Tall oaks and elms stood silently as Jason and Badger brushed past. Scrub pines and ferns growing from the moist ground tugged at their pants legs and left drops of dew on their shoes. The pair moved quickly toward the school.

As they neared the edge of the woods, light spilled in from the streetlamps in the school's parking lot. The tungsten lamps gave an eerie, otherworldly glow to the woods. Strange shadows leaped about as the light hit gnarled branches and thick needles of the trees. The light refracted off the slight fog rising from the mulch-covered ground. The night grew chillier and plumes of their breath spread out milkily among the trees. They inched forward until they were just inside the shadowy blackness of the woods. Jason stopped and put his right hand back, telling Badger to stop.

They stopped about twenty yards from the tennis courts, which sat tucked away in a secluded parking lot far off to one side of the school. Benton's car was parked next to the fenced-in courts.

From where they stood, Jason and Badger had an unobstructed view of the car.

And Benton.

He was dressed all in black, including a black nylon stocking on his head, and he walked toward the back of the car. He stopped at the trunk, reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a pair of surgical gloves, which he tugged onto his hands. Then he unlocked the trunk and leaned over, lifting something out. When he turned around, a large form wrapped in black plastic was cradled in the crooks of his arms.

"Oh fuck," Badger said. "Not again."

Jason reached under his left arm and drew his Ruger 9mm from its holster. He popped out the clip and checked its load. Thirteen rounds, completely full. He shoved the clip back in and slid a round into the chamber, then flicked off the safety.

Badger pulled out his .357 magnum and flipped out the cylinder. All six ports were full. He patted his jacket pocket, making sure his three speed loaders were inside.

"Let's go get this bastard," Jason said. "Stay inside the trees until we're right on top of him. I want the shadows to hide us. And be careful you don't step on anything."

Between the branches, they kept an eye on Benton as they moved closer.

Slinging the limp form over his right shoulder, Benton moved away from the car and toward the tennis courts' gate. He moved with a noticeable bounce in his step, as if out for a brisk bit of exercise. Jason thought he heard music and couldn't figure out where it was coming from until he realized Benton was whistling.

"The motherfucker's doing 'Whistle While You Work,'" Badger whispered.

Striding to the nets at center court, Benton dumped the body on the ground and

squatted next to it. Taking a knife from one of his pockets, he sliced the plastic off, beginning at the feet and cutting toward the head. Within seconds, the scalpel-edged blade neatly sliced the bag open. Benton pulled the plastic off as if he were peeling a banana. He continued to whistle.

Jason and Badger emerged silently from the woods, only ten feet from the courts. Pistols drawn, they walked lightly to the fence. Jason reached out with his left hand and grabbed the gate, then flung it open, making it crash loudly into the fence.

"Freeze, Benton!" he shouted. "Don't twitch; don't cough; don't talk."

But Benton didn't freeze. He didn't even jump at the sound. He simply continued to peel off the plastic.

"Just a minute," he said over his shoulder in a musical voice. "I'm almost done."

Jason moved to Benton's left while Badger swung out to get on his right. Both pistols were aimed directly at Benton's back.

"There are two pistols aimed at you, Benton," Jason said. "Stop what you're doing, stand up and turn around with your hands in the air."

"Okey dokey," Benton said. "I'm done now."

He stood up and turned around. Behind him, the body of a four-foot Raggedy Andy doll rested against the nets. Benton locked his hands behind his head. He smiled, the light glinting off a mouthful of razor teeth and eyes that burned silver.

"Surprise, Jason," Benton said, his voice a razor's hiss.

Jason felt his heart freeze into a solid glacier. That voice. Those eyes. He had seen them in his bedroom, almost a week ago. He stared at Benton with horror.

"Benton?" he whispered, although he knew that wasn't whom he was talking to.

"Oh, I suppose you can use that name if you wish," Benton answered. "But don't

you know who I am, Jason? Or are you truly that dense?"

"Jason, what the fuck's going on here?" Badger asked uncertainly.

Jason didn't answer. He just stared at Benton.

"So it's been you the whole time," he said.

"Well, I can't take all the credit. Let's just say I convinced this little human here to do things he wouldn't think of himself, but was quite capable of doing. His mind is a very dark place; that's why I chose him. I just planted the seeds in his brain, gave him a little nudge, a little help here and there. He did the rest. And I must say, I was impressed at how very good he was at it."

"Where's Benton now?" Jason asked.

"Oh, he's in here, with me. I've just taken charge for the moment. Something I generally do when there's work to be done."

"So it was all to get at me," Jason said. "Five children killed, just to get at me. Wouldn't one have sufficed?"

"Well, it wasn't all for you," Benton said. "I used their blood for my own purposes. You see, this place causes me pain, even when I'm borrowing someone else's body. The blood helps... oh, how to say it?... it helps anesthetize me. I promise to show you what I mean in more detail later.

"Besides, I was having so much fun. And I needed something to get your attention. To distract you from learning about your powers, from reaching your full potential. You'd have been more dangerous. As it is, I'm merely looking forward to playing with you before I kill you.

"So here we are. My plan obviously worked. Although I certainly expected it would. It's taken me almost twenty-five of your years to put it in motion."

Benton shrugged.

"But now I think it's time for the real passion play to begin," he said. "Don't you?"

Why, why, why? Jason's mind whirled. Why was Moloch standing here in Benton's body, so unconcerned with what was happening? He must know that with one wrong move, he would be pumped full of bullets. Why was he approaching everything so cavalierly... unless he wanted to die?

"Jason, talk to me," Badger said, his pistol still aimed at Benton. "What's happening? What's with his eyes? His teeth? Why is he talking in that strange voice? What is he talking about?"

"Oh, do be quiet," Benton said, turning his head to Badger. "I dare say you'll find out quickly enough."

The smile vanished from Benton's face as he whipped his right hand from behind his head. A tiny Beretta in his hand fired, the bullet nicking Badger in the cheekbone. Badger flung himself to the ground and rolled over, coming up on his elbows with his pistol pointed at Benton's chest.

The implications suddenly were crystal clear to Jason.

"Nooooooooo," he cried. "Don't shoot! It's what he wants!"

Badger's pistol barked six times; each round slammed into Benton's chest like a mule kick. The hollow-point slugs ripped into Benton's chest, then left grapefruit-sized exit marks in his back. Bits of bone and organs spewed onto the court. Blood spurted from Benton's ruined chest, staining the black fabric of his clothes an even darker hue. The gun flew out of his hand and clattered onto the asphalt several feet away.

Benton staggered backward even after Badger quit firing, then flopped onto the net, blood trailing down the threads, leaving a crimson checkerboard. His body slipped slowly to the ground and rolled onto its back, arms spread out.

Jason and Badger rushed to the body, already lying in a pool of blood the size of a mattress. Pistols pointed at the twitching form, the two dropped to their knees. Benton still was alive and raised his head.

"Thank you. Thank you for ending it," he gurgled, blood bubbling out of his mouth and onto his cheeks. Although distorted, his voice had returned to normal. "You don't know what it's been like. You can't know what it's been like."

His eyes closed and his head lolled over to one side.

"I guess this is over," Badger said. "Looks as if we really didn't need any backup. I guess you were—"

Benton's body sat up, slinging blood into Jason's and Badger's faces. The dead man's eyes sprang open. Malevolence blazed from silver eyes.

"Yes," the mouth said in a guttural hiss. "Thank you for ending it, so a new beginning can start."

The body cackled as it slumped backward, landing with a mushy thump. A tiny whirlwind sprang to life in the middle of Benton's chest, sucking the blood on his body into a vortex, then slinging it in widening circles. Jason and Badger scuttled backward to avoid being drenched.

The cyclone grew larger, engulfing Benton's body and the pool of blood it lay in. The suction became enormous, dragging Jason and Badger into it. They crawled desperately to the fence, dropping their guns so they could latch on with all fingers. The pull became harder, their legs stretching out straight, then their torsos. Fingers howled in agony as the metal of the fence cut into them.

Not much longer, Jason thought. I can't last much longer.

Suddenly, the wind stopped. Jason and Badger flopped face first to the ground, Jason's nose slamming hard into the pavement. Blood dripping from his nose, he raised his head and looked slowly over his shoulder. He wished he hadn't. A ten-

foot, blood-red chrysalis stood in the center of Benton's chest. The chrysalis expanded and contracted like a huge, living lung.

As Jason stared, large, double-nailed fingers poked through the sides of the cocoon and slowly began ripping it apart. When the gash was finished, a nightmare stepped out.

"Hello, Jason. How nice to finally meet you face to face."

Chapter 31



"What's the matter? Aren't you glad to see me? My feelings are hurt."

An evil grin was pasted on Moloch's face. Its hands were planted on its hips like a petulant housewife's.

"I'm sure your father has told you all about me, and after our last little encounter, I know a good bit about you," Moloch said, casually fingering the M-shaped scar on its left cheek.

The beast was almost nine feet tall, muscles rippling under its dusky gold skin. From an elongated, hairless head, cold silver eyes blazed from the top of cheekbones so high they formed sunken caves beneath. It had no nose, just slits in its face that wheezed asthmatically. Glistening teeth seemed to go on forever inside its smiling mouth.

The air turned frigid. Breath came in icy clouds and Jason could feel his fingertips going numb. Moloch brought the frozen desolation of its world with it wherever it went.

Standing so close to Moloch, Jason could feel the evil reeking off it. It reached out like a living extension of Moloch's body, a thick, decaying stench that threatened to clog Jason's nose, made him want to cough, made his eyes water, like driving by a road kill in the middle of summer when the flies are buzzing heavily and hitting your windshield with meaty splats.

Jason said nothing, shock registered too deeply. The beast had played him like a piano; its plan executed flawlessly. The child murders had been little more than a ruse, a method to Moloch's madness. Benton was an expendable pawn, a cheap avenue for Moloch to use in this world, to cover its tracks until the moment when the disguise was no longer needed, to draw Jason deeper and deeper into the maelstrom until escape was impossible.

Why hadn't he seen it? Why had he refused to accept what was going on right before his eyes? He'd had suspicions, too many bizarre occurrences that couldn't be explained, but he'd searched desperately for rational ways to discount them. He wouldn't believe his intuition—hadn't allowed himself to. He always quoted Sherlock Holmes—*when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth*—but hadn't listened to the sleuth's advice. Five children are dead and in some ways it's my fault, he thought My fault for being afraid; my fault for not trusting myself.

And Moloch had known that he would do just that. The beast had known what his every move would be, his every reaction, a master hunter who knows its victim better than the victim knows himself. Jason felt violated. He'd been mentally raped and now Moloch intended to complete the physical end of the bargain.

"Nothing to say?" Moloch asked. "All the better. I need a few moments of silence. I have something to do."

Moloch held its arms straight out in front of it. Raising them to face level, a magnesium flash of light erupted in its palms. When it faded, a glowing green ball sat in its hands, a low hum emerging from somewhere inside. Moloch looked at Jason with a crooked smile, then flung the glowing orb straight up. As it reached the apex of its climb it stopped, hanging motionless in the air. Then it started spinning.

As the sphere picked up speed, its hum grew louder, the sound of a thousand huge, angry hornets. The decibel level became painful. Stingers of sound assaulted the eardrums. Jason pushed his hands over his ears, but his eyes remained open.

Bolts of light rocketed off the rotating ball, slicing through the air with fierce hisses. The streams revolved around the inside of the fence, quickly fusing into a spinning circle of incandescence. Within moments, a solid barrier enclosed the courts, cutting off the outside world. Breathing a self-satisfied sigh, Moloch took in its handiwork.

"I don't want to be disturbed," he said. "From the outside, it will look as though nothing is here. They won't be able to see or hear us. Very cozy."

Jason knew he must put on some sort of facade of confidence, even if he didn't feel it. Uncertainty was exactly what Moloch strove for. The beast's plan was to render him too stunned to move, too scared to protect himself. It was only Moloch's massive ego that prevented it from attacking immediately. It wanted to revel in its victim's reaction.

By God, I won't give him the pleasure, Jason vowed. He felt the tingling rise in his muscles and tiny sparks danced before his eyes. He was ready; he would give it his best shot; he'd—

"Jason?" The word was a choked cry.

Badger!

Without taking his eyes from Moloch, Jason spoke to his partner.

"Badge, back out of here. Get away. You're not a part of this."

"Who... what is that?" Badger asked, his voice trembling so badly he could barely speak. "What's going on?"

"An old friend of the family," Jason answered.

Moloch bowed low, its right arm flung across its chest, its left thrown back.

"Thank you for the compliment," it said with equal sarcasm. It turned to Badger.

"You are Medlocke's friend. We have met before. I believe you'll recall a tiny stuffed frog and a pair of bright blue eyes?"

Badger's face turned icy pale.

"Ah, I see you do remember," Moloch said. "A pity, though, that you are such close friends with Medlocke. You really should choose your friends more carefully. This friendship is going to prove fatal."

Moloch's right hand came up. In its palm sat a snake as thick as a man's arm, coiled like a spring. With a quick underhand toss, Moloch launched the reptile at Badger.

Badger staggered backward, hands flying in front of his face to ward off as much of the blow as possible, as if it truly mattered where the fangs struck.

Jason's arm sprang out, a scimitar blast of light leaping from the fingertips, slicing through the snake. The reptile's head tumbled to the asphalt where the jaw contracted again and again. Venom spurted in two long jets across the pavement, steam rising from the heated poison. Jason calmly walked to the snake's head and ground it under his foot. The crunching of bones combined with streams of blood and venom flowing from under the sole of his foot.

"Flashy, but hardly impressive," he said.

"You have learned quite a bit," Moloch said, nodding its head. "But I've been practicing for centuries; you for mere days."

"Call me a child prodigy," Jason said.

Jason still did not feel the bravado his voice held. He was trying to get Moloch

off guard, make it do something stupid. But the beast was right, Moloch was an old hand at these trials while he was a novice relying on raw talent, luck, and nerve. He didn't know how long any of them would hold out.

"Child prodigy? We'll see," Moloch said. "Let's see how well you play this."

The beast raised its hands; lightning crackled between the palms. A frigid wind swirled across the courts, blowing Jason's and Badger's hair into dancing knots. Moloch closed its eyes and Jason saw his chance.

The beast apparently didn't notice the pistol lying a few feet away. A quick command from Jason's mind and the gun leapt off the pavement and flew into his palm, barrel aimed at Moloch's chest. In less than five seconds, Jason emptied the clip into the beast, the booming report of the pistol echoing inside the shield encircling the court. Fired in a tight pattern, the bullets left a gaping hole the size of a football in the center of Moloch's breastbone. Thick, black blood gushed from the wound as severed arteries kept pumping.

Moloch dropped to one knee, its hands reaching for the hole in its chest. It looked up at Jason, incandescent hatred blazing from its eyes. Blood dripped from the corners of its mouth.

"That's the second time you've hurt me, Medlocke," it hissed. "I shall not let it happen again. I'll make sure your death is even more painful."

Moloch rose unsteadily, blood pooling at its feet. Jason could not believe his eyes. How can any living thing take thirteen shots in the chest and still be alive?

"You thought me dead?" Moloch spit. "Fool! It will take much more than tiny pellets of metal to kill me."

Planting its hands on either side of the hole in its chest, Moloch pulled outward. Bones splintered and more blood erupted from the wound. Liquid grunts of exertion and pain rose from deep in Moloch's throat. Each grunt spewed crimson

from its mouth.

When the wound was almost a foot wide, Moloch stopped, catching its breath and staring malevolently at Jason. The beast reached into its chest and, with a hideous sucking sound, plucked out its still-beating heart. The organ was badly wounded. Covering it with its other hand, Moloch gently squeezed the damaged organ. Blood oozed between its fingers in muddy rivers. A green glow formed around its hands, a living, breathing aura that pulsed in a steady rhythm. The beast grimaced slightly and seconds later unfolded its hands. A regenerated heart beat in its palms. It calmly stuck the organ back in its rib cage and placed its hands over the wound. The green glow formed around the hole as flesh began mending itself. It only took a few seconds before a glowing scar was all that remained.

Deep in the recesses of his mind, Jason knew he was missing what might be his best chance to attack again. But he was frozen. How could he destroy a creature with the power over life and death? Even when death was tapping on its shoulder, Moloch had the ability to brush the hand away.

Moloch sensed Jason's amazement, smelled his confusion and fear.

"You see?" it said. "You have no idea what you're up against. No clue how to stop me. If you had, you would've done something while I was wounded. Now it's too late."

Sweeping its hands downward, lightning rippled again around Moloch's body. White-hot firebolts lanced from its body, tainting the air with the smell of ozone. One of the bolts slammed into the Raggedy Andy doll still leaning against the nets. It evaporated into a cloud of white dust.

A monsoon wind sprang up, blowing Jason and Badger backward. Jason tried to call upon the golden aura, but was too slow. His head slammed into the tennis courts. Stars burst into glittering diamonds before his eyes and he felt

consciousness slipping away.

Fight, fight, his mind screamed. But the blackness was too strong, too all-consuming. Jason fell into it face first.

Chapter 32



Someone had stuck an electric wire up his ass and was popping him with shots of current. At least that's how Stephen felt.

Sitting in his son's apartment, Stephen knew something was happening with Jason. Over the past several hours, a rush of emotions seared the air between him and his son. His nerves were horsehair rope, frayed at the ends and ragged. But the truth was, none of the emotions seemed terribly out of the ordinary. Nothing carried the sickening taste of terror that would mean Moloch had entered the picture.

Jason had phoned earlier that evening and said there was a break in the case, so Stephen suspected Jason probably was on the trail of the child murderer, hence the emotional roller coaster.

In the hours after the phone call, Stephen tried to remain calm. He read, watched TV, got something to eat. But now the clock read one and sleep was nowhere near. Rational thought told him things were okay, but... there was something else, something he couldn't put his finger on but didn't trust. Things were coming to a head, and while there was nothing concrete to base his fears on, he felt an icy finger jabbing his gut.

And here he was, sitting on his butt, doing nothing.

It was infuriating.

Perhaps a shower would relax him, he reasoned. Maybe he was just too keyed up. He pushed himself out of the recliner and headed for the bathroom. Nothing to get worried about. Don't blow a gasket, old man.

He was halfway down the hall when the blast of terror folded him over double. His stomach heaved and he swallowed the vomit that swam into the back of his throat.

He had no doubts about the origins of his agony. Moloch. The time had come. Propping himself against the wall, Stephen cleared his thoughts, pushing his fear downward, downward, until it pooled at the bottom of his existence. There was no time for fear. No time for indecision. He needed to be calm. He had to help his son.

His body sitting like stone in the hallway, Stephen's blue aura rose around him, coalescing into a glowing wraith above his head. Encased in the aura, the essence of his soul lifted out of his body and through the ceiling, up beyond the roof, above the trees, melting into the formless region of the spirit, out of sight of man. Safely within the spirit world, Stephen's soul took wing, a cobalt streak racing along the spiritual pathways, an archangel of protection and love.

In the distance, a golden light glowed. Jason. Stephen could see waves of anguish and fear rolling off his son's golden aura like heat on a summer day. Yet its bunding spark was fuzzy, slipping in and out of clarity, as if someone were pulling a gossamer shroud across it. Stephen sped toward his son, drawing closer until he was only seconds away.

Then the light vanished. Snapped off. Stephen choked. Dear God, so soon? Is my son dead so soon? He felt his resolve waning, leaking out of his body like a cup tipped on its side. His son was dead, what was the use? He had failed. He slowed his pace. It was all over.

Or was it?

In the distance, a tiny flame sputtered into life. Stephen reached out. Jason, small and defenseless. He was unconscious, not dead. Stretching himself to the limit, Stephen increased his speed. In the hallway, rivers of sweat poured down his face, dripping onto his shirt. Sheets of wetness spread from under his arms.

As he neared the flicker of Jason, Stephen inhaled Moloch's evil. It stood over his son, a hooded blackness threatening to overwhelm, to snuff out Jason's light. Angrily, Stephen reached to shove it aside.

And failed.

He slammed into the green shield around the tennis courts with painful force. In the hallway, his body jerked with the blow and bruises sprang up on his chest, shoulders, and arms. At the courts, his spirit reached out again and again was thrown back by Moloch's screen.

Summoning all his strength, Stephen felt his life-force take on an intensified blue born, a white-hot fire of purity. When he had stoked it to its highest point, he flung himself forward, hitting the green shield with a heavyweight punch. For a split second, the shield held, giving only slightly. Then with a searing sizzle it split, reading a hole through which Stephen leapt.

Jason, Stephen said, speaking without words as he descended toward his son.

Jason, it's Dad. I'm here.

A rumble shook Stephen. An ocean of cold hatred poured over him.

"Foolish old man, you should've stayed where you were," Moloch said. "Now I shall have you both."

A bottomless fury filled Stephen's soul. First his wife, then his daughter-in-law and grandchild, now his son. By God, this creature had done enough to his family. It was goddamned time for it to stop.

"Get away from my son, or I'll reach down your throat and pull your ass out your mouth," Stephen warned.

Moloch just laughed uproariously.

"Such vivid colloquialisms, Stephen," he said. "And you a man of the cloth. Is your God not shocked?"

"I don't think He'll care what I say or what I do, as long as I get rid of you," Stephen said.

As he spoke, Stephen felt his hatred for Moloch become a solid thing, a churning cauldron of blue fire. Even the strength he had attained to split the protective barrier was nothing compared to the molten anger that now burned inside him. White sparks jumped madly from it as the heat of his hate increased. Its color changed from pure blue to a crimson-tinted shade of bloodlust. It wanted to suck Stephen in, make him one with his murderous desire. He didn't care. All he could see was Moloch's ultimate destruction, the ending of the centuries-long battle. He didn't care if he died extracting his blood-warmed justice; he just wanted to taste Moloch's death first.

The power within strained against him, taking on a life of itself, a muscular beast demanding retribution and a target to feed upon. Stephen felt like a sack of grain filled until the seams began to split. Just when it seemed his body and mind would rend themselves apart with the effort of restraint, Stephen let go.

The blood-dipped globe of energy appeared from nowhere, exploding to life only yards in front of Moloch, giving the beast no time to launch a counterattack. The green aura of protection flared around Moloch, but it was puny, an ant before a rampaging elephant.

The sphere slammed into it with locomotive force, wrenching its feet from the ground and throwing it backward, racing toward the force shield at lightning

speed. Its arms cartwheeled the air, trying desperately to find a purchase, to stop the inevitable, but there was nothing to grab and it rammed into the fence with a bone-crushing crash, the metal tattooing a crosshatched pattern into its back. It crumpled to the ground, the breath knocked out of its lungs. The green aura faded as its mind lost its ability to concentrate. Trying to buy precious seconds, it hurled dozens of white-hot firebolts about the court. They ricocheted off the force shield like lethal pinballs.

But Stephen was relentless. Another inferno of anger burst to life in front of Moloch. The creature flung up its arms to protect itself, but its body slammed backward into the fence. Bones broke and blood dripped from its ears and mouth. "You fucking bastard," Stephen said. "I'm going to take care of you once and for all."

One after another, without any breathing room, the fury of Stephen's hatred pummeled Moloch. Again and again the beast was driven into the force field with organ-smashing force. The field of protection it had created around the court prevented the metal from giving way and allowed it temporary respite. What was meant to guard it was becoming its tomb.

Stephen could feel Moloch's desperation. The creature was weakening. A few more blows and it would be over. He would be rid of the beast. His family would be safe.

Below him, he heard a stirring and felt Jason returning to consciousness. For a moment, he slowed his attacks and turned his attention to his son. He saw Badger standing over Jason, talking to him.

"Jason, are you okay?" Stephen asked.

Jason groaned and slowly turned himself over, mumbling something to Badger. Stephen focused his concern on his son.

Blood filling its mouth, Moloch uttered a soft command. The air around it began swirling, blackening into a dense cloud. The gases quickly enveloped it, obscuring it from view.

Feeling the sudden surge in power, Stephen turned, a spear of dismay plunging into his stomach. He had screwed up. Desperately, he launched another attack, but it was weak and bounced harmlessly off Moloch's protective cloud.

The gases surrounding Moloch were tar-black, nothing inside was visible, but the walls of the cloud bulged ominously. There was movement within, inhuman shapes pressed against its outer edges, seeking release. The cloud boiled and buckled as its innards gained strength. Then it split with a wet, fleshy sound and the guts of hell spilled out.

Misshapen creatures, only barely human in form, crawled, slithered, and stumbled from the opening. Twisted wreckage of bodies poured forth. Headless bodies streamed onto the court, faces staring out from the bellies. Twisted arms reached and clawed for sustenance; fingers pointing, eyes staring from their tips. Legless bodies oozed from the cloud, arms dragging the torsos along, intestines dragging out behind. Drool dripped from ruined slashes that once were mouths. "Kill him," Moloch cried. "Kill the one on the ground." His minions shambled toward Jason. Eyes glowed with promise.

Chapter 33



Backed into a corner of the fence, Badger closed his eyes and shook his head. This couldn't be real. It just couldn't be. But when he opened his eyes, it still was there. He bit his lip until blood dribbled down his chin. And it still was there.

What the fuck was going on? What happened to Benton? What did this have to do with the child murders? Why the fuck did Jason know this beast?

He watched as Jason pumped thirteen rounds into the creature's chest, only to have it pull its fucking heart out and fix it, for God's sake! Badger looked at his own .357. What once seemed so powerful and deadly now looked like a squirt gun.

He simply couldn't accept it. This shit didn't happen in real life. Even Stephen King couldn't come up with something this fucked up.

Badger recognized Stephen's voice when it came from out of nowhere and spoke to the beast, but it only convinced him that he had totally lost his shit. When those huge balls of whatever-the-hell-they-were appeared from nowhere and kicked the living shit out of that ugly fucker, Badger figured he'd gone down that long, lonesome road.

The battle rose around him, but Badger, trapped within his own amazement, failed to understand the danger. He saw Moloch's bolts of desperation ricochet off the barrier and fly around the courts in a deadly frenzy, but did not comprehend the danger until one bolt ripped through his right shoulder.

He sank to his knees as the sickly sweet smell of burnt flesh filled his nose. Although the pain was almost crippling, it also cleared the cobwebs out of his head. Whatever this creature was or wasn't, it sure as hell was real and it sure as hell was deadly.

Picking up his gun with his left hand, he scuttled over to Jason. His friend lay facedown on the courts. Badger saw him stir slightly.

"Jazz, Jazz, wake up," he said, shaking his partner vigorously. "You've got to do something."

Jason rolled over slowly, his eyes opening, but still unfocused.

"Jazz, are you okay? Can you hear me?" Badger asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you," Jason mumbled. "Where am I?"

Badger began to answer when he heard Stephen's voice interrupt. "Jason, this is Dad. Are you all right?"

Wait a second, old man, Badger thought, don't take your mind off that thing over there. He ain't dead yet.

Badger looked up and saw the black cloud start swirling around Moloch.

"Oh fuck," he said.

Jason rose to a sitting position and looked around, a dazed expression on his face. Badger thought his friend's expression made him look as if a bulldozer were rumbling through his head, leaving deep, jagged tread tracks. Jason looked into Badger's face and his expression changed to one of alarm.

"Shit, do I look that bad?" Badger said, then turned his head to watch the black vapors swallowing Moloch.

Jason followed Badger's gaze just in time to see the cloud burst open, spilling its horror.

"What are they?" Badger whispered, his arms hanging limply at his sides.

"The souls of the damned," Jason answered. "They used to be human, just like us."

Jason paused. "The poor bastards. What must they have gone through to wind up like that? How they must have suffered," he said as his eyes filled with tears.

But the crying lasted only a second. As the first tears trailed down his cheeks, Jason's body arched backward, his arms stiffened, slapping his palms to the ground to keep him upright. The golden aura flamed to life and Badger gasped, falling backward onto his ass.

Oh Christ! he thought. I can't take much more of this. How much do they expect me to handle?

Badger watched as the tears on his friend's face turned to glittering diamonds, then evaporated. Jason's hair moved and danced like Medusa's snakes. He brought his hand up before his face and turned it forward and back, an expression of wonder in his eyes. The golden light flowed in and out of Jason's skin, the blood vessels and capillaries glowed with inner power. Jason flicked his fingers and multicolored sparks burst from their tips, falling to the pavement in glittering cascades. He looked at Badger and smiled.

"It's never been so strong," Jason said with awe. "But it's different somehow. It's more pure, more... more holy. What brought this on? Why is it so strong, so different?"

"What *is* it? What the fuck is wrong with you?" Badger asked with equal parts fear and amazement in his voice.

Jason saw his partner's horrified face and a look of sympathy and concern crossed his own. He placed his hand on Badger's shoulder.

"Don't worry, pal," he said. "It's okay. It's good. This is the little family problem

I was telling you about. It's sort of a birthright, sort of—"

Jason's words were interrupted as a sphere of energy exploded to life only a few feet away and slammed into the creatures with a meaty thump. Body parts flew helter-skelter. Arms, legs, heads, eyes, rained on the asphalt. There was no blood; these creatures had been drained eons ago.

A thump on Jason's right shoulder caused him to look down. A three-fingered hand was attached to his arm, fingers clamped around his bicep with unbelievable force. The nails sliced through the fabric of his jacket and shirt, biting into the muscle. The pressure tightened.

"It's still alive," he said. "It can't die."

"Bullshit," Badger said, bringing the barrel of his gun to bear only an inch or so from the hand.

Jason gently pushed the barrel away and shook his head. Gazing benevolently at the diseased intruder on his arm, his eyebrows knitted briefly. The hand dissolved into dust, which floated gently to the ground.

The pair stood up. Body parts littered the ground all around them. Dismembered arms, their hands still attached, pulled themselves toward Jason and Badger from all sides. Legs kicked and jumped in fish-out-of-water fashion. A few feet to their left, a head lay sideways on the asphalt, red eyes staring directly at Jason. The jaw opened and closed, teeth clacking together. When it opened, centipedes swarmed out of the mouth.

The remaining creatures lay in a disorganized pile near where they emerged from the cloud. Those with legs still intact wrenched themselves to standing positions and began shuffling toward Jason. Those without flopped back and forth, trying to fulfill their duty. They did it all without saying a word, without grunting or groaning. To Badger, the silence of their unending efforts was more

terrible than the creatures themselves.

"I think we'd better protect ourselves," Jason said. The golden aura around him increased in intensity and extended to cover Badger. A gentle tingling scooted along Badger's skin and he jerked slightly at the feeling. It was weird, but soothing, like the friendly arm of a loved one around your shoulders.

"Good idea, Son," Stephen's voice said from nowhere.

"Dad? You're here?" Jason said, looking around.

"Jesus, what a fucked-up family," Badger muttered.

"Yes, I'm right here," Stephen said, ignoring Badger's comment.

"Where?"

"Let's just say here in spirit if not in form."

From behind Jason, the booming report of Badger's gun interrupted the conversation. Four feet in front of Jason, the head of one of the misshapen creatures vanished in a meaty spray. The body danced and spun, falling to the ground, where it jerked itself into a sitting position and tried to stand. It tumbled over.

Jason turned to face Badger, who stood about three feet back, a smoking pistol in his left hand.

"I think you better get your head out of your ass and pay attention to the situation at hand," Badger said. "There's a lot more of those things. Plus, the big daddy over there seems to be making a comeback."

He pointed the barrel of the pistol at Moloch, still leaning against the fence. A green film hugged the creature's body, and through it, Jason could see the wounds on its body healing themselves.

"Not again," he said. "Dad, isn't there any way to kill it?"

"Destroy it utterly," Stephen said. "Even it can't survive without a body."

"How?"

"I'm not sure. It's something we'll have to figure out together."

A vengeful laugh came from the other side of the court. Moloch stood, its body whole again.

"How touching," it said. "Father-son togetherness. The babbling of fools."

With a wave of its arms, the cloud reappeared, emptying its guts with a fresh batch of creatures. Only this time their numbers were tripled. They descended on Jason and Badger like ravenous wolves. Badger's gun fired five more times and five more fell, but ten more took their place.

The aura protected them both, but the sheer weight of the brutes forced Jason backward. He stumbled into Badger, who was desperately trying to reload. The two went down in a heap.

Creatures fell upon them, biting and slashing.

Chapter 34



Stephen watched helplessly as the creatures attacked. He couldn't destroy them without taking a chance of destroying Jason and Badger. What could he do?

Moloch's voice entered his mind.

Feeling helpless, Stephen? Perhaps a bit left out? Don't worry. I haven't forgotten about you. In fact, I've brought you a little gift.

A greenish glow formed at the end of the hallway in Jason's apartment. Unable to focus his mind in two places at once, Stephen left the tennis courts, speeding down the spiritual road until the blue aura of his spirit descended again into the apartment and reentered his body. He knew Moloch, as powerful as the beast was, wouldn't be able to launch separate attacks at him and Jason. The creatures were a diversionary tactic to keep Jason out of the way while Moloch dealt with him.

Stephen stood and faced the diaphanous glow, which slowly approached him. As it did, it assumed a human shape. Two outstretched arms appeared, reaching. A head formed, but there was no face. Stephen gave ground as the thing came closer.

"Honey, what's the matter?" a woman's voice said. "Don't you recognize me?"

Stephen felt his knees turn to soup. He thought he might fall. The voice. It was Maureen's.

"Baby, it's me. I've come back to you. Don't you want me?"

Sickness filling his stomach, Stephen watched as the face took shape. The straight, aquiline nose, the full, lush lips, the bright blue eyes. Her blond hair fell about her shoulders in the loose, easy cut Stephen remembered with love. Her breasts swelled inside the sweater she was wearing, the cashmere he bought for their twentieth anniversary, the one he took such joy in rubbing his hands along before yanking it off in a burst of passion.

Oh my Lord, Stephen thought it is Maureen.

No, you stupid bastard, it's Moloch, a voice inside said.

He backed down the hall, arms stretched to either side, fingers scraping the walls.

"Kiss me, Stephen," she said. "I want you."

"Get away from me," he said. "I know who you are. You're not Maureen."

"But I am," she said. "I'll show you."

Crossing her arms at the waist, she pulled the sweater over her head. She was naked underneath, and her breasts, wet with perspiration and swollen with desire, rose and fell with each breath. Her nipples stood erect.

Dropping the sweater to the floor, she reached down and unzipped the skirt she was wearing. It sank softly from her hips. Moist drops glittered in the golden-blond triangle between her legs. The musky odor of arousal filled the hall.

"Make love to me, baby," she moaned, her hands running up and down her body, in and out.

Stephen felt himself getting erect. Oh God he wanted her. It had been so long. He still loved her so much. He reached for her, his mouth longing to meet hers. Their hands touched and she smiled. Her mouth was full of fangs.

"Surprise," she hissed.

Her arms shot out and clamped around his throat, almost crushing his windpipe. Fireworks popped in front of his eyes. Her nails dug into the back of his neck and Stephen knew it would only be a few seconds before he passed out.

With power born of desperation, his arms flew upward, catching hers inside the elbows, forcing them apart. Fingernails ripped bloody trails along the sides of his neck as he pried her hands off. Stephen staggered backward, taking air in great whooping gulps.

She stepped up like a striking cobra, the back of her right hand cracking across the right side of his jaw, shattering it. He bounced off one of the walls, then careened backward into the living room, stumbling over his own feet and falling. Coming at him, she grabbed a chair from the dining room table and lifted it over her head. The dining room furniture was Stephen's wedding present for Jason and Sarah. It was solid oak and the chair weighed at least twenty pounds, but she held it as if it were made of toothpicks.

Stephen raised his right hand and flicked his wrist. With a thunderous whoomp! the chair burst into flame. She tried to drop it but couldn't. The wood stuck to her hand in a welder's embrace. As her hands burned and the skin peeled back in charred strips, she looked at Stephen.

"You cocksucker," she said.

The chair quickly burned itself to ash, leaving two blackened stumps where her hands used to be. Holding them in front of her face, she smiled hideously.

"I guess this means you don't love me anymore," she said.

Unable to speak, Stephen sprang upright, spitting two molars onto the carpet. A stream of blood ran from the corner of his ruined jaw, already beginning to swell and turn purple. Hatred boiled behind his eyes, more hate than he thought possible of harboring. Moloch was making a mockery of his wife, abusing her

memory. Stephen's face turned a violent shade of crimson as fury rushed into it. He felt lightheaded and the room began to swim.

He charged.

Her eyes opened wide at the unexpected attack and she took a step backward before his palms smashed into her face, breaking her nose in a crimson shower. A blue glow burst forth around his hands and covered her head in a sapphire shroud. For a moment, the light hooded her head, then sank into her skin like water into a sponge.

Stephen looked at his handiwork and grimaced. Her nose sat sideways on her face, completely crushed to the right. The skin was torn free and one side of her sinus cavity was exposed. As she breathed, blood plumed out in a scarlet mist.

She just laughed.

"I think I want a divorce," she said.

Stephen gave her a furious, cockeyed smile. Then he clenched his fist.

The sound of splintering bone and ripping muscle burst through her ruined nose like a voice through a megaphone. Her hands flew to the sides of her head and her mouth opened to scream. Before she could utter a sound, her face exploded outward and, in a jet of blood, flesh, and bone, her brain rocketed from her head. Stephen stepped to one side and the brain flew past him, splattering against the far wall, oozing down in thick, gray masses.

"Laugh now, bitch," he mumbled through bloody lips.

She stood there for a moment, her face gone, rimmed by the bloody edges of her skull. Then she toppled forward, spraying Stephen with gore.

Wiping his face with one hand, Stephen sighed. His shoulders sagged. He still felt lightheaded and queasy, only now the feeling was compounded by nausea and a feeling of unreality. The room seemed miles away and he was having

trouble concentrating. He still had something to do, but couldn't remember what it was.

All he knew for certain was that the left side of his head hurt, a dull ache. Funny, he thought, it's the right side of my jaw that's broken, why does the left side of my head hurt?

A piercing white arrow of pain jabbed deeply into his temple. The room turned black in front of him and he crumbled to his knees.

One word scorched across his mind before he lost consciousness.

Stroke.

Chapter 35



Jason flinched as claws and fangs tried to tear him to pieces, only to hit the protective corona with terrible sizzling. Beside him, he saw Badger punch his right fist into the oozing face of what used to be a woman. Badger's hand burst through the other side, gelatinous mounds dripping off the knuckles. He groaned and jerked his fist out with a moist pop.

Jason knew he and his partner would be temporarily safe from the physical attack, but the crush of bodies soon would suffocate them both. He must act.

It was hard to ignore the desperate beasts, but Jason cleared his mind. His first inclination was to eradicate them into dust, destroy them totally, but considering that plan, he once again felt a pang of pity for the hapless things. This wasn't their fault. They were Moloch's pawns. But they didn't deserve this.

Instead of annihilation, Jason suddenly thought of freedom, of release, of unchaining these creatures from Moloch's grip.

The power flared to unbounded strength inside him, his skin felt as if it would rend itself apart. He had to send it somewhere, so he directed it outward, toward the creatures. Howling, they fell back. At first Jason thought he had miscalculated, that the screams were agony. But after a moment of listening, he realized these weren't sounds of pain.

At first Jason could detect only confusion in the creatures' cries, sounds of fear in things that should have lost all fear long ago. They did not understand what was

happening.

Perhaps it was just another form of torture, this one more brutally exquisite in its subtlety. Perhaps the freedom being offered would be snatched away at the last second, leaving them empty and barren again.

But the confusion and fear quickly changed, turning to joy from the soul-dead creatures when they understood they were free. The eons they had spent in captivity were over. Whatever crimes they had committed were forgiven. And Jason had done the forgiving.

The creatures milled about on the courts, their arms stretched to heaven. Golden light spilled from their skin and their eyes glowed like beacons. With the sound of husks falling away from corn, their bodies collapsed to the concrete, empty containers no longer needed. As the skin fell away, blinding, vaporlike wisps of light fled upward and outward. A rainbow of colors filled the air—vermillion, topaz, plum, viridian—darting and dancing around the inside of the courts. A beautiful keening could be heard as the creatures' souls broke free of their boundaries. Moloch's protective shield around the courts couldn't hold them and they sped upward, toward eternity and peace.

His head craning backward, Jason felt quite proud of himself. Full of himself and his powers, he watched his handiwork. It was his caring concern, his sympathy, his empathy that had set the minions free. Is this what it was like to be omnipotent? It felt good if it was.

Enveloped with feeling all-powerful, he let his guard down and the golden aura slowly disappeared.

Badger, too, was thunderstruck as he watched the soul dance, numbed by his friend's powers, awed by their implications. And yes, scared of their possibilities. Who was this strange and wonderful man standing next to him, the

man who just ten minutes before had been only Jazz?

Neither of them saw Moloch coming up from behind.

The beast grabbed Badger by the neck and flung him across the tennis courts. Shocked by the surprise attack, Jason was unable to rebuild the sheltering cocoon of golden light around his friend. Unprotected, Badger's head slammed into one of the iron posts holding the tennis nets, knocking him out. A ruby blossom spread across the top of his skull.

With speed in contrast to its size, Moloch turned its attack on Jason, giving him no time to react. Grabbing Jason by the shoulders, Moloch hoisted him overhead. The golden aura burned his hands, but Moloch ignored the pain. Its hands smoking, Moloch reared back and threw Jason into the fence, where he hit with a metallic clang. Jason's aura remained intact, but the force of the blow knocked the wind out of his lungs and his head landed hard on the concrete. The aura faded as his head swam.

He rose unsteadily, shaking the fuzz from his mind and eyes, not realizing his protection was gone. His eyes cleared in time to see Moloch's hand sweeping toward him in a wide, powerful arc. It felt as if a hand grenade had exploded in his left side, and he felt himself flying through the air again. He landed on his right side and rolled, his nose striking the pavement several times. Blood once again flowed across his lips and onto his teeth. Blackness threatened to swallow him for the second time that night.

"No goddammit, no," he said. "Stay awake. Stay awake. Don't lose it."

It was no good. He felt himself about to pass out. In desperation, he jammed the heel of his hand into his nose. Incandescent pain roared through his body, standing him straight and thrusting his head back. He howled and tears rolled from his eyes. But by God he was awake.

Moloch's shadow reared over him, arms raised to deliver another crushing blow. Bringing his arms up for protection, Jason threw himself backward into a somersault. Moloch's nails raked across his left forearm and Jason felt an instant of bone-deep pain. The agony made him realize the aura was gone.

Rolling to his feet, Jason wrapped himself in golden protection and stared boldly at Moloch. His feet felt like lead and his mind still danced dangerously, but he was going to face this beast one-on-one.

"Okay. This is a little bit more fair," he said. "Do your worst."

Moloch looked at him, but didn't approach. The green veil enveloped the beast's body.

"Give it up, Medlocke. Your powers are pitiful beside mine."

"Then why don't you attack? If I'm so weak, you should be able to take care of me without a second thought."

"I wish to toy with you a bit longer, to prolong your agony," Moloch said.

"Killing you would be too quick, too easy. Suffering is what I seek. I will kill you when the time is right."

He paused.

"For instance, don't you notice anything different?" Moloch asked. "Something missing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Where's your father?"

Jason was jolted. Moloch was right. Until that moment he hadn't noticed that he no longer felt his father's presence.

"What did you do to him, you slimy fuck?" Jason said.

"Oh, save the melodrama for someone else," Moloch chided. "Your father has

been, shall we say, removed from this scenario. It's just you and me. I'm finally down to the last Medlocke."

The last Medlocke. Moloch's words brought an unbidden thought to Jason's mind—Alex and his unborn child inside her. He quickly brushed the image away, trying to hide his thoughts, keep them off his face.

Too late.

Moloch's expression changed. Its brow furrowed in puzzlement, then understanding.

"You're not the last Medlocke, are you?" Moloch said. "How can that be? I killed your wife and only child."

A look of comprehension crossed the beast's face.

"That woman. The bitch in your room. She's pregnant with your child, isn't she? So there's still another Medlocke in my way. My, my, my, that certainly adds a new twist to things, doesn't it? I believe I'll have to pay her a visit."

"You leave her alone," Jason warned. "If you think you've inflicted pain on me, that's nothing compared to what I'll do to you."

Moloch smiled.

"Large words from a small men," it said.

"Don't doubt it," Jason said.

"Oh, I don't doubt you could cause some damage if given the chance. You've already proven that. But I'm not going to give you the chance. Your time is up."

Moloch pointed two fingers skyward and a violent humming arose. The vibration shook the tennis court and rattled Jason's jaw. Everything in his eyesight danced in a blurry nightmare. The humming moved directly overhead. Looking up, he saw a spiraling column of green plunging rapidly from the shield

covering the courts. He tried to jump out of the way, but moved too slowly. Like a boa constrictor, the emerald column wrapped itself around him, pinning his arms to his sides and his legs together. He fell, but couldn't even roll back and forth. The rings began to tighten.

Desperately, he increased his power, directing it to the aura. A twinge of fear squeezed his stomach into a knot.

"The rings can't hurt you through your shield," Moloch said. "But they will make you direct all your attention to protecting yourself. I have confidence in you, Medlocke. I think you'll discover a way out of my little snare, but it will take you a while. In the meantime, I'm going to introduce myself to your girlfriend. I'll tell her you said hello."

"Stay away from her," Jason cried, forgetting about himself for a moment. The green ropes wrapped themselves around him one turn tighter; his ribs wailed under the pressure.

"I'm not through with you yet, Medlocke," Moloch said. "Your pain has only just begun. You've caused me more pain than any member of your accursed family in five hundred years. I plan to exact complete payment.

"I'll start with your friend over there," he said, pointing at the limp form of Badger. "Say your farewells now. You won't be seeing him again."

Moloch walked over and hoisted Badger's body on his shoulder like a human sack of flour. Blood dripped down Moloch's back from the gash in Badger's head. Jason couldn't be sure, but he thought Moloch's skin sucked the blood in thirstily. The green rings tightened a bit more and Jason redirected his thoughts to his more immediate concern.

Behind him, he heard Moloch speak again.

"Perhaps I'll take this one, too," the creature said. Jason couldn't figure out whom

Moloch meant until he heard a sucking noise, like a horse pulling its hoof out of deep mud. Benton. Jason had forgotten about him. His body must still be in the same spot where it collapsed, held in place through the mayhem by the pool of thick, gluey blood it lay in.

"I almost hate to lose this one," he heard Moloch say. "He's like a favorite pet or plaything. Oh well, there may be blood in his body that I can use, so it may not be a total waste."

"Bye now, Jason," he heard Moloch say. With a bright flash, the green shield surrounding the courts vanished. But the snakelike rings remained, unrelenting in their pressure. The gate to the courts opened and closed with a clank. All was silent.

Jason lay still. It was hard to breathe though not impossible, but the effort of sustaining his power was exacting a hard toll on his system. He felt himself growing weak and his muscles trembled with exertion. If he was to save Badger, to save Alex, he must figure out something quickly. The thought of Badger in Moloch's arms made Jason groan. His friend was dead if he didn't act soon. So was Alex. And who knew what had happened to his dad?

Oh God, he said, if you truly exist, help me now.

No answer. He didn't really expect one.

Jason lay thinking for a moment, pooling his energies. To destroy the rings, he would have to let down the aura. He couldn't work up the power to protect himself and break himself free, not in his weakened condition.

He steeled himself for the attempt. He wouldn't get more than one.

Taking a deep breath and tensing every muscle in his body, Jason dropped the aura. The rings constricted around him instantly, a body-length bear hug trying to squeeze his last breath out of him. His broken ribs moaned. It was worse than

he imagined, even less time than he thought.

With a mighty surge, he turned all his power outward, radiating it from his body. The rings grew progressively tighter and the air in his lungs grew hot and stale. Jason felt himself slipping away. Bright flashes exploded in front of his eyes as his body screamed for oxygen. He honed his concentration to a keener edge. His body heated, his muscles tingling madly as the power grew within them. He felt the rings loosen a tiny amount. This is it. Now or never.

With a final burst, he thrust his power outward. For a second, he thought he had failed. The power wasn't going anywhere. It stayed within him. Then, with a sound like shattered crystal, the green rings disintegrated. He was free.

He stood quickly, preparing to sprint after Moloch. But the night's battle was too much. His body could go no further and gave way after one step. He moaned as he crumpled to the pavement.

Chapter 36



Quintard stormed into his office, slamming the door so hard the jam pulled an inch away from the wall. He strode over to his desk, yanked open the drawer, and pulled out the bottle of bourbon. Not bothering to look for a cup, he twisted the top off and turned the bottle up, drinking three large gulps before pulling it away.

His face clinched as the liquor burned its way down his throat. Then he upended the bottle and emptied it.

"That goddammed, cocksucking, motherfucking, asshole-licking, sonuvabitching cunt," he swore. "That butt-fucking bastard, I'm going to..."

He flung the bottle at the wall, where it smashed into the photo of him and Hank Aaron. The glass from the frame sliced the photo in several places, ruining it. Quintard stared at the destruction in tense silence. He would never be able to replace that shot.

"Goddammit, this is your fault, Medlocke," he screamed, clenching his fists so tightly the nails bit into his palms, drawing blood.

The county commission meeting was four hours behind him and Quintard had spent most of the time since driving around the county at outrageous speeds, cursing Jason all the while. He stopped at a liquor store, bought a pint of bourbon and finished it on the road. With the liquor fueling his thoughts, he formulated a plan for revenge and came back to his office to drink some more

courage and put it into action.

He dropped himself into his chair with a flop. The alcohol was heating his belly like a blast furnace.

"I'm going to bring that bastard down," he vowed.

He picked up the phone and dialed. The phone buzzed a few times on the other end before someone picked up.

"Yeah?" the voice said.

"Listen, Frog, you little fuck, this is Quintard. I need another favor."

"What do you want?" Webster asked nervously.

"I want an ounce of coke and I want it within the next thirty minutes. I want you to meet me in the Big Star parking lot at the intersection of Singleton Road and Jimmy Carter. Bring the coke with you. You got that?"

"Man, I can't get that much that quick," Webster cried. "Besides, who'll pay for it? That much stuff will cost more than two grand."

"You'll find it and you'll pay for it," Quintard said. "You owe me, you dick-sucking pile of shit. And if you don't do this for me, I'll find a way to burn you to the ground. Believe me."

Webster hesitated. When he spoke again, it was with the energy of a whipped pup.

"Okay, I'll see you at the parking lot about one."

"Damn straight," Quintard said. "And after we meet, you're going along with me to do a little job."

"What kind of job?" Webster asked.

"A little lockpicking. I know you're good at that," Quintard said. Before Webster could protest, Quintard hung up.

Thirty minutes later Quintard was on his way to Jason's apartment, an ounce of cocaine tucked away in his glove compartment. In the passenger seat, smoking one cigarette after another, Webster was not a happy man. Tonight his excessive jumpiness was making him more than live up to his amphibious nickname.

"Shit, I don't like this," he said. "I haven't felt right since coming back from watching Medlocke and his father up at the lake. I'm not up to snuff; my head's fuzzy and I feel fucked up."

"What in God's name are you babbling about?" Quintard asked.

"I just want you to know my shit's not together and if we get caught it's going to be my ass. And yours, too. The papers will eat up a story about a county commissioner involved in breaking and entering."

"Oh, you don't actually think I'm going to be there when you do the breaking in, do you?" Quintard said. "I'll be sitting in the car waiting for you to come back. I can't afford to be seen with the likes of you."

"You fucking bastard," Webster said. "You're setting me up to take a fall. I want to know what the hell this is all about. Where are we going? Who's the coke for? Who's house am I supposed to get into?"

"That's none of your goddammed business," Quintard said, fixing Webster with a snakelike gaze. "Let's just say the coke is a present for a friend and I want you to leave it in his apartment as a surprise."

"Is the guy home?" Webster asked.

"I don't know. We'll see when we get there. The past few weeks he's been spending a lot of time fucking some cunt in another apartment complex, so there's a chance he won't be."

"God, I just hope I don't get caught," Webster moaned.

"All I hope *is* that I don't get pulled over," Quintard answered. "With all that coke in the dash, we'd really be in the shitter."

The thought struck him as extremely funny and he laughed until he farted.

"You sonuvabitch," Webster said, rolling down the window.

Quintard pulled the car into the Casa Loma complex and drove slowly until he reached Jason's building. He scanned the lot, but didn't see Jason's Toyota.

"His car's not here," he said. Webster untensed a bit.

Quintard rolled past Jason's apartment to the next building and parked under a tree to block the light from the streetlamp. He told Webster the apartment number and handed him the coke.

"Go do it," he said. "And don't fuck up."

Webster quietly opened the car door and scurried across the parking lot. Hands stuffed in his pockets and shoulders hunched, he ambled down the sidewalk to Jason's building then sprinted up the stairs. The fact that the apartment was at the back of the building, out of the light and away from the parking lot, made him feel a little better. When he reached the door and saw just one dead-bolt lock, his spirits went even higher.

Easy as shit. In and out in a couple of minutes.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small case about the size of a billfold. Opening it revealed a dozen or so small wires, Allen wrenches, and other tools. Webster pulled out a piece of wire about two millimeters thick and four inches long and shoved it into the keyhole on the dead bolt. One minute later he heard a satisfying click. Thirty seconds later the doorknob lock was conquered and Webster was opening the door.

"Piece of fucking cake," he said under his breath.

The first thing he noticed after shutting the door behind him was that the apartment was freezing. It was chilly outside, but even worse in here. His fingers started aching from the cold.

Fuck, this guy has the air conditioning set on South Pole, he thought. I better get this over with or they'll find me frozen like a statue.

Webster figured the safest bet for the coke was to stick it under a sofa cushion. That way he didn't have to go back into the bedroom, just in case someone was there.

He took two steps forward and the next thing he knew he was tripping over some large object. He stuck out his hands to break his fall and landed on the glass-topped coffee table, which shattered with a resounding crash. The glass sliced deeply into his hands and he felt something warm and sticky running over his fingers.

"I've fucked up now," he said out loud.

"You certainly have," a guttural voice said in front of him. The lamp clicked on and Webster shit in his pants.

"Good evening," said the creature sitting on the couch. "I was waiting here for a woman named Alex, but you'll do for now."

The beast looked at the blood covering Webster's hands and licked its lips. Webster thought he had never seen so many teeth.

"I'm hurting again," the beast said. "This world of yours is an uncomfortable place for me. But guess what? You can help."

It reached out and grabbed Webster by the collar of his jacket, yanking him into the air. Putting one hand on Webster's chest, the beast lifted him to the ceiling. Webster made no move to escape.

"Thank you for your assistance," the beast said.

Webster saw the thing open its right hand. Double-edged fingernails glinted in the light.

Damn, those look sharp, he thought.

The hand whipped across his neck and the little man thought no more.

Chapter 37



Quintard sat in the car, fidgeting. Webster had been gone for almost half an hour. What the fuck was taking him so long?

He debated whether to see what had happened, but common sense told him to stay where he was. If Webster has fucked up, don't get yourself caught in the shitstorm.

But if Medlocke was home and caught Webster, there would be police cars coming in, lights flashing. Medlocke would call his buddies to take care of what he would think was a common burglar. Unless Webster was spilling his guts, a distinct possibility.

Quintard slugged back several more shots of bourbon. Powered by the alcohol, his curiosity got the best of him. He opened the car door and stepped out.

Cautiously he made his way across the parking lot, down the sidewalk, and around the end of the apartment building. He looked up at the windows he figured were Medlocke's. No lights were on. Walking around to the back of the building, he looked at the windows back there. Still no lights.

He made his way back to the front of the building, blowing on his hands. Damn, it's getting cold, he thought. Unsteadily climbing the stairs, he snuck quietly to Medlocke's door. It was open just a crack. No light squeezed through.

Was Webster inside? Quintard wondered. Was he alone? Or was Medlocke in

there, questioning him? He leaned forward, but heard no voices.

Taking a chance, Quintard whispered: "Webster?"

"C'mon in," he heard Webster say. "There's no one here."

There was something strange about Webster's voice, something a bit creepy, and Quintard hesitated.

"C'mon in," the voice said again. "Everything's okay."

Quintard gently pushed the door, which swung open easily. Motherfucker! It's colder in there than out here, he thought. Light coming in from the lamps in the outside hallway washed across the room and he saw Webster sitting on the couch, his arms casually spread out along the back as if he were waiting for someone.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Quintard whispered angrily as he stepped into the apartment. "I told you to get in and out quickly."

Webster didn't answer. He just sat there with a blank look on his face. His attitude enraged Quintard even further.

"Goddammit," he said a bit louder. "I asked you..."

The light fell on the gaping wound in Webster's neck and his glassy, sightless eyes. Quintard felt his bladder begin to loosen and he turned to run out the door. Before he had taken a step, the door slammed shut.

"Don't leave yet; the party's just begun," a raspy voice said.

The light over the dining room table sprang to life and Quintard knew his life wasn't worth shit.

"I keep waiting for Medlocke or that woman of his to come in that door, but I keep being surprised," Moloch said, sitting in one of the dining room chairs.

"First this tiny man, and now you. I'm curious. Why so much traffic through this

apartment?"

Quintard couldn't speak. His tongue was bone dry and clung to the roof of his mouth.

"If you don't answer me, I'm going to be forced to do the same to you that I did to him," Moloch said, pointing at Webster.

His stomach churning with liquor and terror, Quintard caught something out of the corner of his left eye and glanced down. A white-haired man lay faceup on the carpet, breathing shallowly. Quintard noticed the man's throat was intact, except for some nasty scratch marks along the sides. His jaw, though, was almost black and the size of a cantaloupe. From the pasty pallor of the man's skin, Quintard could tell he was in bad shape.

Turning his attention back to Moloch, Quintard spotted a dark spot on the wall to his right. He looked and saw a huge splatter mark with a thick, black trail running down to the floor. At the bottom, where the wall met the carpet, a large pile of bluish-gray matter sat in a pool of rapidly drying blood.

Quintard vomited.

"Since you are here, I assume you know Jason Medlocke?" Moloch asked.

Quintard nodded slightly while wiping his mouth.

"Fine. Well, that man on the floor is Medlocke's father. He and I have been friends for years, although our relationship appears to be over at this point. The mess on the wall is the remains of a partner of mine I sent to visit Stephen. He apparently didn't enjoy her company."

Moloch looked at Stephen and shook its head.

"The old man surprised me. He had more resilience and strength than I realized. It seems to be a trait all humans have."

Then it shrugged.

"But back to the task at hand. I asked you a question. What are you doing here? What is he doing here?" it said, pointing again at Webster.

Despite the terror trying to erase any rational thoughts, Quintard's mind began racing. There was no time to figure out what this beast was or why it was here. What he had to decide was how to save his own life. From what the beast said, there was no love lost between it and the Medlockes. Perhaps he could capitalize on that.

"I... I was here to get Medlocke," Quintard stammered. "The bastard has ruined my life, made a mockery of me, and I wanted revenge."

"Ah, revenge. I can sympathize with that. How did you plan to accomplish this?"

Quintard ran down his plan, telling Moloch about the cocaine and how he intended to set Jason up, get him busted for drugs. He had to explain what drugs were and why it would cause Jason embarrassment to be caught with them, but Moloch soon understood.

"So you didn't plan to kill him, just shame him?" Moloch asked.

"Yes, but also to possibly send him to prison, which would ruin his life forever," Quintard said.

"Would you like to see Medlocke dead?" Moloch queried.

"Yes," Quintard answered without hesitation.

Moloch laughed, making the hair on Quintard's neck stand on end.

"Good, very good," Moloch said. "Then you can help me, yes?"

Quintard nodded.

"I came here looking for Medlocke's woman," Moloch said. "I wish to... to speak with her. I expected to find her here, but she is not. Do you know where I

can find her?"

"Yes, yes," Quintard said. "I know exactly where she lives. I can take you there in the car."

"Oh, we have no need for that. Here, take my hand."

Quintard looked at Moloch's outstretched hand. Dried blood caked the fingers and tiny pieces of flesh hung from the nails. He didn't want to touch it.

Moloch looked at Quintard, then down at its hand. It smiled.

"Does the sight of blood alarm you?" it asked. "I can take care of that."

It stuck its fingers in its mouth and sucked on them for a few seconds. Then it drew them out and gently licked the remaining blood and flesh off with its tongue.

"There," it said with a satisfied stare. "Clean enough?"

Quintard nodded shakily.

"Good, then take my hand."

Quintard held his breath and reached out. God help my soul, he prayed.

Chapter 38



Alex drove home from Montgomery feeling like dogmeat. This particular day, she hadn't been plagued by morning sickness. Instead, she suffered from afternoon sickness. About three she began feeling ill, and for the next two hours or so, food looked disgusting.

Driving along I-65 from Montgomery to Birmingham, then cutting over on I-20 to Atlanta, she kept her eyes on the road and off the roadside signs advertising McDonald's, Burger King, Hardee's, and the other assorted fast-food restaurants. Just the thought of some greasy hamburger or fries made her stomach do flip-flops. A pack of saltine crackers and a quart mason jar filled with ice water sat on the seat next to her. They were the only things she could keep down.

But her queasiness also was part of her happiness. She was pregnant with Jason's child. She had never been more in love. She and Jason weren't married, of course, but that would soon be fixed.

Yet her happiness had a dark spot, a huge, overwhelming cloud darkening everything in its shadow. Would Jason live long enough to become her husband? To see his child born? This Moloch creature wanted him dead. God, most people only had in-laws that hated their guts. Jason had a merciless, inhuman killer after him. And it threatened her, too.

When she thought about it—which was several times a day—she couldn't help crying. She cried as much for her unborn baby as for herself and Jason. God, it

was so unfair.

Switching between singing nursery rhymes to the baby in her belly and sobbing woefully, Alex arrived at her apartment about ten in the evening. Exhausted, she took a hot shower and pulled on one of the oxford-cloth shirts Jason had left for her to wear as pajamas. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she called police headquarters, but was told Jason was out. She left a message with the dispatcher. Out at ten at night? she wondered. Maybe there was a break in the Mercy Killer case, she thought.

Or maybe it was something else.

She shoved that perilous idea from her head.

Her stomach was feeling normal again and she went to the kitchen to fix herself a sandwich and a glass of milk. The food soothed her and sleepiness crept up behind her and wrapped her in a warm blanket. She lay on the bed and, despite her worries about Jason, fell instantly asleep.

She woke suddenly several hours later, alert and staring, yet unaware of what had brought her out of such a deep sleep. The covers were pulled up to her chin, leaving only her head exposed, but her whole body was covered in goose bumps. Light from the streetlamp outside colored the room in shades of black, white, and gray, but gave enough light to see. Realizing that she was holding her breath, she let it out in a whoosh. It turned into an icy cloud the moment it left her mouth.

What on earth was going on?

"Hello, Alex. So nice to see you again," a voice said from the doorway.

Alex looked in the direction of the voice, but shadows obscured the door. From out of the blackness, a monstrous hand reached toward the light switch, flicking the overhead light on with a long, double-bladed fingernail.

"How's the little mother feeling?" Moloch said.

Chapter 39



Jason looked dead.

Sprawled facedown, he lay limp and unmoving, his shallow breathing barely making his back rise and fall. The right side of his face was pressed to the ground, but he didn't feel the tiny chunks of gravel jabbing into his cheek, gravel that would leave tiny, purplish-red craters when brushed off.

When he came to, he groggily raised himself. After three hours pressed Bat to the green-painted asphalt, his cheek momentarily stuck, giving him the sensation that he had just ripped his face off a hot waffle iron. A groan squeezed from between his lips.

He slowly rolled himself onto his right side, using his right elbow as a prop. Blinking the glaze from his eyes, he gazed across the tennis courts. Empty. The cool dawn was coming quickly and a quilt of fog smothered the ground outside the courts. As gray as the haze that clouded Jason's head, the fog lay across the pine-straw-covered red clay beneath the trees, preventing him from seeing what lay at their feet.

There could be a bulldozer out there and I wouldn't know it, he thought.

Sweat stuck his hair to his forehead as he propped himself on his right side, trying to get his bearings. His brain fogged by unconsciousness, he forgot the gashes on his left side and the cracked ribs underneath. Their pain deadened by the chill of the night, the wounds hadn't made their presence known.

Jason did, however, notice the acrid, salty taste in his mouth and tried to spit it out. A glob of blood the size of a quarter splattered onto the court.

"Shit, where'd that come from?" he said, reaching up with his left hand to wipe his mouth.

He twisted his arm to reach his mouth. When he did, the semi-hard scab that covered the gash on his forearm tore loose, sending a gush of blood running toward his elbow and a bolt of pain ricocheting off his fingertips. He howled, instinctively clamping his right hand across his left forearm and the bone-deep wound. As red, purple, and yellow explosions erupted behind his eyelids, he collapsed backward, hitting the ground with a jarring thud. The broken ribs shifted, grating their ragged tips against each other. Nausea crashed over him, a gust of agony blowing away the clouds in his mind.

"Oh Jesus. Oh God," he moaned, his stomach wrenching into a fist. He wanted to roll back and forth across the pavement, but even in its jumbled state, his brain knew better. Stay still, it told him. Take the pain.

When the torment subsided several minutes later, cold sweat dotted Jason's forehead and his stomach wanted to puke. But his mind was crystal clear.

Everything that had happened the night before came back in a horrible rush. The skin on his arms prickled with goose bumps and an electric tingle ripped along his scalp. Benton. Dad. Moloch. Badger.

"Badger," he whispered.

Fighting the urge to leap up and scream Badger's name, Jason stood slowly, battling the sparks that burst in front of his eyes. Trying to stay calm, he headed for the gate. In the fifteen faltering steps it took to reach it, he formulated a simple plan: work his way around the perimeter of the court in increasingly wide circles, then head into the woods. If he didn't find anything in thirty minutes, he

was getting on the radio and bellowing for help.

He couldn't do that just yet. He wasn't sure what he'd find.

The blood trail started two feet beyond the gate, originating in a foot-wide pool of blood on the parking lot. A red stream led into the pines. In any other case, Jason's detective instincts would have kicked in, leaving his feelings behind in favor of cold, emotionless analysis. This time his heart jackhammered and his thoughts were a merry-go-round.

Standing at the edge of the pines, he peered through the fog swirling around his knees and sending cool chills up his pants legs. He saw the blood stretch away in a line that was arrow straight, as if it had been poured from a can. He followed the crimson trail into the trees. The woods were silent.

He found Badger's Atlanta Braves baseball cap about fifty feet into the woods, the dark blue fabric stained even darker in spots. Jason's stomach flip-flopped, but he moved on.

He found Badger one hundred feet farther on, leaning against an ancient, gnarled oak tree. Jason's legs crumpled and he sank to his knees with a choked groan.

Badger's hands drooped at his sides and his head cocked to the left, like an understuffed clown doll's. His neck was slit from earlobe to earlobe. The skin around the wound was stretched apart, exposing the ruins of his throat.

He never even got the chance to put up a fight, Jason thought.

In the center of Badger's chest, where his jacket was unzipped, was a large, ragged hole in his blue cotton shirt. The material was crimped around the hole and there were deep gashes in the flesh of his chest. As if he had been lifted up by the shirt, Jason noted.

Until that moment, Jason had avoided looking at Badger's face. He didn't want to see it; didn't want to look into the dead face of his once-living friend; didn't want

to accept the ultimate finality of the situation. He slowly raised his eyes.

If his broken ribs hadn't prevented him, he would have vomited.

There was a smile on Badger's face, a huge, comical grin. It was as if someone had waited until his skin began to cool and become putty-like, then taken their fingers and pulled the corners of his mouth upward.

It wasn't natural. It was a sick, evil joke. Jason knew it was meant for him.

Jason sat slumped on the ground for almost five minutes. In the deeper recesses of his mind, he knew he was close to going into shock, but his body felt leaden and his head hung down, as if an oaken yoke rested upon it. He couldn't look at Badger. He wanted to cry but no tears would come.

What will happen to Badger's kids? he thought. Who will take care of them? Who will take care of me? Who will be my best friend? Who will I turn to when I need someone to talk to, to laugh with?

Then, slowly, bottomless anger began to replace the sadness and anguish. Jason saw Moloch's face appear over Badger's head, ethereally floating in front of the tree his friend leaned on. A wicked smile sat on the creature's lips.

Jason's body burned with a feverish tingle. All he saw was Moloch's face being smashed into oblivion. A great pounding shook the woods as the fist of Jason's mind unleashed its justice. But the face was only imagination and the anger was directed into the oak tree. Slivers and splinters of wood flew in every direction as Jason's anger wore itself out. When it was spent, sap welled up in the wounded, virgin wood. Jason felt no better.

He suddenly thought of something else. Where's Benton's body?

He rose and looked around the area. About ten feet to his right the saplings were smashed flat and spots of blood flecked the weeds and tree branches. Walking over, he found Benton's crumpled body lying facedown.

Jason shook his head. One more dead because of me.

He emerged from the woods ten minutes later, his eyes dull and glassy. He had carried Badger to the edge of the trees and gently laid him out of sight. He left Benton where he was, figuring he'd worry about him later. There was a good chance no one would find him, at least for a few hours. And Benton's car probably wouldn't cause much concern. Everyone would figure some kid left it there because it wouldn't start.

Jason looked at his watch. Quarter to five. School wouldn't start for another three hours. Teachers and such wouldn't start arriving for another two. That should give him time to finish things once and for all.

Taking the keys from Badger's pocket, he walked slowly to the car, still parked in front of the office building on the other side of the woods. He drove to the tennis courts and lay Badger across the backseat, making sure his friend was in a comfortable position. It never occurred to him that Badger was beyond feeling. He climbed in the driver's door and started to turn the key. But when the door closed with a solid, final thunk, the cold realization finally descended upon him. Tears burst in his eyes and his body was hit by a wave of sobbing. He rested his head against the steering wheel and cried loudly, not caring if anybody heard. He cried for five minutes, deep, racking sobs that made it hard to breathe. When it was over, the hurt was partially cleansed. He sat up, wiping the wetness off his red, puffy cheeks with the back of his hands. Sniffing back the remaining tears, he started the ignition.

Suffering, that's what Moloch said he wanted to inflict. Well, he got his wish. Jason felt a large gaping hole in his heart that would be impossible to fill.

He could only hope Moloch hadn't carried out his threats against Alex. He didn't believe Moloch would kill her only to leave her to be found later. It would be

much more cruel to do it in front of him. So Alex might still be alive. Or was that just desperate hope?

He was stopped at a red light on Lawrenceville Highway when the world disappeared around him, blackness enfolding everything but the interior of his car. A pair of frigid silver eyes formed over the passenger's seat. Jason raised the golden aura but held his place, not shying away from the apparition.

"Hello, Jason," Moloch said. "I just thought I'd let you know that I'm over at Alex's place. We've had a wonderful conversation. I feel like a part of the family now."

"You bastard. Is she still alive?"

"Of course. I wouldn't hurt her, at least not as long as you're not here. Don't worry. I'll wait until you arrive to start the festivities. Oh, by the way, your father's here, too, but I'm afraid he's not in such good shape."

"What have you done to him?" Jason demanded.

"Me, personally? Why I've done nothing. Your friend, Anson Quintard, says he thinks it's either a heart attack or a stroke. But he admits he's not sure."

"Quintard? What's he got to do with this?"

"Oh, he's my little helper these days. You know what? I think he hates you as much as I do and he's just dying to watch what happens to you."

Moloch laughed. "But enough of that," he said. "The end result is that your father isn't long for this world. Then again, neither are you or your pregnant bitch. So take care and we'll see you soon."

The world cleared and Jason heard the loud honking of a horn as an impatient driver behind him wondered why he wasn't moving for the green light. He slowly accelerated. His mind was racing, but not about what Moloch said; he expected as much. What surprised him was the way he felt when Moloch

appeared. The swell of power within him was instantaneous and took on added strength when Moloch's words made hatred rise inside him. Yet it wasn't like the rush of energy he had felt on the tennis courts. Yes, it was strong, monstrously so. But it had a dark edge that left a nasty residue on him, like the time as a boy when he had stepped on that dead cat on the side of the road.

What does it mean? he wondered. Why was the power different this time from the last? His gut told him the distinction was important, perhaps crucial, but it still escaped him.

Moloch obviously was laying a trap, expecting him to just walk in on the pretext of saving his father's and Alex's lives. He was going to try to save Alex and his father all right, but he'd be damned if he would follow Moloch's game plan. He had an idea of his own.

Turning on Mountain Industrial Boulevard, he drove toward the massive complex of one-story offices and warehouses lining both sides of the road for miles. Behind the complex were acres upon acres of flat, empty land, the trees bulldozed to make way for buildings still in the planning stages. It was a vantage point offering a wide-open view for several hundred yards in any direction.

Pulling into an entrance of the complex, he drove until he reached the last open piece of land, a red-clay plot about five hundred yards square sitting a quarter of a mile behind the other buildings. At the edges, the field sloped up about ten feet to row after row of Southern pines. Trees surrounded the field on three sides; only the road side was open. Jason pulled the car to the curb and stepped out, then walked slowly to the middle of the field.

He looked at his watch. Half past five. At this time of the morning the office complex was empty. People wouldn't start arriving for another two hours. Things would be over by then.

He was strangely calm. It was all coming down to this. One way or another, things would end right here, right now. There was something peaceful and settling about the thought.

He reached into his pocket. He didn't need to check to see if anything was in there; he knew there would be. He pulled out the disappearing ball trick.

Holding it in the palm of his hand, he gazed at it for a moment and smiled thinly. With the briefest thought, he vaporized the toy.

"Here we go," he said out loud.

He opened his mind and called.

Chapter 40



Why won't my heart stop pounding? Quintard asked himself every couple of minutes.

He sat on the couch in Alex's apartment, but knew he wouldn't be able to stay there long. Within seconds, he stood and walked across the room, then went to the kitchen to get a drink of water, then walked back to the living room and sat down. All the while he rubbed his hands together or ran his fingers through his hair. Each time he looked at the floor and saw Stephen Medlocke lying there unconscious with a near-gangrenous jaw, his stomach verged on expelling its contents. He wished Moloch hadn't insisted on bringing Stephen along, but was hardly in a position to voice a negative opinion.

What have I gotten myself into?

He looked at Moloch, who stood by the sliding glass doors, watching the sun rise through the trees. If he didn't know better, he'd think the creature's face was blessed with a look of contentment. Then Moloch spoke.

"This is truly a beautiful world," it said, and Quintard couldn't tell if it was talking only to itself.

Moloch turned away from the window.

"I shall take great pleasure in ruling it," it said.

Quintard tried to smile, but all he could dredge up was a grimace.

"Don't worry," Moloch said, spying the expression. "You shall be in a position of authority with anything you wish. Those who help me are rewarded."

"Thank you," Quintard croaked.

Moloch nodded and Quintard decided to press matters a bit further.

"What exactly do you have in mind for the time being?" he asked. "With Medlocke and this woman, I mean."

Without looking at Quintard, Moloch answered matter-of-factly.

"I intend to kill them both," it said. "I thought you understood that."

Bile burned the back of Quintard's throat, but he continued his questioning.

"Why exactly do you want Medlocke dead?"

Moloch turned and pointed at the M on its face. "I assume you've noticed this?" it asked. Quintard nodded. "It was given to me by a Medlocke over five hundred years ago. It was the Medlockes who first brought me to this world then cast me out like a dog. I never forgot nor forgave. The Medlockes have prevented me from my rightful inheritance of this world for too long. Jason Medlocke is the last in the bloodline. Once he is erased, my path is clear."

"What about the woman?" Quintard said. "What does she have to do with it?"

"She is pregnant with Medlocke's child. I cannot take the chance that another Medlocke son will be brought into this world. Sons carry the power to stop me."

"Suppose it's not a boy? Suppose it's a girl?" Quintard asked.

Moloch smiled, its teeth glinting in the golden morning light. Quintard thought the combination of the beautiful morning sun and the deadly teeth was the most terrible thing he'd ever seen.

"Boy or girl, the woman must die," Moloch said. "Killing the unborn child is only part of the reason. I intend to kill the woman while Medlocke watches. I

wish to make him suffer to the depths of his soul. I wish to hear him cry out in anguish and know the fate of this world rests on his shoulders—and he has failed."

Quintard had never much believed in God, had tried not to think much about it since killing his father. But if there was a devil, then this creature was it. And he knew if he helped it, his soul was lost. More so than it already was.

He only wanted to ruin Medlocke's life, to bring him to his knees. And so help him God, he never meant for the woman to end up a casualty and, so help him God again, not a baby.

He suddenly found himself believing strongly in the burning fires of hell and didn't want to spend eternity there.

But what could he do?

His thoughts were interrupted by a small grunt from Moloch. The beast tilted its head to one side, as if it were listening to something floating by on the breeze. Moloch stood silently for about ten seconds, then nodded. It looked at Quintard.

"Time to go. The mouse has thrown a wrinkle into the fabric of my plan. He is more wily than I thought. No matter. The end result will be the same. Go get the girl and let's be on our way."

Quintard rose from the sofa and marched dutifully back to the bedroom. Alex still was in the bed, trapped there by the green bands of energy Moloch had wrapped around her. Her eyes, once wide with terror and puffy with crying, now were hard and hot. Fury rolled behind them.

She looked at Quintard with hatred that surpassed anything he had ever experienced. He felt small and worthless.

"You fucking worm," she said as he stood beside the bed. "You don't think it's going to let you live once this is all over? It doesn't like humans, much less need

them. It's going to blast you into bloody chunks the first chance it gets. I just hope I'm around to see it."

"I... I... I didn't know," Quintard said, saltiness welling up in his eyes. "Honest to God. This is beyond anything I planned. I don't even know where this creature came from. It was at Medlocke's apartment when I got there."

"So you just fell in with it like a good little Nazi brownshirt," Alex said. "You're still scum."

Anger rose in Quintard's chest.

"And what would you have done?" he asked spitefully.

"Let it kill you right there on the spot? No, Miss High-and-Mighty, you'd have done exactly what I did—anything to keep yourself alive."

"How long are you going to keep up the charade?" Alex demanded.

"I don't know," Quintard said, the heat expunged from his voice. "I just don't know. How can I compete with it? Tell me something that has a chance of working and I'll try it."

Alex lay silently in her green cocoon. She looked hard at Quintard, her eyes taking a cutting edge, as though she were either sizing him up or getting ready to slice him to ribbons. Finally she spoke.

"I still don't really trust you, but I don't think I have much of a choice," she said. "In the top drawer of this nightstand is a thirty-eight-caliber revolver. Jason gave it to me several days ago. It's loaded."

Quintard's eyes widened in amazement and he scurried to the nightstand and pulled out the drawer. A blue-steel handgun lay inside. He reached in and drew it out.

"Put it in your coat pocket," Alex said. "And whatever you do, try to act cool

about it."

Quintard's hands trembled as he held the gun, turning it over in his hand, looking it up and down. "If it discovers this, I'm dead," he said.

"If you don't use it, you're just as dead," she said.

"Quintard!" Moloch's voice echoed down the hallway. "I said bring her in here."

Quintard jumped so hard he almost dropped the pistol and spent a couple of heart-stopping seconds juggling it madly between his hands. Alex held her breath. She could already hear the gun going off as it hit the floor. But Quintard managed to get it under control before it fell. He pushed it deep into his pocket.

"Answer it," Alex hissed.

"I can't do anything about her until you do something about this green stuff around her," Quintard hollered. Fear gave his voice a shrill edge.

The green bands disappeared and Alex got up slowly, flexing her stiff muscles.

"Don't go chickenshit on me," she warned as Quintard escorted her from the room.

Moloch stood in the middle of the living room. It looked sternly at Quintard as he and Alex entered.

"I didn't like the tone in your voice when you spoke to me," it said.

"I'm sorry," Quintard said. "I'm just tired. And I'm not ashamed to admit I'm scared, too. I have no idea what's happening."

Moloch smiled. On another face, it would have been called benevolent. On its, it was only ghastly.

"Don't worry about that," it said. "I know."

It extended its arms in a semicircle.

"Come, stand by me. We're ready to leave."

The two moved inside its arms, both careful not to touch it.

"What about him?" Quintard asked, pointing at Stephen.

"He's coming, too."

"Is he strong enough to make the trip?" Alex questioned.

"Probably not. But he's going to die soon anyway, so it really doesn't matter, now does it?"

With a bright flash they were gone.

Chapter 41



Jason stood alone in the barren clay field, waiting for Moloch to appear. He moved constantly in a circle, making sure the beast didn't suddenly appear a foot behind him and brain him before he had a chance to react.

As he kept watch, his mind turned over and over, trying to understand the new aspect of his power. It seemed essential to do so, but it was like trying to solve calculus with an elementary school education.

Why did it feel so different under different circumstances? What was the key? The trigger? His father had never mentioned anything about varying shades of power.

So far, he knew that each time he saw Moloch, a combination of disgust, horror, and soul-deep abhorrence filled him. The power almost invariably flamed to life at those moments. And there was no doubt that his body felt electric, a magical high-tension wire looking for something to latch onto.

Yet that couldn't hold a candle to the other side of his gift, the one that had revealed itself when he set the soulless creatures free on the tennis courts. There was no comparison. In the first form, Jason felt powerful; in the second, he felt invulnerable, a holy archangel capable of bestowing either sustenance or retribution on whomever he pleased.

He also knew the first time he had felt the difference was at the sight of those misshapen beings. His instantaneous revulsion was quickly tempered with pity

and the power took on an added dimension. A sudden spark of understanding struck him. The change occurred when he felt another kind of emotion, one that sprang from compassion, not from hate. God, was that it? Was it that simple? A blast of cold air on the back of his neck told him the chance to explore this revelation was over. The golden aura enveloping him immediately, he turned to face Moloch.

"Hello, Jason," Moloch said. "I've brought some friends."

Quintard and Alex moved from inside the embrace of Moloch's arms to stand several feet to its right. To their left, the prostrate form of Stephen lay on the bare ground. The sight of his father's pale, barely breathing body almost knocked Jason to his knees. First Badger, now this. Oh God, how much could he take?

"Oh, he's not dead yet," Moloch said with a slight cackle of pleasure. "But I wouldn't be making any long-range plans for him."

Bitterness coating his tongue, Jason stared directly into Moloch's eyes. There was no compassion there, nothing human. Wrath made Jason's face equally stony, and his eyes began to match Moloch's in coldness.

"I'll warn you only one time," Jason said. "Let them go. This is between you and me."

"Oh, I don't think so," Moloch answered. "This woman is carrying your child and I can't afford another Medlocke bastard in this world. Your father and I, meanwhile, have been enemies for too long for me to just forgive and forget. And Quintard is—how should I say it?—in my employment."

"Is that true, Quintard?" Jason asked.

His skin the shade of paste, Quintard just shrugged. Jason stared at him and shook his head solemnly.

"You're lower than I thought you could be," Jason told Quintard. "But that doesn't matter. You're human; it's not."

"Let him go, too," he said to Moloch. "Let them all go."

"I believe the expression in this world is: Fuck you."

Moloch walked casually over to Stephen's body. It looked down and smiled.

"In some ways, I'm sorry to see Stephen die," it said. "He's been a good opponent. In others, though..."

It reached out and kicked Stephen savagely in the ribs. Jason heard the bones crack like snapped tree limbs. Stephen rolled over twice, and his arms, which were lying by his sides, flew up in limp arcs. He ended up on his chest, dirt and gravel clinging to his face and matting his eyebrows and eyelashes.

All the feelings of hate Jason harbored inside rushed to the surface. His arms whipped out and golden streams of fury flew from the fingertips.

But Moloch was prepared. The green veil of protection flared around it and it counterattacked with an equally strong column of green magic. The two forces met in midair, barreling into each other with an impact that shook the air and left a ten-foot crater from which smoke rose in a wide, stinking swath.

Jason instantly understood that Moloch's kicking of his father was a ruse intended to test him, to get him off step. But understanding came too late. Still stunned, Jason didn't react when Moloch whirled to face Alex, a greenish-yellow glow filling his hands.

But she wasn't there.

Moloch frantically scanned the open field. It took only a second to locate her—halfway across the field, aiming for Jason's car.

The beast heaved the glowing mass in her direction. As it flew in a whistling

line, it began to change, mutate. Wings burst forth, then a monstrous curved tail tipped by a two-inch stinger. Massive pincers were the last to form, their malevolent clacking filled the air.

"The girl," Moloch whispered and the scorpion zeroed in on Alex.

"Alex, look out!" Jason shouted. "Duck!"

Locked in her race for safety, she didn't hear.

Concentrating desperately, Jason reached out with his arm. In his mind, he pictured crushing the beast like an eggshell. Yet the scorpion continued to bear down on Alex, twenty feet, ten, five. Jason increased his concentration, clenching his fist when the scorpion was a foot from her neck. The creature halted in mid-flight, pincers clacking, tail jabbing the air at the unseen enemy holding it fast. Jason squeezed more tightly. The scorpion squealed as black ropes of fluid spurted from underneath its armor. It twitched and struggled as the unrelenting force constricted around it. Jason opened his fist and the creature fell to the ground, an unrecognizable mound.

Alex continued to run, unaware of the near miss. She was only a few feet from the car when Moloch unleashed another attack. This one moved with the speed of sound, giving Jason no time to react. Twenty feet from Alex, the bolt transformed into an arrow, the point slamming into Alex's left shoulder, emerging bloodily on the other side. She stood stock-still for a moment, touching the point with her right hand. Then she turned toward Jason.

"Jason?" she said faintly, then crumpled to the ground.

Jason screamed.

"Don't worry, it's not deadly. She's just unconscious," Moloch said. "I'm not through with her yet."

Enough was enough, Jason decided. To hell with figuring out the complexities of

his power. To hell with its subtleties. All he could see was tearing Moloch limb from limb. He wanted to see the beast in pieces on the ground, black blood spilling out and being sucked into the dry earth. The power detonated into a red inferno inside him and his body began to burn. His arms sprang out and a bloodthirsty, crimson glow enveloped them. He only wanted one chance. One would be enough.

Before he could attack, the ground beneath his feet began to tremble wildly. Barely keeping his balance, Jason saw Moloch standing arms akimbo, palms facing the earth. Solid streams of energy fired from the beast's hands into the ground, blowing out clouds of dust and sending dirt and rock flying. Rippling fault lines ran in all directions, turning the field into an unsteady jigsaw puzzle. Great columns of dust rose in the air as the earth devoured itself. The ground beneath Moloch remained firm, protected by the green shield.

Through his shaking vision, Jason watched as one of the running chasms sped toward his father's comatose body. Stephen's limbs flailed about in mad abandon with the rocking earth.

Jason redirected his energy, scooping up his father's body just as it tumbled into a fault. Holding him above the ground in a golden hammock, Jason debated where to put him out of harm's way. He never had time to find it.

A green firebolt slammed into the bottom of the hammock, pitching it so violently that Stephen almost fell out. Jason struggled to right it and expended more energy to strengthen the shield surrounding the hammock.

His eyes were on his father when the ground beneath him vanished and he plummeted straight down.

Instantly his arms sprang out against the walls of the pit, shoulders cracking with the strain as his downward descent slowed, then stopped. Pushing his arms to

their breaking point, he inched his way toward the surface.

Then something grabbed his leg, something ropelike and unrelenting. Jason felt other bands wrap around his legs, dragging him deeper. He looked down and wished he hadn't.

Four huge, hairy legs grasped his, inexorably pulling him into the blackness below. Eight blood-red eyes stared up from the darkness; under the eyes, two slavering fangs waiting for flesh. Jason thought the golden aura would protect him, but didn't want to test his theory. He didn't have time. He had to dispose of this creature quickly.

His concentration on his shield increased, turning it into a fiery corona.

Nauseating smoke filled his nostrils as the hair on the spider-creature's legs caught fire. He heard the beast's squeals of pain and upped the power another notch. With an air-sucking whoomp, the entire beast caught fire, burning like a ball of tissue paper.

His arms agonizing with the effort, Jason pulled himself out of the hole, the smell of burning flesh and hair assaulting his nose. He was halfway out when the edges of the hole began squeezing shut. Scrambling with all four limbs, he wrenched himself upward just as the hole closed with a dusty slam.

Panting badly, he needed time to catch his breath but knew there was none. He pushed himself to his knees when he heard the low rumble of thunder and looked up to see a black cloud forming over him.

"A little present from me to you," he heard Moloch say.

With a thunderclap, the cloud unleashed its contents, streams of golden-brown rain. Acid? Jason thought. Can it burn through my aura?

The liquid came down in unbroken sheets, thousands of gallons a second. Jason felt deluged, as if he were on the downside of a damburst. He himself going

under, drowning. Pummeled beneath the downpour, he thought for a brief second that he might be able to stay on his knees, forming a barrier against the rush of rain and a spot in which to breathe. But the force of the torrent knocked him flat, his face turned sideways. Even with his aura, he couldn't breathe. The liquid was too much. His mouth filled and he swallowed.

As the liquid burned a trail down his throat, the sheer malevolence of Moloch's plan struck home. This wasn't acid or water. Moloch planned something much more insidious.

He was drowning Jason in scotch.

Chapter 42



Quintard no longer believed his eyes. The scene playing out before him was destroying his trust in his own sanity. And yet, even if it was impossible, he should be enjoying it. The creature was kicking hell out of Medlocke, something he had always wished he could do. But there was no joy in it. None at all.

He could see the beast had plotted his strategy perfectly. Wear Medlocke down by forcing him to protect the people he loved until he didn't have anything left for himself. Once Medlocke was weakened to exhaustion, Quintard knew the beast would kill the woman and old man as Medlocke looked on. Then Quintard knew it would be his turn. What the woman had said was true. A creature like this had no need of humans, except to subjugate as slaves. When this battle was over, his life would be over, too.

Quintard looked at Moloch, who stood to his right. A satisfied smile languished on the creature's face as it watched its enemy drowning. If there was a chance, it was now. Quintard's heart pounded dangerously and his breath came hot and painful. He reached into his coat and drew out the pistol.

Get the wagons in a circle, pilgrims, he thought. It's time to play John Wayne. He brought the pistol up with both hands, aimed carefully and fired.

Moloch's right eye exploded in a plume of blood and yellow vitreous humor as the hollow-point slug tore in one side of the socket and blasted out the other. If Moloch had had a nose, the slug would have ripped most of it away. As it was, it

left a ruined eye socket pouring blood down its cheek, coating the M-shaped scar. As Moloch turned toward its attacker, the pistol barked five more times. Staggering backward, the beast tried to flee the hail of lead, but each bullet found its mark somewhere on its body. One ripped down its left temple, leaving a deep, bloody streak. Two others slammed into its chest, exiting out its back with meaty explosions of flesh and bone. Another crashed into its groin while the final one tore off the two smallest fingers on its right hand, which had flown up in a gesture of protection after its eye was blown out.

The assault lasted only a few seconds and when it ceased, Moloch turned its remaining eye toward Quintard. Undiluted evil flowed from it.

Quintard stood there, the smoking pistol hanging in his right hand. All he could think was: Well, I've certainly fucked up now.

An angry snarl rolling over its lips, Moloch raised its left hand, pointing the first two fingers at Quintard's head. A blade of green fire carved the air and with a ripping sound, sliced through Quintard's neck, sending his head flying in a red arc. It landed with a heavy thump on the hard red clay and rolled to an upright position. The mouth opened and closed once, then stopped.

His body stood for several seconds, tottering one way, then the other. From Moloch's fingers, emerald tendrils lashed out at it, wrapping it like a mummy. Once the body was completely engulfed, the tendrils squeezed. The crack of bones resounded loudly and Quintard's body erupted like a water balloon. His left forearm jettisoned away from the explosion, landing thirty feet away. Quintard's arm rolled over, the four bites from his father's pitchfork turned skyward.

Chapter 43



Gulping for air, Jason swallowed mouthful after mouthful of the liquor. It scorched his mouth, burned his skin, inflamed his senses. If he opened his eyes, the stinging liquid set them on fire.

He tried to concentrate, use his power to shove back the attack, but the flood of alcohol thundered on the back of his head like a sledgehammer, making it almost impossible to think clearly.

The pistol shots rang in his ears, but he was unable to look up long enough to see what had happened. The flood of alcohol did not let up, so if the shots were directed at Moloch, they obviously were not doing their intended task.

Even in his rattled state, Jason could see the irony in Moloch's latest salvo. It was deviously appropriate that the one thing that almost killed him before, something he had defeated, now returned to kill him again. Badger was there the last time, to help pull him through. Now there was no one.

Badger. His friend's face flashed in his mind. Badger. He would never see him again, never get to tell him how much he meant, how much he loved him.

He thought of his father, of Alex, of his unborn child. He'd never again hug his father, tell Alex he loved her, see his new baby. His world was being washed away, snatched from him as it had been before, with Sarah and Claire. They had been gone for months, now their memories would be destroyed, too. Old and new swept away in the same flood.

He had failed. Failed himself, failed the world, failed the ones he loved. Moloch had won. The beast had lived up to its promise, had made him suffer. As his life was torn from him, so were the people he cared about, pulled from his grip like the air from his lungs. When he was gone, there would be no one left to protect them. Moloch would kill them, too.

Why did they have to die? Why did everyone he cared about have to die? Liquor spilled into his lungs and he began to choke. I loved them all and I couldn't save them.

But he had to try.

Throwing himself facedown, he began to roll in a desperate attempt to spin from under the deluge. Over and over he spun, the liquid splashing into his mouth and eyes when he was faceup, the mud and grit grinding into them when he was facedown. But the torrent moved with him, always remaining directly above. Wherever he went, it went. The flood continued.

With a sudden bump, he rolled into an unmoving object. He opened his eyes to see what it was, but the liquor burned like a hornet's sting and he quickly shut them. Like a blind man, he began to run his hands quickly over the object. It took only a moment for him to realize it was a body. A warm body.

Jason?

He heard his name echo inside his head.

Jason, is that you? the voice said.

It was Stephen.

Dad? Dad? Are you okay? I need your help. I can't do this alone. I can't.

Son, you can't quit now. You're the only hope.

Dad, I don't know how.

Grab my hands.

Jason fumbled about until his hands closed around his father's. A wave of power lanced into his fingers. Coupled with his own, it quickly enveloped his entire body. His brain burned with fire, with knowledge, with power.

Do you know what we must do?

Yes, Dad.

Do you know how?

Yes. We can do it together.

No. You must do it alone, Jason. I can't help. I haven't the strength. I've given it all to you. It's my gift. I'm sorry I didn't give it to you sooner. Goodbye, Son.

Dad? Don't go. I need you. I need your help.

I love you, Son.

I love you, too, Dad Hang on. I'm coming back.

As Jason released his father's hands, an incandescent sun of power stoked his heart, warmed his body. The scalding power radiated from his heart, down his arms and legs to the tips of his fingers and toes. The alcohol drowning his system burned away.

In his mind, visions began to form, familiar visions. Blood, fire, faces, screams. He saw great fires, people thrust inside to burn. He saw torture devices, victims writhing in the machines' embrace. Faces began to fly by. All men, all familiar. Some of their faces were smiling and benevolent; others locked in expressions of agony.

And suddenly Jason understood. These weren't strangers. They weren't just random faces from his dreams. They were ancestors. Medlockes from the past. Caught in massive witch-hunts. Killed for having a power none of them truly

understood or wanted. Killed for being different.

Killed for being like him. And there was no one to protect them.

Around Jason, the aura exploded into golden phosphorescence. Blinding in its intensity, it roared through his bloodstream, electrified his nerve endings. His muscles jumped and flamed with the power.

From his body, the golden aura spread outward in all directions, its heat searing the air. The rain of alcohol turned to steam, blowing away on the breeze. Still upward the aura expanded, reaching the black cloud, sucking the life from it, absorbing it.

Freed from the torrents, Jason raised his head and pulled himself up. The gift scorched through his veins like a holy avenger. He held his hands before his face and looked in silent wonder as his flesh pulsed and glowed with the magnificent light. His skin seemed insubstantial, a tissue-thin barrier barely reining in the abundance of his power. Everything suddenly became crystalline in clarity.

Why hadn't he seen it before? Why hadn't any of his ancestors seen it? Hatred wasn't the answer. Moloch fed on hate, relished it, drew power from it. Defeating it took something else, something outside the self-centeredness of hate. Quell the lust for revenge. Dampen the fury. They only hid the truth.

Compassion, concern for others more than for yourself. That was the secret of the gift, what made it truly special, what made those who had it truly special. It was all so simple. And yet so hard. Perhaps some of his ancestors had understood the secret too late. Perhaps hate clouded their judgment. It no longer clouded his.

Glancing to his right, Jason saw Quintard's head lying in a pool of blood and the huge crimson stain on the ground nearby. He felt no satisfaction. Only sadness.

The power flamed even brighter.

Jason faced Moloch and smiled. He was shocked to see the bloody mess that remained of Moloch's right eye and the multiple wounds on its body.

Apparently, the bullets had done some damage after all.

Moloch did not smile back. It simply leered. In its right hand it held Alex's neck. In the left, it held Stephen's.

"The game is over, Medlocke," it said. "I just wanted you to watch as I killed them."

"I warned you once. Now I'm warning you again," Jason said, his voice calm and composed. "Let them go."

Moloch hesitated for a moment, struck by Jason's seriousness, then broke into an evil smile.

"Perhaps I have underestimated you," Moloch said. "Your powers seem far more vast than I expected. But even so, you aren't quick enough to prevent me from ripping their heads off. You may be able to kill me, but everything you love in your life will also be gone. Either way, you lose. Do you want to take that chance?"

Jason just smiled. From his eyes, a white-hot flash of light split the air between him and Moloch. With a quick slicing noise, Moloch's arms dropped to the ground, severed at the shoulders. They lay on the dirt, useless and twitching. Alex and Stephen slumped to the ground beside them. A casual thought from Jason and the arms disintegrated.

Blood jetting from its shoulders and its face blank with shock, Moloch looked at Jason.

The aura about Jason flared brilliantly, blindingly, yet its color no longer remained gold. A rainbow sparkled in it—red, purple, green, yellow. The colors

swam in and out of Jason, passing through him, coming from him and returning to him. "I can't let you hurt the people I love," he said.

He raised his arm to deal Moloch's death blow when the beast threw its head back, loosing a geyser of words into the air. A rumbling shook the sky as great, purple clouds rolled into life. Lightning twisted and burned. Bolts tore from the sky, tearing out great chunks of earth where they hit. The green aura rippled and smoked around Moloch.

With a flick of his wrist, Jason covered Alex and his father in a protective cloak, then brought them quickly to his side. Lightning fired toward Alex and Stephen, but Jason casually eradicated the bolts, as if he were swatting flies.

Moloch dropped to its knees, blood streaming from its shoulders to the ground. As it splattered the red clay, the dirt began to glow with a diseased shade of green. Still invoking, Moloch plunged its face into the bloody mud, sucking it down its throat, licking it up with its tongue. It brought its face up to stare at Jason with demonic glee.

"Too late Medlocke. It's all too late."

The smile still on Moloch's lips, a rip started at the top of its forehead, slicing down the center of its face. The skin folded back, exposing the bone and muscle underneath. Bones bent and broke, twisting, growing, transforming. The face stretched outward, the skull cracking in protest. Moloch's needle teeth fell out, only to be replaced by gargantuan tusks jutting out like ivory scimitars.

The rest of Moloch's body followed the transformation.

Its back arched, the spine tearing through the skin in huge knobs. The skin of its chest expanded, widened into a broad expanse of sinew. Muscles in its legs bunched, becoming broad, steel-strong springs. The knees broke, then bent backward.

From the ruined stumps of its shoulders new arms sprang forth, great limbs ending in meaty paws, each paw tipped by knifelike claws that dug trenches in the ground beneath. Gray fur began to grow across the entire body, covering it in a heavy coat.

Then the skull split. Once. Twice. Mutating until three wolflike heads yapped and growled on short, stumpy necks. A pair of silver eyes stared from each.

Jason watched in awe. Yet he remained strangely calm and unafraid. The fire still jumped and danced inside him. He waited securely within its protection.

Moloch grew, towering farther into the sky. The top of its shoulders was two stories tall, its head towered over the trees growing alongside the field. From where he stood, Jason could feel the heat of the huge beast's breath, smell its gas-chamber stench.

Then the center head spoke. Two words.

"Die, Medlocke."

Craning its necks backward, the beast began to howl, a cyclone of sound. The trees bent and swayed; some splintered under the deafening dirge. The clouds roared and tumbled, like combatants in a deadly battle. Rumbling shook the air. Wide branches of lightning burst from cloud to cloud, then centered on the middle of the storm, firing bolt after bolt into the maelstrom's heart.

Where the lightning struck, a green glow appeared, a spinning vortex of light. It grew at a frightening clip, soon encompassing the entire storm. As it completely swallowed its birthplace, another hole tore open at its center. Orange, burning light spilled forth and a forbidding landscape appeared in its core. A gray, barren land of dense, cloudy skies and a line of fire hundreds of miles long on its horizon. Reptilian birds flew across its sky. Wind blew out of the land and across the field, a frigid, inhuman wind with no remorse. One of the lizard-birds soared

out of the storm on the chilling wind and into the sky above Jason's head. Its screech brought him out of his amazement and he understood.

It was Moloch's world.

And it was bringing it here.

And still Moloch howled.

Summoning all his power, Jason concentrated on the approaching world. As the opening drew closer, he turned the golden aura away from him, toward the green-tinged storm. The forces of gold and green met with a deafening explosion. For a moment the storm stopped its descent. The golden aura held its ground.

But it wasn't strong enough. The oncoming world was too powerful, inexorably it pushed forward. Jason couldn't stop it.

But if he couldn't stop the storm, perhaps he could close its conduit.

He turned toward Moloch. The three-headed beast still howled, Cerberus calling its world to take command of this new, virgin territory.

No!

Shimmering explosions of light burst from Jason's hands. Like the sword of judgment, they sliced into Moloch's body. One tore off its back right foot, another cut a huge gaping hole in its chest through which its still-beating heart could be seen. Jason attacked again. The front left leg exploded in a fountain of blood. The head on the right detonated into a thousand pieces, spraying gore across several hundred yards.

The remaining heads howled in agony and directed their stares at Jason. Green columns of hatred erupted from the eyes, scorching the air toward him. He held his arms out. Like a magnet around iron, they drew the attack. The green beams slammed into his palms, the force knocking him backward several feet. The attack's sheer evil wrapped itself around him, but its fury was absorbed and

Jason stood his ground.

He turned his attention to Moloch, walking toward the beast.

Time and again, the creature fired bolts at him. Time and again they were absorbed harmlessly. The beast tried to divert him by attacking Alex and Stephen. But they were safe under Jason's protection.

Overhead, the golden power and Moloch's magic waged battle. Each gave ground, each took it. The match was a draw until the war on the ground was decided.

Jason continued to approach Moloch. When he stood within fifty feet of the towering monster, he raised both hands. The power rose again, his hands became insubstantial within the light.

Time to quit fucking around, he thought.

One blast destroyed the second head. Another tore a huge chunk from the beast's right shoulder. Blood showered Jason, but the aura burned it away instantly.

Its life being torn from it in huge bloody bites, the beast turned to flee to safety in the nearby woods. It made two hobbling steps before the most powerful of Jason's blows struck it halfway up its back, ripping it in two. The bottom half fell to the ground, the legs kicking and jerking wildly.

The top half collapsed forward, entrails spilling out. As it hit the ground, a large black cloud rose around it, smothering it from view. With a thought, Jason destroyed the twitching legs, which evaporated onto the breeze. With another thought, he dispelled the cloud. What he saw surprised him.

The three-headed beast was gone. In its place lay the remains of the original Moloch. Its legs were gone, only its upper torso from just below the heart was left. A massive pool of black blood covered the ground around it and its breath came in struggling wheezes, but the M-shaped brand glowed with burning

malevolence.

Jason walked up and stood over it. Moloch stared back with its one good eye and smiled.

"I believe the proper response is: Go fuck your mother," it said, blood dribbling from between its lips. "But I'm afraid I made that impossible years ago, didn't I?"

Jason reached over and put his hand on the top of Moloch's head. He stared directly into the creature's face.

"You're mine," he said.

Moloch's head exploded.

A furious whooshing rose over Jason's head. He looked up to see the swirling vortex sucking back into itself, like water running down a drain. The opening to Moloch's world closed with a thunderclap and the sky returned to its normal shade of early-morning blue.

Jason's power subsided but he still felt its tingle within his muscles. For all he knew it might never go away. He gazed at Moloch's destroyed body and experienced only a slight glow of victory. Mostly he just felt tired.

The job's not over yet, he told himself.

He strode back to where Alex and his father lay under their protective blankets of power. Lowering the protection, he picked Alex up, carried her over near his father and lay her next to him.

He looked at his father. God, he looked awful. He looked at Alex. She didn't look much better. The poison of Moloch's magic was turning her shoulder black. I hope it hasn't harmed the baby, Jason thought.

Bending his head, he put one hand on his father and the other on Alex. The power rose within him, pure white in its intensity, traveling through his body and

out his hands. Alex and Stephen began to glow.

EPILOGUE



Morning sunlight streamed through the hospital window, falling warmly across Alex's bed. "It's going to be a beautiful May morning," she said.

Jason, who was sitting on her left, holding her hand, smiled and nodded.

Then the next contraction hit and neither of them thought about anything else for sixty seconds.

When the pain subsided, Alex looked over at Jason. He took a damp cloth and mopped her brow, then offered her some ice chips on a plastic spoon. She took them and chewed slowly, letting their coolness wash over her dry mouth.

Jason smiled lovingly at her, then reached down to the bedside monitor that was spitting out sheaves of paper. Two wires extended from the monitor to Alex. One was attached to her belly to monitor the contractions, the other was positioned inside her womb to check the baby's heartbeat.

"That was a pretty hard one," Jason said, looking at the readout sheet.

"You're telling me," she said.

"Is the epidural kicking in?" he asked.

"Seems to be."

"Good," he said. "This is killing me."

Alex gave him a half-smile and looked back out the window. She brought her left hand up to brush some of the sweat-drenched hair from her eyes. As her

hand passed through the sunbeam, the light reflected off the golden band on her third finger.

"They're coming about five minutes apart, so it shouldn't be too much longer," Jason said. "I know Dad is about to go crazy up in New Hampshire. He's already called three times. Says he has to putter around the house like a madman to keep from calling more often."

"He gets around pretty well in that wheelchair," Alex said.

"Yeah, and he told me he's also started his morning walks again. Although now he does them with his walker and doesn't go nearly so far."

Jason's eyes and mouth tightened. Alex squeezed his hand.

"Hey, you did everything you could," she said. "You couldn't ask for much more. The damage from the stroke was too extensive for you to repair completely. You saved his life. That's more than enough."

Jason shrugged.

"Has he ever said what kind of grandchild he wants?" she asked.

"He said he just wants one with ten fingers and toes and one head. But between you and me, I think he'd rather have a girl at this point."

"No shit," Alex said, then she paused and gazed out the window.

"Are you sorry we didn't find out what it was?" she finally asked.

"Not at all. This way, it's a total surprise."

"Yeah, in more ways than one if it's a boy."

Another contraction hit and Alex's statement changed to a grunt.

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," Jason coached.

After the contraction wound down, Jason sat in the chair next to the bed,

continuing to hold Alex's hand. Silently, he prayed for a healthy baby, too. All the sonograms and tests showed it to be completely normal, but he still wasn't sure if Moloch's poison would have any effect on it.

Moloch. He had tried not to think much about the beast since that day seven months ago. God knows, there was enough to take care of otherwise.

The solving of the child murders was front-page news for almost a week. Jason blessed his lucky stars that he was able to get back to the tennis courts that morning before any school workers arrived. He disposed of the huge bloodstain on the court himself. That would be just too hard to explain.

He kept his story simple. They tracked Benton to the tennis courts; there was a fight; he was knocked out and when he woke up, he found Badger's and Benton's bodies in the woods. How Badger managed to kill Benton after his neck had been slit wide open was a question posed by many people, but Buzz Saunders told everyone that a big guy like Badger could live for several minutes after his throat was cut. "There was plenty of time to blow that bastard away," was how Saunders put it to reporters.

The fact that all the accoutrements of the child killings—the duct tape, the outdoor saws, the surgical gloves—were found in Benton's trunk helped ease the questions. With the added evidence of the typewriter and the car, there was no doubt Benton was the murderer.

Badger was buried with full honor guard and awarded the department's highest medal of valor. Jason cried like a baby during the funeral and didn't care.

Badger's kids stayed with Uncle Jazz for a few days while Badger's brothers and sisters decided who was going to take care of them. Telling them what happened to their father was one of the most heart-wrenching things Jason ever did. Tears flowed for several hours. By God, Jason vowed to Alex, if anyone tried to split

those kids up, he was heading into court and fighting for custody himself.

But Badger's sister Rosemary from Santa Fe agreed to take his children. That was fine, the kids said. They liked her. She was nice and a good cook. Their leaving was another painful moment for Jason and he promised to come see them soon.

The disappearance of Anson Quintard was another matter. With a quick blast of power, Jason disposed of Quintard's remains on the field. When he got back to his apartment late that evening, however, he saw Quintard's car parked at the next building down and a warning light went off in his head. He told Alex to wait outside while he searched the apartment. Finding Jimmy Webster's body was no picnic, but finding the ounce of coke in Webster's pocket and adding Quintard's car to the equation gave Jason a pretty clear idea of what was going on.

Making sure only Webster's prints were on the coke, Jason stuck it in the glove compartment of Quintard's car. Then he drove the car to the parking lot at Gwinnett Place Mall. A few days later, the search for Quintard began. When his car and the drugs were found but no body turned up, police ultimately assumed it was a drug buy gone bad. Who'd have thought it? Anson Quintard. A dooper.

Jason felt some guilt about going outside police procedures, tampering with evidence and all that, but then said to hell with it. The whole case was outside normal police procedures.

As Jason relived the past, the hospital door swung open and the obstetrician came in, a nurse right behind him. Both were dressed in scrub suits.

"How's the little mother doing?" he asked. Alex shot him an evil look.

"That good, huh?" he said. "Well, let's take a look."

The nurse handed him the readout sheet and he examined it for a few seconds.

"Time between contractions is getting shorter and they're getting more intense," he said. "But then, you probably already know that. Let me wash up and I'll check the dilation."

After cleansing his hands thoroughly, he leaned down and examined her.

"Holy cow, this baby's going to walk right out of there in a couple of minutes," he laughed.

Another contraction hit.

"I'd better do it quick," he said.

Two minutes later he returned in full surgical gown and mask. The nurse unhooked the bed's stirrups and adjusted them for Alex. The doctor wheeled a stool to the end of the bed and sat down.

"Let's play ball," he said.

Jason stayed at the top of the bed, holding Alex's hand. The next thirty minutes went by in a blur of groans and sweat from Alex and coaching from the doctor, the nurse, and Jason. Alex cursed Jason, cursed the doctor, cursed God for laying this burden on women.

Finally, the doctor said: "I see the head. C'mon, push real hard. Okay, there's the head. Now, one more big push for the shoulders."

Alex tensed up, her whole body rigid. Sweat poured down her face and a long, laborious groan squeezed from between her lips. She took breath in short little gasps. "This is too damned hard," she said, "just leave it up there."

Just when she felt she simply couldn't push any more, when she had nothing left, she heard the cry of lungs taking their first gulp of air. A loud wailing shook the delivery room. Tears welled up in her eyes. Jason leaned down and kissed her.

"Congratulations, you two," the doctor said. "It's a whole and healthy baby boy."

Jason's head snapped up from gazing at his baby. He could've sworn he heard a peal of high-pitched cackling.