

**The Takers  
Summon the Demon**

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**The Takers  
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To all those who feel as we do— that there are still mysteries unsolved in the world and there remains high adventure for those who dare to seek it.

Any resemblance, etc...

**BOOK ONE  
RITUALS OF DEATH**

**Chapter One**

JeAnn Bonaparte could feel the wind, cool against her legs, flirting with the hem of her dress. Like the fingers of a lover, it caught her hair at the nape of the neck, moving it to its will. The Battery was a marvelous place. With a toss of the head, she could gaze east or west, into the purpling darkness of the open sea or the orange wash of the lowering sun.

Whit Candler's hand touched at hers and she held it with the tips of her fingers. "Let me take you home," Whit told her, his voice barely audible, but almost to the level of a shout. The wind drumming against her ears made speech of any kind nearly impossible to hear. The concrete walkway on which they stood looped outward and then, at what seemed a right angle, thrust back toward the city of Charleston. The lapping sounds of the waves beneath and the screeching of the seabirds overhead only exacerbated the wind's cacophonous effect.

JeAnn looked up into Whit Candler's eyes. "I love you, I think," she said, not saying it loudly, not knowing if he heard her. He was too old for her; her friends had told her that. She had never asked Whit how old, but she guessed middle forties, perhaps late forties, his hair all but steel grey.

JeAnn supposed Whit had heard her, because he folded her against him, his arms enclosing her at shoulders and waist. "I think I love you, too," he told her, the little lines at the corners of his eyes deepening as he smiled.

Whit Candler always told her things, never suggesting, asking, or otherwise stating anything. Perhaps she liked that about him, too. Her university days psychology professor would have counseled her that Whitlock J. Candler's age, his prepossessing manner, his affluence, the way his grey eyes seemed always to bore into her soul, that all of this fascinated her simply because she had never known her father. But her psychology professor was someone she hadn't seen for a long time and hadn't liked that very much anyway.

Whit Candler kissed her, and JeAnn didn't kiss him back at first, just letting him do it all. But then her hands touched at his face and his throat. She held his face tightly as he squeezed her against him; and, she kissed him back at last.

"Now you've gotta go home with me," he smiled. He had a broad smile, instantly ingratiating, animating every plane and angle of his face, leaving only his eyes unchanged.

"Why do you want to take me home?"

"To ravish your body, of course," she heard him tell her, his lips touching at her hair, her forehead. She turned around, hugging his arms to her waist as she looked south. And she felt it, almost heard it on the wind. "What's the matter— cold? You're shivering."

"No— it's not that," she told him. She knew what it was. But she could never tell him that...

\* \* \*

Where the land was higher, it would not yet be night. But already here, Momma Cinda could see the moon, low. It was, of course, only its reflection, because the moon could not have risen yet. But, unlike the reflection of a person's face in a mirror, showing what is, the reflection of the moon in the clouds was a reflection of what would be. In that way, tonight's moon was like a deck of cards or the fragmented

leaves in the bottom of a Blue Willow china cup; it revealed the future.

She had considered the moon for a very long time, ever since her mother had begun to teach her the mysteries.

Momma Cinda walked, deliberately not hurrying herself because for them to see that she was afraid would have invited their attack only sooner. And she was not yet near enough to the house.

Her thoughts had scanned the faces of many, but there was only one who could aid her, who could try.

Child bearing and a passion for pecan pie had destroyed the lithe figure of her girlhood; and, it was only at times like these when she had to move in haste that she at all experienced regret. Childbearing and pecan pie— one a good taste for the soul, another a good taste for the mouth. She smiled to herself, still walking, purposefully, but not quickly. Passion, after all, was still passion.

The thumb of her left hand was hooked on the frayed strap of her woven bag, the one in which she carried the instruments of her profession, everything from band-aids and antiseptics to her charms. The people would call the Momba and she would come. Frequently, the need was only for the cleansing of a minor wound and its protection. Other times, the reason was something else again. Infertility. Possession. Nervous energy. A lump on the body. The combatting of an evil eye. All these ordinary things, and the charms and mixtures of her trade— for all but the more bizarre ailments which required special remedies of a more exotic nature— were in the hand woven bag of bleached, once tan cloth.

Momma Cinda hugged the bag closer to her. If, somehow, the ones who followed her in the twilight stopped her before she reached her house, what the bag held would be her only defense, that and her ruby talisman engraved with the symbol of the loa Ibo who helps the wearer fulfill all her responsibilities and solve all her problems.

She had walked paralleling the blacktop since crossing the bridge over the intercoastal waterway. And, it was once she had crossed the bridge that the noises began. Thrashing sounds, like blind animals in the brush. But they were not animals and they were not blind. They were once human and they could see because their master wished them to see.

The thrashing sounds were on both sides of the road now, near her and distant and both ahead of and behind "Velasquez," she whispered, sucking air through her teeth, making a faint whistling sound. She had made the doll Velasquez out of a perceived requirement for self-defense. But the doll was safe at the house and the doll would not work for her without the bit of fingernail secure in a compartment in the lining of her bag. When, in his rage, Velasquez had come at her with his hands, going for her throat, it had been young Willie Boyle who had taken out his knife and slashed at Velasquez's left hand. She had picked up the bit of flesh and fingernail when no one saw and hidden it in her handkerchief.

Velasquez then did the unspeakable. His left index finger was heavily bandaged, as one of them who had been too frightened not to tell her had recounted. And he swore revenge against Willie Boyle. He sent the ones who almost constantly attended him, sent them for Willie Boyle. And now, Willie Boyle was one of those who pursued her, one of Velasquez's soulless ones.

She walked a little more quickly at the thought, cooing the name, "Willie. Go away and do not harm me, or come to me to end your pain, Willie." But Momma Cinda knew he would do neither, because Willie's will was not his own.

The Catholic Church of St. Peter was coming up on her left. Had it been a normal evening and were she just returning from visiting a patient, she would have stopped at the rectory beyond the graveyard, shared a glass of wine with Father Whitehead or talked off a wart for Father housekeeper, Luella. The old woman was always plagued the things and had been ever since discovering a vaginal wart on her wedding night and thinking it was some sort of curse from the grave of her new husband's dead first wife. Momma Cinda had tried to explain it was only a wart and what caused warts and that it was not a curse.

But tonight, she would not stop, because it was not a normal evening.

Momma Cinda passed the church, making the Sign of The Cross. She did this not because she was Catholic— she wasn't really anything— but because she believed in the fine young man Jesus quite a lot and always had. And, the Sign of The Cross was a symbol of good against evil. So many of her people practised both religions, Voodoo and Catholicism. Momma Cinda, like Father Whitehead, practised only one. Father Whitehead had invited her to his church in the building beside the graveyard a hundred yards set back from the road. She had invited him to her church, her Oumphor, in the clearing at the end of the narrow path across Gunwater Swamp.

She had declined. He had declined.

Occasionally, over the years since he had replaced Father Hambrick, Father Whitehead had encouraged his congregation to leave her church; she had never encouraged her congregation to renounce Father Whitehead's church. And, after a time, she and Father Whitehead had begun to talk, to discuss the concerns of their common flock.

She stared at the graveyard. Mists rolled in early tonight from the swampy land beyond. It was said by some that when the next hurricane came, it might be enough to make the graveyard wash into the swamp. That the rotted corpses and the nearly as rotted boxes which contained them would float to the surface. She had seen the dead many times in many ways in many forms, and she laughed as she thought of the way the white women spoke of the impending disaster for the cemetery in such a hushed and frightened way.

As if the dead could harm someone. Only the living could do that, and those trapped between life and death who served the living.

Momma Cinda addressed a particular grave. It was her custom, had been since the grave was first occupied. "Good evening, Mr. Hutchins." And she added something she had never said, but felt deeply tonight, because it was still a long walk and although she could no longer hear their thrashing about in the underbrush, she knew Velasquez's Zombies still followed her. "I might be in your arms again real soon— real soon." And for the first time since Mr. Hutchins' death twenty-eight years ago, she felt tears come to her eyes for him.

Momma Cinda brushed her tears back and sniffed. Mr. Hutchins was the best looking white boy she had ever seen. She let him get into her and when she had realized he loved her she was very afraid. His father murdered him, then killed himself. And his mother refused to let her son be buried in the family cemetery on the other side of the island. Mr. Hutchins had not been Catholic, but Father Hambrick had taken him in.

Momma Cinda had not cried when she was told her white lover had been killed. She had not cried when she learned by her own art that she carried his child in her womb. She had cried only the one time until now, the one time late at night, when the fog was so thick no one would see, and she had taken her baby

in her arms and undressed the pretty little girl child over the grave so Mr. Hutchins would know. For a moment again, she was a young girl, body aching for the touch of her lost lover.

From the graveyard, she heard moans. Not the dead, but the undead, calling for her. Momma Cinda, fatter, older, kept walking.

Past the rectory. No light glowed from Father Whitehead's study window. His yellow light was a beacon she could sometimes see from her own house on the opposite side of the road and beyond the ten feet or so of bridge spanning what the white folks called Gunwater Creek. Gunwater Creek was not usually a real creek, but merely a free flowing trickle of water, draining from one side of Gunwater Swamp in to the other.

The undead would be moving behind the rectory. Momma Cinda smiled. There were lights on in other rooms. If Luella were there alone, Luella would be making the Sign of The Cross, and rubbing the charm Luella had insisted on having as proof against the powers of Arturo Velasquez's Zombies.

Momma Cinda reached the bridge spanning Gunwater Creek. What she heard frightened her deeply and she looked down into the shadow. Arms, brown and muscled, glistening in the water, reached up toward her over the sides of the bridge. She moved more quickly now, into the center of the bridge at an angle. Her track shoes slipped once and she fell. She picked herself up, gathering her ankle length print skirt in her right hand and hitching it to her knees. She started to run.

"Momma... Momma... Momma..."

She looked back. Six of them. They were coming. Her house was small but nicely kept, with freshly painted blue lintels and a small porch with a well-used rocking chair. Her house was less than five hundred yards further ahead as she reached the center of the two lane blacktop.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, her tongue dry against the roof of her mouth, its tip darting back and forth into the gaps where she had no teeth left. The moaning, the chanting of her name. They were using her own beliefs against her. Velasquez was. It was not that she was afraid of the physical harm the Zombies of Arturo Velasquez would do to her. But if they killed her. Velasquez would control the Voodoo on the island and control her people. Her people would be damned. Momma Cinda forced herself to keep running.

A different sound. A rising wail. Brightly glowing lights. A horn. Headlights. She looked behind her and dodged to the side of the road, a pickup truck loaded with teenage white boys, laughing loudly, beer cans in their hands. The wind of the truck's slipstream sucked at her skirt at the loose hairs which had worked free of her single braid. From the right side of the road, strong brown arms reached for her. She shouted. "Be gone!" And she ran again.

"Momma... Momma... Momma..."

She could not run anymore.

She stopped, she turned, faced the Zombies as they climbed from the brush. one of them was Willie Boyle. Or had been.

"I am the Momba. I order you to be gone!"

Each of them was as tall as Willie or taller and Willie had played center on the basketball team.

Momma Cinda had watched him play, thought of him like a son, but his eyes looked dull and dead in the twilight and Willie's face bore no expression anymore. The five others with him advanced, but slowly. "I am the Momba—" Their faces remained unchanged, and slowly, like robots she had seen in a movie about outer space, they walked toward her.

Momma Cinda had never seen Zombies like these.

"Momma..." They took up the chanting of her name again "Momma... Momma... Momma..."

She turned, running again, her breathing hard but her house near.

Off the road, up the incline that never seemed so steep as now, running. She looked back. They were coming. But they would not attack her in her house— not yet.

Momma Cinda sagged against the door, taking the latch key from her cleavage. The brass was wet with her sweat. She turned the key in the lock, letting it drop back on its chain between her breasts. And she threw her weight against the door, half stumbled inside.

She found the light switch beside the door frame, palming it upward, for a split second frightened that Velasquez had cut off her electricity. The light in the middle of the ceiling came on, illuminating the room that was her living room, dining room, parlor and office.

She pressed the door closed behind her, letting it self-lock. There was no chain. She had never been in fear until now, locking her door only against strangers who might not know her.

Momma Cinda turned, facing the door, edging back. Through the partially curtained windows flanking the door, she could see only darkness, and the shadowy reflection of the interior of her own house in the spotless glass.

She started across the room, hearing the chanting outside—"Momma..."— and trying to force it out of her mind so she could act.

Her desk. Momma Cinda crossed behind it, seating herself in the cushioned wooden swivel chair. She could see the front of the house clearly from here, and see the door leading out and leading in.

Momma Cinda reached across the neatly stacked file folders. She picked up the telephone receiver from its cradle. The file folders had not yet been returned to the cabinet which stood in the far corner, its drawers one of only two repositories of information on her patients. The second storage place was more sophisticated, more complete, covered more than facts and histories. It was her brain.

Her fingers started to press the touch-tone buttons. She could not trust Jimmy Howard Hanks and his miserable excuses for police officers. But the fire chief, Zippy Thornton, was a good man. She stopped midway through the fire department emergency number. There was no connection. Momma Cinda depressed the nearer button in the cradle and tried to dial the fire department again. "Dead." She hung up.

Momma Cinda studied the room that spread before her.

The small table set with two cups and two saucers that were her best china. The coffee table with the ashtray at its center for those of her patients who smoked. She had never wished to do what she had heard those in the recognized medical professions did. prohibit smoking, thereby making someone who was already nervous just that much more nervous. And her patients were polite; if smoking bothered someone else, they would retire to the small porch or put the cigarette out. Maybe, the patients of the city doctors weren't that considerate of others.

The chanting from outside the house brought her thoughts back to the moment. "Momma..."

Momma Cinda stood up, walking slowly past the unmatched nicknack cabinets with the miniature tea and coffee cups friends had given her over the years, past the gleaming glass of her white enameled cabinet where special preparatives for charms, special herbs— and the more mundane things such as aspirin— were stored.

She stopped at the bookshelf. All of the books were written by hand except for those books occupying the lower shelf, all of them concerning her religion, her medicine, except those on that solitary shelf.

She studied the books there. THE PHYSICIAN'S DESK REFERENCE, GREY'S ANATOMY and the collected works of the only person who might somehow be able to help. Momma Cinda took down the latest of these books and turned it over. The photo on the back of the dust jacket showed a youngish girl who was trying to look mature, a very pretty girl. Her dark hair was up and she was smiling as though she were laughing. Her eyes— Momma Cinda had joked with the white girl that her eyes, dark brown and green mixed together to form something that was both yet neither— should have been the eyes of some strange and pretty animal.

Momma Cinda stared at the eyes in the photograph and began to speak the girl's name. What was in the girl's mind, the curiosity which seemed to obsess her mind, tonight such would be more powerful for Momma Cinda than any charm. She started moving toward the file cabinet, the book with the pretty girl's picture on the back of it tucked up under her left arm, between her armpit and the top of her bag.

With her right hand. Momma Cinda found the necklace key chain again, this time using the second key.

She placed the second key in the small rectangular lock with the rounded corners and the lock cylinder popped outward. She let the key drop, drawing open the top file drawer. A shoe box, the one from the track shoes she wore. She opened it.

Inside the shoe box was a crude likeness of the one whom his worshippers called "Fidelito." Arturo Velasquez. But, it was likeness enough to serve.

She closed the file drawer, pressing in the lock tumbler, neatly placing the lid back atop the shoe box, setting the box atop the file cabinet. Momma Cinda would not kill Arturo Velasquez; she had reasoned that as she had fabricated the doll.

Returned to her desk, she set the doll to one side, the book with the picture of the girl on the other, both objects face up. She was digging into her charm bag by feel now and located the small poly bag in the sewn in pouch. She set the bag on the blotter at the center of the desk.

"Velasquez," she murmured, opening the poly bag and removing the bit of fingernail she had separated from the flesh of the severed portion of Velasquez's fingertip.

There was a pouch set at the small of the eight-inch doll's back. Momma Cinda carefully placed the fingernail into the pouch. In the old days, she reflected, it would have been necessary to sew the pouch shut. But these were modern days; and, instead, her fingers merely pressed the male and female portions of the Velcro together and the pouch was closed.

She reached into her hair, extracting one of the two hatpins which she used to secure her bandanna to her head. Momma Cinda studied the effigy, the doll in her right hand, the pin in her left. She stabbed the hatpin into the Pit of the doll's stomach and she knew that somewhere the one called Fidelito would scream in agony. Momma Cinda withdrew the pin. He would know now that she was fighting back. But he would also know she would not kill him.

She set the doll and the pin beside it to the left of her blotter, taking up the book, calling the name of the one who would help her, "Mary Frances Mulrooney, hear me... Mary Frances Mulrooney! Hear me!"

Momma Cinda watched the pretty eyes as she spoke the magical name...

\* \* \*

Mary Frances Mulrooney opened her eyes, automatically reaching out with her left hand toward Josh Culhane; but he wasn't there and, had she been in bed, the bed would have been empty.

Mulrooney sat up, cold suddenly despite the gown she wore. There wasn't really that much to the nightgown, more a semi-transparent formal. And the robe over it was made to look pretty, which it did, rather than keep the wearer warm.

The thunder. It had been that which had awakened her. Mulrooney told herself.

She licked her lips. She rubbed her forearms, then her upper arms, still cold. She looked about the great room, spied the VCR's digital clock. The evening was young, very young. Not even eight PM. Mulrooney stood up from the couch, hugging her arms across her chest, the robe and the nightgown beneath it falling down to all but cover her bare feet. She looked at the floor beside the sofa. She stepped into her pink scuffs.

She looked around the room, knowing where she was but at once somehow disoriented.

Mary Frances Mulrooney tried organizing her thoughts, the thunder rumbling louder now, or at least it seemed that way to her, alone in the lakeside A-Frame she had moved into once again with Josh Culhane. But Josh wasn't there now, and perhaps that was why the thunder sounded so loud, almost menacing she reasoned.

It had been an early morning for her, at her computer by eight-thirty, not even bothering to shower, working throughout the day (forgetting about lunch) on her latest, Relics of The Future. For once in her life, a book would be early or at least on time, despite the tantalizing research for her next book.

But, much of the day, she hadn't typed at all, just simply stood on the deck which overlooked the lake and watched the water, her hands buried to the wrists in the pockets of her cutoff Levis, one of Culhane's cowboy shirts knotted below her breasts.

By five or so she had stopped writing or even trying to.

No desire to brave the shower yet, slightly cold feeling throughout the day, Mulrooney decided on an early dinner, especially after remembering she had forgotten lunch.

The trouble with living with Culhane was that when they were home together, she made elaborate meals; but, when he was gone, she didn't bother and she ate junk food when she bothered to eat at all. She never gained. It was her own personal way, she reflected, of saying "Fuck you" to the rest of the world. She had eaten through a can of Beef-A-Roni, then tackled a half-a-box of Girl Scout chocolate chunk cookies she had bought from a little Brownie (along with eleven other boxes that still lay nestled in the freezer). It had been a very little Brownie and the girl's order list had been positively naked. Mulrooney was once a Brownie herself and remembered how intimidating those cookie lists could be.

A glass of Myers's Dark Rum then, the glass specifically one of the ones Culhane called a "Doc Holiday" glass. Other people called them bourbon glasses.

Then a shower, washing her hair. She had debated about setting it. She hadn't set her hair for— As she walked across the room, toward the kitchen, up the three steps. she tried remembering when the last time had been that she had set her hair? She couldn't remember. Drying her hair, she had sat on the recliner for a while, not found it comfortable, lain on Culhane's bear skin rug not comfortable there either. She had settled on the sofa, at last, curling up her feet under the hem of her robe and reading. It was an old copy of The Life of Greece, by Will Durant. She had fallen asleep.

Standing behind the kitchen counter now, Mulrooney poured a glass of rum for herself.

The thunder was louder. She closed the bottle of rum and walked down the three steps and into the great room again. "Momma Cinda," Mulrooney whispered as the thunder rolled, a chill running along her spine in the same instant.

Religiously, she sent Momma Cinda an autographed copy of every book she wrote as soon as it came out. But, she rarely thought of the woman. Why, then, she wondered, had she just spoken Momma Cinda's name?

M.F. Mulrooney walked across the great room and toward the sliding glass doors which led onto the A-Frame's deck. It was clear that it was not raining— yet. Perhaps the fresh air would fully awaken her, she reasoned.

She opened the door, making certain it would not lock, then drew it closed after her. The wind pressed her robe and gown against her thighs, her calves, catching at her hair. Her hair felt just a little damp and there was a sensuous feeling in the wind, her clothing molded against her body like the heroine on the cover of some romance novel. All that was missing was a half-naked Indian or pirate swashbuckler; or Josh, who looked great half-naked. She walked across the deck, watching the chain lightning over the rising whitecaps of Lake Lanier.

Mulrooney leaned against the deck's railing. She set the glass of rum on the flat top rail, staring out over the growing tempest, the sky almost purple rather than black, the gun metal thunderheads which carried the storm's electrical energy flashing brilliantly bright in series, then thunder rumbling again.

Mulrooney felt at the pockets of her robe, found the pack of Salems and the Zippo lighter Culhane had given her. Using her left hand as a shield against the wind, she struck the Zippo several times, each time an errant gust hissing out the flame. Finally, on the fourth try, she was able to co-ordinate the flicker of flame with inhalation. The cigarette was lit. She was almost out of fluid and, as was her custom, would

wait until Culhane returned and filled it for her. Matches worked.

She inhaled the smoke deeply, watching the chain lightning. As she exhaled again, the wind blew from across the lake, making her shiver all the more in the flimsy robe and flimsier nightgown. She found herself saying, "Momma Cinda." She didn't know why; and, that frightened her...

\* \* \*

Momma Cinda set down the book with the picture of Mary Frances Mulrooney on its dust jacket.

The chanting of the Zombies of Arturo Velasquez had stopped. She had no idea whether her use of the doll had any bearing on this.

She felt that it had not.

Zombies, Momma Cinda had always told her flock, were not instruments of magical power. They were made by infusing the body of someone previously made to appear dead with certain natural elements. It was merely the Petro of a Bocor, and, as a Momba, it was nothing in which she ever engaged. But she knew at least one reason why Velasquez, a Bocor of the first magnitude, had sent his Zombies against her. Because she had pledged at her last meeting with her flock— a fertility rite under a new moon— that somehow she would undo his Bad Magic and restore Willie Boyle, either to life or death.

Willie Boyle was part of the larger issue, she knew. For decades, she had been the Momba, kept her flock from the evil that could be reached out for so easily, grasped so quickly and was all but impossible to abandon.

And Velasquez offered them this evil, threatened them with greater evil if they did not embrace it and follow him.

Momma Cinda picked up the doll she had made of him. She had chosen a doll with a bit of fingernail attached to it rather than the more modern method, a doll with a Polaroid photograph of the subject.

Momma Cinda held the pin. From outside this home where she had birthed many babies, one of them her own, came sound, not of life but death. She set down the doll, raising her hands to her kerchiefed hair, reinserting the pin there. She opened the Velcro closure for the doll's tiny pouch, removing the bit of fingernail taken from the Bocor Fidelito.

Neatness had always been her only fetish. She placed the piece of fingernail in the empty wastebasket beside her desk. She opened the drawer on the top left side, placing the doll in the near righthand corner of the drawer, then closing it.

"Momma... Momma... Momma!"

She would not kill. If she did that— killed the Bocor Fidelito— then her Rada, her good magic, would be gone. And she would not follow Velasquez down the path of Petro.

Momma Cinda told herself she would be safe in her house. There were charms against the Zombies, against the Petro of the Bocor Fidelito, and were not her door and its frame and the window frames as well painted blue?

The window glass to the left of the door smashed inward, a human— once human?— body, flailing blood streaked arms, propelling itself toward her. Despite herself, Momma Cinda screamed...

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Momma Cinda no longer needed the photograph of Mary Frances Mulrooney, feeling sure inside herself that contact had been established. She spoke to M.F. Mulrooney as the Zombies which held each of her arms pinned to her sides propelled her along the rocky path down toward the sea. "Mary Frances Mulrooney" she whispered, the Zombie at her left arm— once Willie Boyle— staring at her oddly.

Momma Cinda reached out to his mind, probing to discover if it were still there. But, it was not.

From the base of the path, they began to move across the upper ridge of sand and rock on the boundary of the lapping surf, toward the place she had known since her girlhood, discovered when death had nearly claimed her.

She stared, but even with the full light of the moon there was nothing to see in the depth of the shadow but the flickering torches.

Having crossed the beach, again they began to climb, toward the rocky grotto that was Fidelito's Oumphor, his temple. Chanting. But not her name, not the mindless rumbling of the Zombies who had taken her. Men. Women. A chorus: "Asmodeus! Asmodeus!"

They summoned the Demon of Lechery. Asmodeus of the First Hierarchy, one of the exiled Seraphin, Tempter of Men, Prince of Wantons, arch foe of John The Baptist.

Willie Boyle and the Zombie at her right arm all but carried her now, their pace too rapid for her body, her breath coming in short gasps. No little of its cause was fear she knew.

The torchlight. The flames grew in definition, and with them grew the shadows of the robed figures which held them.

"Asmodeus!"

Their shadows assumed immense and spectral proportions along the black walls of rock which formed the grotto. And, in the niche at the deepest place in the grotto, she could see him now, his cowled face illuminated by the flickering candles which surrounded the flat rock which was his altar.

"Asmodeus."

It was Fidelito, the Bocor of Petro.

"Asmodeus." The Zombies propelled her forward. The cowled faces of the worshippers, half in the red-orange glow of torchlight, stared at her as she was taken past them. A woman's laughter— insane laughter.

"Asmodeus."

Toward the altar in the niche of the grotto.

Momma Cinda began to pray. She prayed for the intercession of the Catholic Saint who had heralded the coming of Jesus, John The Baptist.

Beelzebub was Prince of the Seraphin, and second only to Lucifer, Prince of Darkness. Of equal rank to Beelzebub were Leviathon, Balberith, Verrine, Gressil and Sonneillon. And each of the principal rank of Demons had its adversary. Beelzebub's the Pious St. Francis. But one of the demons, his name spoken in whispers, perhaps since time began, was called Asmodeus—the tempter, the prince of promiscuous evil.

And she prayed to St. John The Baptist, adversary of Asmodeus, to help her.

"Asmodeus."

"Blessed Saint protect me," she whispered. "Come to me. Blessed Saint protect me."

Why had her magic failed to stop the Zombies of Fidelito? She could not understand it, beyond that it might be part of some great plan of the Loas, and perhaps that her death and torture were some small part of this.

"Give me wisdom, John," she whispered.

"Asmodeus."

"Behold!" Fidelito's brown skin shimmered red in the wavering torchlight, the candles flickering with his words. His grey lips were long, heavy seeming, a lifeless wound beneath a pencil-line thin mustache. The dark eyes concealed below his heavy brows were flecked with pinpoints of fire. "Behold! She who would mock me, she who would mock the one whose blood is our blood, whose spirit of fire burns within our loins! Behold the hag in the moment of her death!" And Fidelito raised a long, curved bladed knife with jewelled hilt, raised it from the altar, raised it high above his head in both his hands, the sleeves of his robe falling away, his bare arms rippling with muscles, glistening with sweat. The blade caught the fire of the torches in its steel.

"Behold! Behold the fate of those who defy!"

Simultaneously, Momma Cinda prayed for the intercession of St. John The Baptist and for the coming of Mary Frances Mulrooney...

\* \* \*

When the rain began like a mist on the wind. Mary Frances Mulrooney took up the glass from her rum—the rum was gone—and moved through the sliding doors, returning to the great room. She was cold, still, and still found herself saying a name she had no reason to say.

A clap of thunder seemed to shake the very house itself. She stopped, kicking out of her scuffs, preparatory to curling up on the couch. She stood at the center of the great room, staring out toward the storm which lashed across the deck where a moment earlier she had stood. Sheets of rain pummelled the decking in torrents of wind and water. And in the next instant there came the loudest clap of thunder she had ever heard. Mulrooney involuntarily jumped back, the Doc Holiday glass falling from her fingers and shattering, the lights in the A-Frame and from the houses across the lake that an instant before had been visible, dying.

Darkness.

Almost total.

Thunder rumbled and the flashes of lightning seemed to deepen the darkness rather than relieve it. Mulrooney stood motionless, barefooted. She'd broken one of Culhane's bourbon glasses before. They didn't shatter into little pieces, but instead into shards which were razor sharp. If she stepped on the broken glass barefooted— Mulrooney didn't dare even move, powerless to lest she slash the soles of her feet.

The lights did not come back on. The artillery barrage of thunder, which seemed somehow to surround the house, to tear at its roof and walls and foundation, did not cease, only grew louder, stronger, more insistent.

And she was immediately colder than she had been, so cold that her body trembled with it, her goosefleshed arms folding tightly across her chest. "Momma Cinda!" She screamed the name into the darkness.

Mulrooney's entire body was racked with chills. And the lights would not return. She stood motionless, except for her incessant trembling, muscles stiff and she was freezing cold in the very core of her being. The broken glass still surrounded her bare feet, imprisoning her; the cuckoo clock, which needed no electricity, chimed, marking the duration of her torment.

The half hour.

The hour.

The half hour again.

Mary Frances Mulrooney cried, like she hadn't cried since she was a little girl.

## Chapter Two

Mulrooney showered under hot water for what she judged to be at least half an hour. Afterward, she changed to a different nightgown and robe and pulled out her quilted winter slippers from the closet, then very calmly poured herself a drink. Using fresh bread then the trusty Kenmore vacuum cleaner. she got up all the glass, pondering at the same time what to tell Josh Culhane. He hated it when one of his Doc Holiday glasses was broken.

She had been doubly careful with the vacuum cleaner; both of them liked to walk about the house barefoot at times, and the great room floor frequently became an extension of the couch, or their bed.

Mulrooney had tried the telephone, tried it several times, getting at first what sounded like an automatic circuits busy, then going through the long distance operator to a verifying operator. "Trouble on the line. I'll report it right away." Mulrooney sat down at last to sip at her drink. Trouble on the line? For Momma Cinda?

A moment of calm was sometimes useful. Mulrooney walked into Culhane's office and found his Rolodex, flipping through to the "T" section. "Time." Dialing New York on the portable phone, she was able to reset the digital clock on the videocassette recorder, this the most precise time instrument in the house. It was necessary to call New York because nowhere in Georgia had she found a time source which repeated the precise time in minutes and seconds for a long enough period in which to calibrate the second adjustment on the VCR clock. Hence the long distance call. Her cellphone, which would not have lost the time, was in her car, and she had no desire to go outside.

Mulrooney went about the house then, resetting all the electric clocks; lastly, because if she didn't do it right the alarm kept sounding, resetting the electric clock built into the kitchen stove. As she started to turn away from it, the buzzer went off. "Damn it," Mulrooney hissed, twisting the turning knobs angrily until the buzzing ceased.

If Josh had been here, he would have reset everything by his Rolex. Despite the fact she made as much money or more from her books as Culhane did from his, she didn't feel like spending Rolex prices when Timex time was just as good for her purposes.

Mulrooney left the kitchen, snatching up Culhane's Rolodex which was hers now too and taking it with her into the office. She sat at Culhane's desk, what he called his "whoopie cushion" under her in the chair. It was a fabric covered rubber cushion with a hollow center, of the type sold in pharmacies. She picked up the phone from the cigar stand beside his computer table and dialed area code 803, Information, asking for St. Peter's Island Police. "It isn't an emergency."

Well, maybe it was.

While she waited, Mulrooney looked about the room. There was no clock, except for the business card-sized digital device which showed time in all the major world time zones. Culhane relied on his two thousand dollar wristwatch for real time at all times. Except as concerned the VCR.

The operator gave her the number. Mulrooney standing, copying it on the small wooden framed blackboard—it really was black, not green—which hung on the wall near the cigar stand (this inherited from his late father) which Culhane used as a phone table.

She sat down again brushing the chalk dust from her fingers against her robe, then dialed. Absently, she wondered if a new phrase would be coined someday? "He touch-toned the telephone," she said aloud, laughing. The phone was ringing—"Hi."

"St. Peter's Island Police."

She could hear a radio in the background. "Yes. I wanted some information, please; it isn't an emergency."

"Hold on, please."

He—the man on the other end of the line—just set the phone down. She could hear the receiver bang against the table top or desk or whatever it was, picking up his voice more faintly, as if somehow in the distance. He must be answering radio calls. Mulrooney surmised.

He sounded fat and fiftyish; the voice probably belonged to a willowy transexual in his or her twenties. Mulrooney smiled.

She studied the room, as if seeing it for the first time. She rarely sat in Josh Culhane's office without something of her own to do or talking to him or something of his that she was helping him with. The new computer that he was trying to understand well enough to use for his filing and typing— she played with its keyboard.

On the panelled walls there was a massive Bowie knife, a shoulder holster for a cowboy-style sixgun, a bullwhip and a Cherokee Indian Stone axe. Hanging there as well was a portrait of John Wayne in full cowboy mufti, movie stills of everyone from a battle-vested Arnold Schwarzenegger to craggy-faced and black-clad Richard Boone (one of the most oddly handsome men she had ever seen), holding a long-barrelled .45 Colt revolver. There were some pictures of her. Mulrooney liked it that he put pictures of her alone or the two of them together on his walls.

"Yes, ma'am," the voice came back. Mary Frances Mulrooney decided; definitely fat and fiftyish rather than willowy and sexually questionable.

"Hi— listen, uhhh— I was trying to call a friend of mine? I live in Georgia. I was worried about her, ya know? Well anyway—"

"Who's y'all's friend ma'am; what's the problem?" The voice came back at her impatiently, cut her off.

That pissed her; it was her dime. "I don't know her last name. Momma Cinda. Do you know—"

"Hold please," and she heard his receiver clatter down again.

"Shit," Mulrooney snarled, continuing her survey of the office. Boxed files of magazines, books on every subject from foreign languages to knife fighting to woodcraft.

The voice came back. "Ma'am? Momma Cinda's house caught fire. No one seems to know where she is, but she wasn't apparently inside. If I can have y'all's name—"

M. F. Mulrooney didn't know if she should give it. "Thank you." And she hung up. What if he Star-69-ed her?

Josh Culhane would be ticked when he got back and found her gone off to St. Peter's Island off the coast from Charleston. South Carolina.

## Chapter Three

He rarely used a gun. As the onetime champion bar fighter of the Southeastern Seaboard, usually his mere presence and a look of disfavor were adequate to calm any potentially violent situation. When the efficacy of these was lacking— perhaps ignorance on the part of the malefactor or too much drunkenness to care— he would simply, quickly and decisively punch out the person in question.

But intimidation was an important factor, as he had learned through those formative years when bar fighting had turned from an avocation to a vocation. And, for that reason, he had just changed the shotgun carried in his personal patrol car from an ordinary and somewhat rusted Remington 870 pump to

a brand new gun, otherwise identical but brightly chrome plated. It looked mean.

Similarly, Jimmy Howard Hanks, Police Chief of The Township of St. Peter's Island (which included the actual town of Teach's Landing and the remaining portion of the entire island) had picked a handgun that was intimidating. He had considered the Model 29, always an admirer of Clint Eastwood and his characterization of the mythic statured San Francisco R.D Inspector. But, he had settled on the Colt Python instead, adhering to the rule he had established for all the men in his department: "Carry whatever the fuck handgun feels good to you, so long as it's a 357 Mag just like everybody else's." Adhering to his own dictums was something he believed in.

Hanks unwound his nearly six and one-half feet from behind the wheel of the dark brown Ford Crown Victoria and shifted the weight of his belt, moving the holster which held his stainless steel revolver. The Colt was polished as bright as a bald pimp's scalp.

Intimidation.

Walking slowly, he studied the remains of Momma Cinda's house, the brim of his Stetson pulled low over his eyes against the sun. "Hey, Jimmy Howard!"

Jimmy Howard Hanks shifted his eyes from the approximately half-burned house to the origin of the half-baked voice, his wife's younger brother. "I'm Chief Hanks to you since you got on with the cops boy and y'all remember that, heah?"

"Yessuh." the twenty-four year-old nodded. "But, look. I mean—"

"What?" Hanks snapped, deliberately turning his back on Carroll Robert Aldrich. How did his wife's parents expect their kids to grow up right, naming their daughter Bobbi and their son Carroll?

"Well— looks mighty peculiar to me. Chief."

Everything looked peculiar to Carroll. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, boy, and sweets for the sweet too, come to mention it," he nodded. "What?" Hanks started walking across the neatly trimmed grassy area at the front of the house. Momma Cinda's Voodoo people mowed her lawn for her. But he wasn't interested in her lawn.

And Jimmy Howard Hanks wasn't that much interested in Momma Cinda, either.

"Somethin' in the nigra lady's books heah. None of 'em's got burned. But it's all this heah Voodoo shit."

Hanks stepped over the skeleton of the blackened and still smoldering doorway, careful where he placed his spit shined cowboy boots. "What the hell y'all expect to find in a Voodoo Momba's house anyways, the Victoria's Secret catalogue?"

"Don't think she's got her none." And Carroll actually looked at the book shelf again.

"Shut the fuck up." and Hanks walked past Carroll, trying to dismiss him from his thoughts. Momma Cinda had, for decades, helped the poor on the island, black or white making no difference. The idea of helping the poor didn't inspire Jimmy Howard Hanks, but the thought of where she got the money did. "Y'all get a coupla other boys down heah, Carroll. I want these heah walls ripped apart. Y'all check for faulty wirin', like that. Get all them books and carry 'em down to Headquarters and box 'em up an leave

'em in my office. I wanna look through 'em. Any papers y'all find. do the same. Anythin' peculiar. I wanna see it— heah?"

"Yessuh." Carroll nodded. The boy was six foot three and thinner than a soda straw. Hanks studied him for a minute. He had called Carroll a wimp once and his wife had pestered him about it for days.

Hanks turned around and looked through what had been a wall. "I'm goin' over yonder there by the Catholic church. I'll be back." And he started picking his way through the rubble and into the yard. It was obvious to him (because that side of the house hadn't burned at all) that someone had smashed through the window. He had gone to the house immediately after Father Whitehead's housekeeper had called him and gotten him out of bed— with his wife. On the glass, although he hadn't touched it, he had detected what looked like blood, at least in the light of his flashlight.

Some fool had flat out thrown his body straight through the window in order to get Momma Cinda. Hanks reckoned it was one of the crazy Voodoo worshippers with the Cuban fella. If he could find Arturo Velasquez, he'd question him. Maybe Velasquez wanted Momma Cinda's treasure, too. Whatever happened to Momma Cinda was okay by him, fine as frog's hair. But her treasure was another matter completely.

Hanks pulled off his Stetson and climbed behind the wheel, gunning the engine as he brought it to life. then whipping the power steering hard. He cut the wheel sharp right and accelerated.

Once across the bridge that spanned Gunwater Creek, his radio began making the staticy whispering sounds it usually made. The police on the next island over used the same frequency. They had a dumb mother police chief and consequently had a lot more crime.

Hanks cut the wheel hard right. the rear end fishtailing left intentionally as he stomped the gas for an instant to straighten out, then turned the Ford into the rectory driveway. Hanks started hitting the brakes.

The car lurched once and stopped.

Hanks looked at his Stetson in the overhead rack, but left it. He stepped out of the car, running the fingers of his left hand back through his hair, tossing his head once to get a long comma of hair off his forehead, back from his eyes.

He crossed by the front of the Ford, the sun warm feeling but not unpleasantly so as he walked toward the front door of the rectory. But at the head of the three steps. Father Whitehead was already waiting. Whitehead was fifty or so. brown hair greying, his face, just like his six foot tall body, lean. Whitehead was an inveterate runner; each morning, for at least an hour as best Hanks could make it, the priest ran up the road and along some of the old animal paths, then back again. As Hanks started UP the steps to the front door, stopping halfway, he reflected that if he were a priest and couldn't have women, he'd probably run a lot too. "Hey, Father."

"Jimmy Howard. Any news about Momma Cinda?"

Father Whitehead wasn't from the South and had never picked up the right way of talking. Hanks thought absently. "None, yet. I figured maybe y'all and Miz Saddler could tell me a few things."

Whitehead grinned. "Well. Mrs. Saddler was here alone last night while I was out giving the Last Rites to Mr. O'Doud."

"O'Doud dead?"

"No. Mr. O'Doud's a hypochondriac. Jimmy Howard. But, just in case he really would die, I've gotta give him the Last Rites of The Church anyway."

"Right," Hanks nodded, not caring. O'Doud was a frequent critic of the police department and he wished the old man would drop dead.

"How about some iced tea?" Whitehead smiled again, opening the door into the rectory.

Hanks had given up correcting Northerners a long time ago. Tea with ice in it was just called tea. Tea that you drank just off the stove, at some ladies' social or something was hot tea. If you wanted hot tea you asked for it. "Fine," Hanks nodded passing Whitehead and entering the front hallway of the rectory. It was one of the few brick private homes on the island and smaller than most homes of equal age. Hanks faced down the length of the hallway his left hip beside the small table near the doorway his shoulders almost spanning the hallway itself.

"Come on into my study. Jimmy Howard."

"Right," Hanks agreed, turning sideways so the priest could pass him, then following the priest nearly to the end of the hallway and through the already opened sliding double doors. The study consumed what seemed to be a full one quarter of the first floor of the house; and, the desk, large by anyone's standards, filled the front of the room near the window. Hanks sat in the leather overstuffed chair opposite the desk, the priest disappearing for a moment back the way they had come. Hanks looked eastward through the window and he could see the wreckage of Momma Cinda's house clearly. He wondered. He wondered what the old black woman, Luella Saddler, had seen last night.

"Mrs. Saddler'll be here with the iced tea in a minute. Jimmy Howard," Whitehead smiled again, taking the high-backed leather swivel chair behind the desk.

Hanks leaned back in his chair. "Tell me, Father, what do y'all know about Momma Cinda and this Cuban fella Velasquez?"

Whitehead lit a cigarette; smoking and running were an odd combination. Hanks thought. He said so. "How can you run an hour a day and smoke those things?"

Whitehead laughed. "Easy— I smoke ten cigarettes a day. Back when they first pushed the Cancer thing. I decided it was stupid to smoke, but I really like smoking. So, instead of quitting. I keep myself to ten a day. Done it for twenty years. But about Momma Cinda and Fidelito."

"Yeah— Fidelito," Hanks echoed.

"Well, you know, most of Momma Cinda's Voodooists are also Roman Catholic. So we sort of share the same flock."

"Wonderful," Hanks observed.

"Well, I had bad vibes on Voodoo, like you do. I guess— Voodoo like you do?" and Whitehead laughed. "But, I couldn't help but learn about it and I couldn't help but realize that when I came down on

Momma Cinda from the pulpit, the next week she still had her people with a full service and I didn't. I can't help my parishioners if I don't see my parishioners. So— well— we became friendly competitors, sort of like with your minister over at First Baptist."

"I don't think it's the same at all, but y'all tell me about Velasquez."

"Okay," Father Whitehead nodded through a cloud of exhalation. "He came to the island a little less than a year ago and began, with those friends of his, preaching a different kind of Voodoo. Momma Cinda told me once that it wasn't Voodoo at all; it was funny the way she put it, 'Voodooified devil worshipping'. And I guess that's what Fidelito is into."

"As a Catholic," Whitehead went on, "I've got an obligation to fight Satanism. I've tried talking with his people, tried talking with him, but he's very close mouthed. I don't want to appear uncharitable, but he doesn't seem like the most pleasant man in the world, either."

"Violent maybe?"

"Maybe," Whitehead nodded. "There was talk that before Willie Boyle died, Fidelito tried strangling Momma Cinda and Willie Boyle cut off part of one of Fidelito's fingers. I know Velasquez was going around with his little finger— on his left hand I think it was— going around with it bandaged."

Hanks nodded. That would show the priest he was interested. "Y'all think this Fidelito maybe had somethin' to do with Willie dyin' so sudden?" One less black kid to make trouble didn't exactly bother Hanks, but there might be a connection worth chasing.

"Ohh—" And Whitehead exhaled hard, then stubbed out his cigarette. Hanks noticed it didn't have a filter. "That's uhh— a tough question. Jimmy Howard. As a man. I'd say it seems pretty likely; but, as a priest. I'd say I don't want to cast the first stone. I have nothing but out level reaction to base it on."

Hanks turned around, hearing footsteps on the carpet behind him. It was Luella Saddler.

"Mister Jimmy Howard," she nodded deferentially.

"Luella." Hanks groaned perfunctorily as the older woman walked past him, carrying a tray with a pitcher of tea and two glasses filled with ice. The hands which held the tray were positively frail looking and though her short, carefully waved hair was still black. Hanks doubted the color was natural. But, he could never tell age with blacks.

"Mrs. Saddler, Chief Hanks would like you to tell him all that you remember about last night and the fire at Momma Cinda's house." Father Whitehead said, standing, taking the tray from the woman and setting it down on the desk between them. "I'll pour; you just sit down." And Whitehead got a straight backed leather chair from the side of the desk. He turned it around and held it while Luella Saddler sat down. Hanks watched the woman as she arranged her apron over her skirt, fussed with the neckline of her print dress, stared at her black shoes. He decided to try honey rather than vinegar with her, especially with the priest around. whitehead noted. "This is sweet tea; I hope you like it?"

"Fine."

"Mrs. Saddler, would you care for some? I can get you a glass?"

"No thank y'all, Father Whitehead," the woman smiled, still looking at her shoes.

Hanks took his glass and sipped at it, then turned to Luella Saddler. "Y'all make mighty good tea. Luella."

"Yessuh, Mr. Jimmy Howard. I been makin' tea since I was little."

"That's all right. Now, y'all try to think back an' tell me everything y'all remember from before y'all called the fire department. Old Moses down there. He was swampin' out and he recognized y'all's voice."

The old woman nodded.

Father Whitehead said softly. "There's nothing to be afraid of Mrs. Saddler, because Chief Hanks is just trying to see if he can help Momma Cinda. He cares for her just the same as we all do."

"Yes, Yes, that's right." Hanks lied, agreeing.

"Now, just take your time." Whitehead told her.

"Yes sir. Father Whitehead." She was still looking at her shoes, despite her age looking like some sort of kid in trouble, Hanks thought. She was into this Voodoo thing too. Hanks knew. "Well, sir, Mr. Jimmy Howard— uhh— I was cleanin'— uhh— I heah me these moanin' sounds? And I looks into the cemetery. There's these heah men— three o' 'em!"

"Why were they moaning in the cemetery, Mrs. Saddler?" Father Whitehead pre-empted.

"I'll ask the questions father." Hanks told him then looked at Luella Saddler. "Why were they makin' moanin' sounds in the cemetery?"

"Don' rightly know, Mr. Jimmy Howard, but they was doin' it fo' sure." And the old woman made the Sign of The Cross. "One of them—"

"Yes?"

"One of them— it was Willie Boyle." Luella Saddler whispered.

"What?" Hanks snapped.

"It sho look powerful like him!"

Father Whitehead interrupted again. "Willie Boyle is dead. Mrs. Saddler. I performed the service. You were there."

"But the ground— it were all mix up the nex' mornin'—"

"A dog," Whitehead assured her, then turned his gaze to Hanks. "I've been meaning to call you on that, Jimmy Howard. We've been having a rash of problems with freshly dug graves being disturbed. I think we've got a pack of wild dogs—"

"They're feral dogs— once tame now wild. Y'all got y'allself a gun, Father?"

"No. I mean. I've got nothing against guns—" Hanks followed the priest's eyes to his own gun. "I just never felt the need to own one."

"Well— and y'all can do what y'all want— but I'd advise gettin' one. Father. Scattergun'll take care of dogs good with some double 0 buck. Matter of fact, I've got a nice Remington for sale. Never been fired much; just carried it around in the patrol car 'til I got me a new one."

"I'll— ahh— I'll let you know. Jimmy Howard, but thank you."

Hanks shrugged. He could stiff the priest for close to the cost of a new one, which was about two hundred more than it was worth.

"Well. y'all make up y'all's mind, but I'll let it go at three and a half."

"Thank you, Jimmy Howard."

Hanks nodded, returning his gaze to Luella Saddler. "Now Luella, regardless of who that one fella was y'all recognize any of the other ones?"

"No sir, Mr. Jimmy Howard." she answered, shaking her head, not looking at him.

"Then what happened?"

"Well. Mr. Jimmy Howard— uhh— I looks back an' seen Momma Cinda crossin' over Gunwater Creek and these Zombies," and the old woman made the Sign of The Cross again, "they's reachin' up outta the water fo' her. And Momma Cinda? She jus' started in a runnin'!"

"Did these— hell— these Zombies— did they follow her?" Hanks asked.

"Yes, sir. Sho followed her all right, but they's didn't do no runnin'; and they was a-callin'."

"Calling?" Whitehead asked her.

"Yes sir, Father, they was a-callin'. They was a-callin' Momma Cinda's name. I closed up the curtains and when I looks again. they's standing around her house not doin' nothin'."

"Why didn't y'all call me or Carroll or somebody, Luella?"

"Uhh—" The old woman didn't answer.

Father Whitehead interrupted again. "You should have called Chief Hanks, Mrs. Saddler."

"Them Zombies was from Fidelito the Bocor. Father Whitehead. and I was scared t'death them no-good Zombies would break in heah and grab me!"

"What the hell is a Bocor. Luella?" Hanks snapped, angry, disgusted with this Voodoo stuff.

Luella Saddler's body seemed to be shaking with cold. Father Whitehead answered for her. "Momma Cinda, well, she's a Momba. That's a good priestess in Voodoo, someone who uses good magic, or

Rada. Okay, well if she were a bad priestess for example, she'd use Petro, which is bad magic. A Houngon is a good male, a good priest, who uses Rada. But a Bocor is a priest who uses Petro. Do you follow me?"

"Yeah. I follow y'all real good. Y'all been hangin' around with Luella here too damn long, Father."

"But Voodoo is real. As a Catholic priest, as a rational man of the twentieth century. I can't believe that the manifestations of Voodoo are real, but the reality that Voodoo is practised and believed in is undeniable."

"Then what happened?" Hanks asked Luella, staring at her. "And look at me, Luella— or so help me. I'll arrest y'all for obstructin' justice."

"Really. Jimmy Howard!"

"And y'all keep interruptin'. I can do the same for y'all, Father. All I'm tryin' to do is get at the truth hers so maybe I can find out what did happen to Momma Cinda."

Whitehead licked his lips and nodded. Hanks guessed the priest wanted a cigarette but that it would upset his ten per day quota. The priest drummed his fingers on his desktop instead.

"What happened, Luella?" Hanks repeated.

"Mr. Jimmy Howard— uhh— when I looks out— well— they was a-callin' again and Willie, he throwed hisself through the winder next t' Momma Cinda's door. An'theys drug her out an' one of them Zombies—" And she crossed herself again "—he takes this ol' rag and it burn like a demon was breathin' on it and he throwed it into Momma Cinda's house and I calls the Fire Department and to! Moses to call the police and I hung up and hid in Father Whitehead's li'l chapel in the back of the rectory and prayed hard 'til I heah the fire engines."

Hanks started to speak, but Father Whitehead said to Luella Saddler, "Who did you pray for, Mrs. Saddler?"

The woman finally looked up from her shoes, saying, "Momma Cinda."

## Chapter Four

Mary Frances Mulrooney reflected that most people probably thought writers, since they usually worked from home, sat around this way all day, in their pajamas or nightgowns or whatever. She undid the belt of her pale pink, almost white robe. Culhane had bought it for her and spent far too much money. She could tell that from the label. She threw the robe down on the bed. naked now as she went to the mirrored triple drssser. When she moved back in with Josh Culhane. he had, without her asking, abdicated the triple dresser. She imagined that was because it had the mirror and men always thought women had nothing better to do than preen themselves. Culhane had stuffed his things into the chest of drawers. She had compromised, taking his sweaters (since she wore them more often than he did anyway) and putting them back into the two bottom drawers of the triple dresser. But a sweater wasn't what she wanted now.

Naked, Mulrooney hunched over the dresser, searching for a strapless bra. She found it, putting it on rather than setting it down and risking forgetting where she had put it. It was white. She didn't have that many without straps. It had been a strange day and her mind was elsewhere. She thought again about the misconceptions people had concerning writers. Now, that she lived again with Josh Culhane, she dressed better when she worked. Instead of ragged cut-offs and a T-shirt or the sort of thing her mother had called a housedress and Mulrooney sometimes paid as much for as a good skirt or a pair of slacks, instead of these she dressed more nicely, because logically she wanted Culhane to see her looking nice. She didn't go as far as nylons, but she didn't go to the faded cut-offs and a T-shirt full of holes with no bra underneath either, unless he was going to be out all day.

Mulrooney found a pair of bikini panties which were the same color as the bra, turned them right side out and stepped into them, settling them at her hips. She started pulling out more underwear now, trying to pair things as she went. She had no idea how long she would be in Charleston and might not have the time each night to wash things out. She took out a half slip, stepping into it, found stockings and started back toward the bed.

Culhane should be home soon; she would leave him a note.

In her mind, Mary Frances Mulrooney began composing the note she would leave as she fought her way into first one, then the second thigh top stocking. "Hi Josh!— Never guess what! Well, last night I kept thinking about Momma Cinda— the Voodoo woman? Remember my talking about her and how she helped me out with that series of magazine articles I did on Voodoo quite a few years ago? Well, I tried reaching her—" She stood up, settling her slip, stocking footed, walking toward her half of the closet which occupied nearly a full wall.

Because the bra was strapless, she could wear a sundress and she started plowing through things. She went back to composing her note. "Well, I tried reaching her and her telephone is out of order. I called the police on that little island she lives on just off the coast from Charleston? St. Peters? When I asked about Momma Cinda, this guy didn't tell me much." She settled on the dark blue floral print. The flowers looked like peonies and there was enough yardage in the skirt to make curtains for a greenhouse. She shrugged, starting to pull the dress on over her head, continuing with the note, "Anyway, I think Momma Cinda was sending me— now don't laugh— was sending me psychic vibrations. Anyway, I'm driving to Charleston. I'll be at the Sheraton— the one near the bridge? By the police department? If they say I checked out, I'm on my way home."

She moved to the mirror; it wasn't really preening. She was just tying the long floppy sash into a long floppy bow at the small of her back and had to use the mirror to make certain the bow was right. She would sign the letter. "Love, Fanny."

Mary Frances Mulrooney began debating about whether or not to leave in the part about psychic vibrations.

## Chapter Five

JeAnn Bonaparte stared at her face in the mirror, her pretty face. Her face had been called pretty ever since she was a little girl called lovely beautiful in fact. She tossed her black shoulder-length hair back from where it had caught on the upturned collar of her white lab coat.

"JeAnn," she whispered to herself. What little make-up she wore was perfect and there was no need to touch it. She took off the lab coat and hung it on the hook attached to the interior of the bathroom door. As she looked down at her clothes, she noticed there was a tiny spot of something on her dress. She started the warm water faucet in the sink, picking at the offending substance with her wetted fingernail. The spot disappeared and she took one of the cotton hand towels and daubed at the damp fabric to dry it.

She looked at herself in the mirror again. "Momma Cinda," she whispered, then unlocked the bathroom door, touching the switch with the palm of her left hand, the overhead and the mirror lights and the vent fan dying as she closed the door behind her.

Her bag was on her desk and she grabbed it, shouldering it on its strap, stopping beside the small closet near the inner office door and slipping her khaki trenchcoat from a hanger. She opened the door and passed into the outer office.

"Dr. Bonaparte, I was able to cancel all of your appointments for this afternoon but, uhh—"

JeAnn Bonaparte smiled at Mary Dutton. "Mary. Let me guess! Mrs. Obfelder wants to see me so I can reassure her that she isn't pregnant even though she feels pregnant and that the hysterectomy really worked, right?"

"Yes, Doctor, something like that," and Mary Dutton started to smile.

JeAnn leaned across the desk and told her receptionist. "You have Emily call her back. Have Emily emphasize that she's an R.N. Have Emily tell Mrs. Obfelder that I wanted her to rest assured that she could not be pregnant, and if she is I'll refund the money on the hysterectomy and deliver the baby myself. And. I'll pay for its college education," and she laughed. This was the first time she had laughed since last night on the Battery with Whit Candler. "See you tomorrow. Mary. I'll have my beeper and my cellphone will be on." And she let herself out through the private entrance and into the sunlight.

Her trenchcoat across her arm, her heels clicking against the pavement, she walked the few yards under the portico until she reached her car. Resting her bag on the hood of the yellow Mercedes, she searched briefly for her keys, found them, deactivated the alarm, then let herself in.

Her trenchcoat on the back seat, her bag beside her, she arranged herself then strapped in. St. Peter's Island. She had to know...

\* \* \*

Jimmy Howard Hanks leaned on the left front fender of his Ford, his hat low over his eyes. "Carroll—gonna take y'all into my confidence on this." It was a lie, but he figured his brother-in-law was dumb enough to believe that pigs could fly.

"Gee. Chief!"

"Right. Look. For a long time. Momma Cinda's been giving money away right?"

"I know."

"I figure we might be lookin' at foul play here— y'all know what I mean?" Hanks paused, letting Carroll embroider the tale out of his own imagination.

"Gee! Y'all mean, well, somebody maybe kidnapped Momma Cinda for her money?"

That sounded good. "Exactly. I knew y'all'd catch on, Carroll. Well, what I want y'all to do is help me look for clues. This could be the big one, the way for y'all to make y'all's name known in this state, maybe all through the Carolinas and down into Georgia. If we can crack it."

"Hell. Chief, I'll—"

He didn't give Carroll the time to figure out what he'd do, just said. "Know y'all will," and nodded soberly. "But, we gotta keep this'n between ourselves. Don't want the other fellas gettin' much in on it. Y'all know what I mean?"

"Yessuh!"

Hanks watched the stupid face of his brother-in-law until he couldn't take it anymore. The sound of a racy exhaust caught his attention and he turned to look back toward the bridge over Gunwater Creek. A yellow Mercedes. He thought he'd seen it once before. It slowed, then speeded up, passing so fast that he couldn't make out anything of the car except that whoever was driving it seemed to be alone and the license plate was from South Carolina. But, the speed limit was fifty-five, and he had eyeballed the yellow Mercedes at under fifty before rounding the bend in the road. No excuse— even a marginal one— to stop it.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't have stopped him.

But Jimmy Howard Hanks had bigger fish to fry...

\* \* \*

JeAnn Bonaparte licked her lips. "Damn," she murmured, appraising her own voice; it wasn't tinged with anger or disgust, just despair. She had tried calling Momma Cinda. The line was disconnected. Trouble on the line. She had tried that morning again. No change.

That was why she cancelled her afternoon's appointments.

She knew the island, knew the pay telephone kiosk. Years ago, many styles of telephones ago, she had used the phone there an awful lot. It was across from the house of old Maurice Brown and she stopped the Mercedes on the opposite side of the road from his blue lintelled doorway.

JeAnn opened the door, swung her legs out and stood up, her splayed hands smoothing her dress's straight skirt down along her thighs. Her bag over her left shoulder, the wind brisk, she brushed her hair back from her face with the heel of her left hand. The bright sunlight caught the diamond set in the engagement ring which Whit Candler had given her last night after he had kissed her. She laughed at herself; she hadn't even tried to estimate the size of the diamond beyond the fact that it was large and exquisitely cut.

She rested her bag on the small tray beneath the phone, numbers scratched into the aluminum with knife blades, penned there with fading blue ink. There were histories written here, she thought. With a tissue

she wiped the earpiece, then balled the tissue into her purse. She dialed 911, a Pen in her hand as she punched the touchtone buttons a pad of paper from her purse on the little tray beneath the phone.

"St. Peter's Island Police."

"Yes. I tried calling Momma Cinda last night, then this morning. I was told her line was out of—"

"Look, Miss. Y'all called me last night and I'll tell y'all the stuff I know. They was a fire and Momma Cinda's missin'. What's y'all's name?"

She hung up the payphone. She didn't know for sure whether cellphones could be traced or not, why she'd elected to use the payphons instead. And, she wasn't about to give her name.

JeAnn Bonaparte hadn't called Officer Stebbins last night. Who had?

Her hands shook, more than they had before the first time she met with a patient and attempted a diagnosis.

## Chapter Six

Mary Frances Mulrooney tipped the bellman and took the key he offered her watched him as he closed the door, then went to the door and put on the chain.

She kicked out of her heels and walked the hotel room, surveying it. At her natural height, the yardage in the sundress seemed even greater to her, almost obscuring her feet when she looked down.

From the window, she could see the Ashley River. A police car, its Mars light flashing— Culhane always called them Mars lights even though a lot of them were made by Federal Sign and Signal— was barreling out past the Sheraton from the police headquarters building north of the hotel. She let the drapes fall back, then began her checking-in-ritual: try the television set, open the drawers in the dresser, check the bathroom for adequate towels, toilet paper and the like. The television worked. The drawers contained a room service menu, a brochure on Historic Charleston and a Gideon Bible. She remembered Culhane telling her about the room he had for a conference he'd attended once in Las Vegas. The drawer in the nightstand on one side of the bed had been packed with prophylactics. She smiled, thinking that perhaps Charlestonians didn't expect such ambitious performance from tourists.

Mulrooney was tempted to call the police again to see if there were any word concerning Momma Cinda. But, the clock on the dashboard of her yellow Mustang had read nearly eleven when she parked it in the Sheraton's lot and fought it out with her dress against the high winds coming from the north and off the river.

The previous night had been all but sleepless, part of that wondering why Culhane hadn't called; he'd said that he would, but not to worry if he couldn't. She didn't like it when he went off somewhere by himself, because he was always trying to outdo his fictional alterego. "Seen Dodge." But, Sean Dodge wasn't real and didn't bleed; Josh Culhane was real and did.

What if Josh had gotten in trouble, was hurt somewhere?

Mulrooney shivered, undid the sash of her dress, then began slipping the dress off over her head. Just like "Sean Dodge," Culhane carried guns and knives and gadgets and knew how to use them all. Unlike the character he'd created, there was no guarantee a bullet would only produce a flesh wound, a knock on the head wouldn't result in concussive coma, that a knife blade would skitter off the stainless steel band of his Rolex.

Mulrooney hung the dress in the closet beside her dress bag, then returned to the bed, taking up the receiver and dialing the hotel operator. "This is Miss Mulrooney. I'd like a wake-up call for tomorrow morning at seven-thirty, please." The operator confirmed the room number.

Mulrooney yawned as she hung up, reached behind her to open her bra. Wash out her bra, her panties, her stockings— then sleep. Tomorrow, she told herself— tomorrow...

Panties. He could see their outline beneath her short shorts as the girl walked out of her house.

Jimmy Howard Hanks stayed bent over the case of Rye until the door closed, then hefted the case into his arms and started walking it out toward the pick-up.

The truck belonged to Hardy Lovecraft, his black suitcoat gone, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up past the elbows of his skinny arms, his tie pulled down from his throat. "Jimmy Howard, that was a fine lookin' gal with them short shorts."

Hanks laughed, the laugh coming from low in his gut. "I didn't notice; but. I reckon in y'all's profession, studyin' bodies that's still alive is 'probably a rare opportunity."

Lovecraft laughed. "Well, sometimes, though—" And Lovecraft laughed again and made a wink.

Hanks set the case of Rye in the pickup's bed and slammed the tailgate up, giving it a good luck tug. "Sometimes what?"

"Well, y'all remember that accident coupla years back, them three high school girls—"

"I remember."

"Well, now don't get me wrong, but them bodies weren't bad even though they was dead," and Lovecraft laughed again.

"Y'all's about as good to be around as a fart in a telephone booth. Hardy," Hanks told the man, meaning it.

Hardy Lovecraft laughed. Hardy Lovecraft was known all over the island as a man someone could spit at who'd smile while he wiped it off.

Moths hovered around the solitary arc light, illuminating the driveway which wound up toward the house. Hanks leaned against Lovecraft's pick-up truck for a moment, staring at them. He hated bugs of any kind. And he put Lovecraft in the same category as the bugs. But a customer was always a customer and the trouble with running a bootleg liquor store— illegal business hours and no liquor control stamps— was that a disgruntled customer could always turn into an informer and get the place closed down. It was for that reason that Hanks rarely worked here himself, although everyone knew he owned the old white

house. But that wasn't what it said in the county recorder's office, at any event. "Well Hardy, thanks for stoopin' by. Fixin' t'have y'all a party or somethin' with the dead folks?"

Lovecraft laughed again and Hanks didn't like people who laughed that much. "Nope. Just ran out is all," and Hardy Lovecraft climbed into the cab of the pickup. Hanks turned away from the vehicle, hearing the telephone ringing through the screen door.

Maud would answer it; she loved the telephone a lot more than she loved working the cash drawer.

"Jimmy Howard! It's fo' y'all!"

"Comin'," Hanks shouted back, letting the screen door slam behind him, heeling a moth that skimmed the floor.

He stepped over the second case of Rye— Lovecraft had said he'd wanted two, then changed his mind— and took the receiver from Maud Harkness. It was all he would take from her. She could have been lying on the floor naked with her leas spread and he wouldn't have looked. She was just one of those people who was naturally ugly. "This is Hanks," he growled into the receiver.

"Chief!"

"What is it. Carroll?"

"I been lookin' at them books we took outa Momma Cinda's?"

"So? I don't pay y'all to sit 'round readin' like some asshole, Carroll."

"But all them books, they was somethin' funny Chief."

"Tell me." Hanks nodded to the receiver.

"Yessuh. Outa all them books, only ones wasn't Voodoo, medicine, or the Holy Bible was wrote by some woman name of M.F. Mulrooney. And git this! They was all autographed to Momma Cinda, like they knowed one 'nother! And all them books was about weird crap, like flyin' saucers and the Lost Continent of Atlanta and Amazon women an' magic stuff and shit like that."

"It's Atlantis, not Atlanta. Carroll. Were the autographs personal, I mean to Momma Cinda?"

"Yessuh— sure was."

"Don't y'all tell nobody. Pack up them books like y'all was supposed to, then first thing in the mornin' get on the telephone to whoever published them books and tell 'em it's official police business and we need to contact this M.F. wha's her name."

"Mulrooney. Chief."

"Right. She's an old broad, I bet. With a name like that, sounds like she should be."

"They's a picture of her on the backs of each of them books, least-wise s"posed to be her. Looks kinda pretty in the picture. Not flashy or nothin', Chief, just nice lookin'. Y'all know what I mean?"

"Yeah." Hanks groaned into the phone. "I know what y'all mean." And he hung up without saying anything else.

For the last thirty seconds, he'd been eyeing three men in the parking lot. He knew one of them. Tommy Melton. The other two he didn't know, but they seemed pretty much like Tommy. Young smart-ass troublemakers, he mentally labelled them.

They were roughhousing beside a late model Camaro that looked spit shined under the glow of the arc light.

"Maud, be back in a minute."

"Y'all gonna teach 'em this ain't the right place to go playin'?"

"Somethin' like that." Hanks nodded, already half through the screen door, the door slamming behind him. He carried an old colt .25 automatic in a holster sewn into his left cowboy boot. He always carried the gun no matter where he went, no matter what he did. And there was an Ithaca Roadblocker 10-gauge Magnum behind the counter near the cash drawer, and a .45 automatic he'd brought back from his eighteen months in Viet Nam. But he didn't need any of the guns.

Hanks stopped halfway across the parking lot. It was hard packed dirt and when it rained became mud-rutted. "Tommy," he shouted.

Tommy Melton— eighteen and known around Teach's Landing and all over the island as a self-proclaimed "—badass"— turned around. "Yeah. Chief?"

"Y'all take y'all's two friends there and drive, toward the mainland."

"Can't do that Chief. I'm what y'all'd call drunk," and Tommy Melton laughed. Tommy Melton was too young to remember the bar fighting days. Manks reminded himself. And so confident he could kick anybody around that he wouldn't have worried if he had.

"Y'all lookin' for trouble. Tommy?"

"Maybe I am, Chief! Y'all know anyones can gimme some?" Tommy Melton laughed again and his two friends stopped shoving each other around and laughed too. One of them— both of them looked about eighteen— had a wine bottle in his left hand.

Hanks started walking toward the three. "I could put y'all under arrest, the three o' y'all or kick y'all's ass. I think I'll do that instead."

Tommy Melton laughed again; the two with him laughed, but not that loudly.

Hanks considered; he had to beat them badly enough they'd be afraid to cross him and start talking to state authorities about the bootled store, but not so badly they'd figure he couldn't do anything worse to them. He glanced at the one holding the bottle. a redhead who was all neck and looked like a body builder. "Y'all fixin' t'get rid of that there bottle boy, or am I gonna ram it up y'all's ass?" The redhead started toward him. The bottle was in the right hand and he had been standing on Tommy Melton's left side and there wasn't enough room for clearance to get a good swing on the bottle.

Hanks took one long step forward on his left foot. his left fist hammering forward into Tommy Melton's jaw. Hank's right jabbing forward twice into the center of the redhead's face. Tommy Melton sprawled into the redhead, stumbling back into the left front fender of the black Camaro. Hanks brought his right foot forward and wheeled ninety degrees left, his left foot stepping out as his left hand flicked toward its target, the third boy.

Hanks started his right foot forward, snapping a kick into the left rib cage of Tommy Melton. As the redhead started to sag down, Hanks back kicked the boy twice in the abdomen. The third one was starting to his feet. "Bad move, boy," Hanks groaned, swinging his right foot forward as he shifted his weight onto his left foot, simultaneously edging forty-five degrees left. With the outside edge of his right foot, he caught the third boy in the mouth. Hanks turned his face away and backstepped as the boy's lips split and started spurting blood. The third boy started to scream.

Hanks stepped back, pivoting on his left foot, his feet square, not in a T-stance, his balled-up fists just above waist level.

But neither one of the three boys moved to get up.

The only one moving at all was the boy with the split lips. Hanks looked at him. The boy was crying, tears streaming from his eyes into the bloody lower half of his face. "Now, boy, y'all wake'em up. Tell 'em which ever one of 'em's in the best shape should drive, but not so fast as one o' my men nails y'all for speedin'. Ever come back on St. Peter's Island again, y'all's ass is mine. Nod."

The bleeding faced boy nodded, kept nodding and Hanks thought the boy was probably nodding still. Hanks turned around and walked back across the parking lot.

"Damn kids."

## Chapter Seven

Fidelito instinctively looked behind him, and instinctively too his right hand drifted under the open windbreaker to the inside-the-waistband holster in which he carried the Walther P-5 for a strong side draw. But there was no need for the German 9mm pistol. There was no one following, no shadowy figure darting to cover.

"Fidelito— I don't like this."

He looked at the girl. At her blond hair. He wondered what attracted her to him? That he was partially black and she was obviously white, that he was a Cuban agent (or had been at least) and, to the uninitiated, espionage agents seemed somehow romantic? Or, that he worshipped Satan? He thought it was the latter, remembering the way her nipples hardened, her body quivered when unexpectedly one night she had been there with a fat, red-haired white girl, the red-haired girl as fat as Marcella Hobson was perfect. He remembered Marcella's body, how it responded when, still wearing his robe as the high priest, he had entered her, the others chanting to Asmodeus, like cheerleaders urging their team to victory at some American college football game.

"All will be well, Marcella,"

"But— I mean— it's all been— well—"

"Pretend?" He proposed.

"Yes," she nodded, licking her lips, her blue eyes saucer wide, her hands instinctively, it seemed, going back to push her long hair from her eyes.

"No," he told her.

Ahead of them were two of his Zombies and, urged along between them, still a third. But he really didn't consider the third Zombie in the same light as the other two. The other two were stupid islanders who had in one way or another interfered with his work. The one in the middle was not stupid and the interference the one in the middle had caused had been more than a minor annoyance.

"Stop," he told them, and the three Zombies stopped, responding only to his voice as he had taught them.

Marcella reached out and squeezed his hand. Fidelito smiled at her. She was good in bed and her money had already helped him. And, if a human sacrifice were needed, she would be ideal born to please the Prince of Lechery.

Moving in front of the three Zombies, he looked first at the two who flanked the third, "You will wait for me. If anyone follows up from the beach and into our temple here in the grotto, then you will kill."

Dumbly, the two Zombies nodded.

He looked at the third Zombie. "You will follow me."

The third Zombie nodded slowly.

Fidelito walked ahead, past the flat stone which was his altar, water still held in the stone's cracks from being washed clean of blood; past the firepit, emptied of its ashen human debris; toward the niche at the Grotto's rearmost point. Rocks were in place there. He called to the two Zombies he had earlier posted as guards. "Remove these. Do not replace them until you are told to do so."

Slowly, then more rapidly, as if arising from a sleep, the two Zombies started toward the niche in the wall, moving aside the rocks, each of which could have weighed no less than fifty pounds. The rocks were black like the walls of the grotto, like the grotto's ceiling and floor, like the skin of the Zombies who moved them.

The rocks were set aside and, without waiting, the two Zombies returned to their position near the altar stone, to guard as they had been told to do.

Fidelito reached into his hip pocket for the mini flashlight, twisting its head into the on position, then starting through the niche. "Watch that one. Marcella; the steps are steep."

"Yes Fidelito," he heard her soft, hardly southern sounding voice answer him.

He started downward, the steps cut from the natural rock, flat, even, but steep as he had told Marcella.

He had never understood the origin of the steps. Their precision seemed beyond that which one could expect from pirates and to his knowledge, no one but pirates had ever visited the cavern beneath the grotto. He kept moving, shining the light behind him once to see that Marcella (who also had a flashlight) and the third Zombie were progressing well.

He had counted the steps once; there were seventy-one.

Fidelito kept moving, downward, the black of the rock gleaming under the brilliant pinpoint light of the flash in his right hand.

The sea actually penetrated the cave, but at a level well below the base of the steps. He could hear the surf, the waves echoing off the walls of the cavern.

He reached the base of the rock steps, waiting. Marcella and the third Zombie close behind him. Marcella whispered "I'm afraid."

"That is good." Fidelito told her. "But soon, fear will no longer matter. Follow me." And Fidelito started ahead, from the base of the rock steps, into the very bowels of the cavern. "I have left lights here," he said into the darkness. "You must close your eyes until I have lit all the lights once I have begun."

Marcella's obedient voice came back to him through the darkness. "Yes. Fidelito."

"Now, wait here, and keep the Zombie with you."

"Yes."

He walked ahead, a hint of yellow, a sparkle of light brighter than the flashlight in his right fist as he shone the beam ahead. "Remember, Marcella, to keep your eyes closed until I tell you that you can open them."

"Yes. Fidelito."

He found the first of the battery powered Coleman lanterns, lit it, then moved on to the next. Then the next, Then, finally, the last. The four were arranged in a one hundred eighty degree arc to the rear wall of the cavern, reflectors fitted to each so that their light could be concentrated.

He didn't look. Having seen it once, it was forever impressed in his mind and to such an extent he would never need to see it again, could have drawn it from memory were he to be struck blind.

"Marcella, you may open your eyes now!" Fidelito commanded.

The blond-haired girl gasped, then shrank back and dropped to her knees. The Zombie beside Marcella remained motionless.

"You see wealth," Fidelito whispered to Marcella. "You see wealth you had not dreamed could exist in this age. Gold in ingots, in chains, in cups and bowls. Gold that sets precious stones larger than you had ever imagined possible. Stones, diamonds and emeralds from South America, larger and more beautiful than anything you have ever seen."

"Yes."

"It fills the floor of the cavern from side to side."

"Yes," Marcella moaned, her voice edged with something that sounded like orgasm.

"It rises in a pile toward the roof of the cavern, unimaginably vast."

"Yes, Fidelito."

"Open your blouse."

The girl began to unbutton her blouse.

"Bare your breasts to it."

She pulled the tails of the blouse from her blue jeans, shifting it down from her shoulders. He watched as her hands disappeared for an instant behind her back and then the bra— white and very small— was whisked away and her breasts were bare, the copper colored nipples rouged by the light of the lamps, the light reflected from the treasure.

She raised her hands beneath her breasts.

"Now, call his name," Fidelito hissed.

Marcella, her hands cupped beneath her breasts still, the nipples visibly hardening, began to chant. "Asmodeus... Asmodeus... Asmodeus..."

## Chapter Eight

JeAnn could see it in his eyes; she had always— since the first time with him— been able to see it in his eyes, a tensing at the eyesockets, and the eyes themselves somehow hardening. He thrust against her one more time, and then she felt his heat filling her, his muscles iron hard, her hands holding him more tightly. And it was done, and tonight she was glad of it. He lay over her, his head beside hers for an instant; slipping down, his head rested on her breasts. Her fingertips trailed through his hair. "There's something bothering you," he whispered, his breath hot against her skin.

"Nothing" she lied.

"Nothing? Exactly nothing? Nothing happened for you."

"It usually does." she told him— and that was true.

"But, it didn't tonight. And I care for you, JeAnn. I want to know why. Something I did?"

"No, nothing you did," and she smiled as she bent her head to kiss his forehead. "And nothing you didn't do."

"Then something else," and he rolled over from her, lying beside her. She scrunched down, to get her

head beneath the level of his shoulder, his right arm folding around her; the fingers of his right hand toyed with the nipple of her right breast. "Tell me what it is. Lovers shouldn't have secrets, at least not secrets that keep them from being lovers."

"Something— today. A friend. I was just worried—"

Whit Candler leaned over toward her, her head resting in the crook of his elbow. "So, tell me. I'm not as rich and powerful as you say I am for nothing. Tell me and maybe I can help, I mean if it's that kind of problem. JeAnn."

"I don't know— I mean— if it's that kind of problem."

Whit Candler sat up. JeAnn moved closer to him, the wetness beneath her, her legs tight together at the knees and thighs— She didn't want to get out of bed, didn't want him to think it was something with him and that was why—

"If you don't trust me. JeAnn," he began, interrupting her thoughts.

"But I do trust you, Whit."

"Sometimes words come easily," he said. JeAnn watching him as he found his cigarettes, passing one to her. "Let's forget about it." Whit added.

"No." JeAnn whispered. "It's just—"

"What?" He looked at her, his eyes boring into her.

She exhaled the smoke from her lungs; she only smoked when she was with him. "A woman. Her name is— she's Momma Cinda."

"The Voodooist?"

"How did you know?" JeAnn asked without thinking.

"That article in the paper a few months ago; I remember it was an odd name the woman had. And then one of the local TV stations picked it up. And anyway, I buy a lot of antiques on St. Peter's Island. Once I'd heard the name. I started listening for it, I guess. It seems like everybody on the island knows her. I understand she's quite a decent person, despite that Voodoo nonsense."

"Maybe— uhh— maybe it isn't nonsense." JeAnn said hesitantly, nervously.

"You know this woman? This is what's upsetting you?"

"I was very close to her as a child. She cared for me, like a mammy," JeAnn added.

"That's interesting. A black Voodoo witch doctor cares for a white child who actually grows up to be a doctor."

JeAnn only nodded.

"So, what's the problem with her?"

"Uhh— she— uhh— she disappeared last night after her house was partially destroyed. I heard about it today and I drove out to St. Peter's Island. It looked just terrible, Whit, her house I mean. Anybody inside would have been killed."

"Well, JeAnn, did you make any inquiries, darling?" Whit Candler asked her.

"No— I— I called the police. They told me they didn't know what happened, but she was missing. I hung up," and she laughed at herself. "I was afraid of some small town policeman," and she laughed again. "I really was."

Whit Candler kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Well," and Whit started to laugh. "That is kind of silly, you know— hmm?"

"I know," and she sat up, the sheet bunching around her legs— "Ohh oh—" and she jumped from the bed and started to run for the bathroom. . .

\* \* \*

Whit Candler never used the GTSi's dashboard lighter, never used it at all. Instead, he lit his cigarette as he always did with his habitually carried pre-War Dunhill. JeAnn lounged in the passenger seat beside him, the Ferrari's eight cylinders idling comfortably. JeAnn whispered, "I'm glad I love you."

"I am too, darling."

"This sounds like an insult, I mean, these days, I guess, but you're very sensible; and, sometimes I need that."

"And you're exciting, JeAnn, and more and more I need that in my life."

Her hand reached out and touched his. "You don't have to go home you know. You could stay with me all the time from now on," he told her.

"I know that. You asked me to marry you, but then what would we have to look forward to?"

He laughed. "Lots of things. If you're going in, well—"

"No, I'll walk myself in," and she leaned across the console, kissed him hard on the mouth and, before he could respond, she had opened the door. "Tomorrow," she said, slamming the Ferrari's door, running on the toes of her high heeled shoes toward the apartment building entrance. He watched her— her long legs, the way her hair moved, bounced. He let himself smile, returning her wave as she looked back. He waited until she was through the outer door, through the inner door, then gone.

Candler glanced into his sideview mirror, threw into first and pulled away.

It was a ten minute ride, the traffic quite light at so late an hour. Candler parked the red Spider in its slot. He set the car's burglar alarm, walked the few paces to the back door, turned off the building alarm and went inside.

There was always a musty smell in the back room of his shop. And it had nothing to do with the climate in the Carolinas. The backroom of the shop in Maine, the shop in San Francisco, the shop in Denver—mustiness went part and parcel with the antique trade.

He walked through the backroom as quickly as possible, stopping near the door which led into the shop proper in order to examine the clipboards with the pickup and delivery lists. Apparently, Mrs. Rathbone had finally been home to sign for the Seventeenth Century ebony cabinet with 'trompe l'oeil' interior.

He set the clipboard down, cutting the overhead light switch. He went into the shop, letting the door close behind him. There was enough light from the street, filtering through the wrought iron grillwork of the security gratings, that he didn't need lights here.

Candler threaded his way past an Eighteenth Century gilt wood mirror from the reign of George III and stopped, his left hand touching gently at the top of a Pennsylvania salt glazed stoneware butter crock. It was a fine piece, not quite as fine as the price he was asking and would probably fetch for it, but a fine piece, none-the-less.

To the far side of the shop were the low stairs, and he took these two at a time toward the mezzanine, where his desk was placed so that he could overlook the shop.

Candler settled himself into the desk chair; it was leather, but not an antique like the desk. He reached across and turned on the brass banker's lamp, its green-shaded light a yellow wash over the green of his leather bound blotter.

He checked the telephone answering machine for messages. There were several as he listened. Mrs. Rathbone had found a scratch on the Louis XV style armoire. He would call her tomorrow and explain the historical significance of the scratch. There was none, but that mattered not at all. She would feel happy for having the scratch and her friends would feel envious of her for her having it.

And there was a call from Fouod Ram. Candler glanced at the Rolex President on his left wrist. The time in Paris would be very awkward, but he picked up the receiver and dialed directly, the number summoned from his memory.

It took some seconds for the connection. And the phone rang several times.

"Ram," a voice groaned.

"Fouod— this is Whitlock Candler."

"Ahh," the voice brightened. "Mr. Candler. Yes."

"I take it you found an outlet, sir."

The clipped, congested sounding voice came back. "Indeed I did, sir. Indeed."

"I'm very close to things on my end, very close. You might wish to tell your people to be ready, but not instantly."

"Certainly, sir."

"Fouod?"

"Yes, Mr. Candler."

"You should be able to retire as a result of this; I'll keep in touch," and Candler broke the connection with the index finger of his left hand, cradling the receiver a moment longer afterward. The thrill of wealth, like sex, was partially in its anticipation.

Candler leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. He exhaled. He looked down to his bottom desk drawer, finding the separate key for it with his left hand, switching the key to his right hand and unlocking. From the deep cavity within, he extracted a dog-eared and cracked leatherette album. Candler pushed the drawer closed with his right foot, setting the album on his blotter. He tugged at his trouser legs as he leaned forward, finding his cigarettes and his lighter, firing the DuMaurier, closing the Dunhill. Candler began flipping through the album. Momma Cinda. As a young girl the old woman had been very pretty, and very provocative. The dress she wore was too long, and generally too big for her and the photograph looked to have been taken with a box Brownie. But still, she was very pretty.

He flipped through several other photos, stopping as he saw a picture of a slightly older Momma Cinda, a baby held in her arms, the baby obviously not pleased at being turned to face the camera, the baby's face and visible left hand very pale compared to that of the woman who held her.

Newspaper clippings. A pretty, dark-haired, dark-eyed, obviously quite healthy young woman. It was not Momma Cinda, but the baby grown up.

There were more clippings, honor society postings, plays, a beauty contest. Medical school graduation lists.

And always, when there was a photo, the haunting eyes. the magnificent features. The too white face.

Candler closed the book, staring through a cloud of smoke from his cigarette, into the shadow beyond the yellow light of the green-shaded banker's lamp. "JeAnn— you exquisitely lovely imposter," he whispered.

## Chapter Nine

Jimmy Howard Hanks had done something he rarely did. He returned to his office at the police department after closing up his bootleg liquor store.

But the phone call from Carroll had bothered him.

He had never felt comfortable at his desk, never felt comfortable just sitting. And he didn't feel comfortable now. But, physical discomfort was on a level of awareness with a much lower priority than it usually had. He was reading the books— some of them water damaged— autographed to Momma Cinda by M.F. Mulrooney.

He had gone to an Evelyn Wood course once years ago. Always a slow reader, he had felt it hampered

his other abilities and had held him back too long to be tolerated any longer. He attained a rate of eighteen hundred words per minute and, despite the fact that he thoroughly disliked reading because it usually meant sitting down and he thoroughly disliked that, he had kept up his speed, forcing himself to digest two hundred pages of prose each day. Content mattered little if at all. Westerns, thriller novels, occasionally one of the romance novels his wife seemed to get more enjoyment from than she did from him.

But, he had never read books like these. Lost Continents, Lost Tribes, lost everything, it seemed, and only this Mulrooney woman had found them. She seemed to be an accomplished writer— clear, vivid, concise, details fitting together logically enough.

It had taken Hanks slightly more than forty-five minutes to read Legend Beneath The Waves and, on one level of consciousness, he estimated another ten minutes of reading would get him through The Magic of Magic. The first was one of her earlier books, this latter which he read apparently her latest.

One thing seemed clear. This Mulrooney woman was obsessed with unsolved mysteries. Whatever treasure Momma Cinda had drawn on all these years could be within his grasp now, and if he could convince the Mulrooney woman that finding the treasure might help find Momma Cinda, then she would be his ally. He kept reading, taking in those little nuances of the writer's character which he could discern through her words. If he could appeal to these...

\* \* \*

Jimmy Howard Hanks went home at four A.M., set his alarm clock for ten and crashed; the sounds of his wife, Bobbi, fixing something in the kitchen awakened him at nine.

Hanks didn't bother with civility, merely showering and shaving, dressing, taking his gunbelt out and running a patch down the Python's bore, all this before going downstairs and telling Bobbi he was leaving.

He arrived at the police department a few minutes before ten. When he came through the front door, he removed his hat preparatory to tossing it the measured seven feet to the hall tree which he kept there specifically for his hat. Carroll almost ran toward him. "Chief! She called!"

"Who called, Carroll?"

"M.F. Mulrooney— she called!"

## Chapter Ten

The woman who owned the shop in Commerce, Georgia, where M.F. Mulrooney bought the dress, had called it "Heavenly." Mulrooney shrugged, looking at herself in the hotel room's closet door mirror. "Heavenly" meant other things to her. Heavenly was being in Josh Culhane's arms. Heavenly was not a dress. Pretty, yes, but not the other.

After listening to the tone of Chief Jimmy Howard Hanks' voice, after talking with him for ten minutes on the phone. after promising to have lunch with him and discuss "the case," she had decided the less-than-Heavenly dress was the perfect thing for her to wear. Culhane had told her that it looked sexy.

Hanks sounded like the sort of man who would respond to that, just hopefully not too much. Thrusting her hands into the large patch pockets, she turned around once, its skirt swirling satisfyingly around her legs. The sundress was of beige linen; and, if it weren't linen, it had cost enough that it should be.

She checked her purse. Lipsticks, brush, revolver, all the necessities. She went to the mirror again and put on her earrings, little gold roses. Ever since she'd had her ears pierced as a little girl, she'd always had trouble with getting the left earring on, but today she had less trouble than usual. She picked up a single gold chain, put it around her neck and closed the clasp. She put on her wristwatch. She ran a brush through her hair— she'd left it down— and did one more turn in front of the mirror.

The purse over her shoulder, a little white cotton sweater over her arm. Mulrooney snatched up the hotel room key and started for the door. She turned the sign on the door knob to "Maid— Please make up my room." then let herself out, testing that the door was locked before walking toward the elevator banks.

Chief Hanks had been more than pleasant, even told her he had read two of her books. Anybody who read her books was automatically on her try-to-like-this-person list. She pushed the elevator call button, thumping her right foot as she waited for the car.

Hanks had asked about her relationship to Momma Cinda. M.F. Mulrooney countered that by asking him just' what the police knew about Momma Cinda's house burning and her subsequent disappearance. Hanks had suggested lunch and a ride out to Momma Cinda's house.

The elevator came. Mulrooney stepped inside, the elevator otherwise empty. She pushed the lobby button and began searching her purse for one of the lipsticks she'd spotted just a moment ago; she found one, but it was too red for the dress. She found another, the color all right and it tasted good, too. As the doors opened, she dropped the lipstick in her purse.

Mulrooney started across the lobby. The man who immediately caught her eye— huge in proportions, athletically trim despite being about fifty— had to be Chief Jimmy Howard Hanks. And the badge and gunbelt he wore had little to do with her impression. He could have been naked and she would have had the same instant recognition. He wore khaki trousers and cowboy boots, a khaki shirt with dark brown epaulets and dark brown flaps over the pockets, the shirt with what Culhane had once told her were called "military creases." She pushed her purse back, burying her hands in her pockets again as she walked toward him. His hands— massive— held a light tan western hat. It would be a Stetson, of course. He had a full head of once black hair, now streaked with grey, the forehead high but naturally so, it seemed, the face beneath it wide, handsome, angry looking despite the smile, the prominent chin with an equally prominent Kirk Douglas-style cleft. However one cut it, he seemed at once handsome and dangerous.

The badge looked to be gold, and judging from his overall appearance she guessed it wasn't fake.

The gun on his right hip was enormous, the handles black, a splotch of gleaming steel showing above the top of his holster. On his left hip was a ring for his nightstick, but the ring was empty.

He started toward her from across the lobby, the hat shifted to his left hand where he held it at the crown rather than the brim, his smile broadening, two ranks of even white teeth showing almost wolfishly.

"Miss Mulrooney," he drawled, his speech generously colored with what she as a transplanted Northerner labelled a southern accent, his voice deep and resonant enough to belong to an FM announcer for Public Radio.

"You must be Chief Hanks." Mulrooney said, making herself smile. She extended her right hand toward his. He took it in the way many men take a woman's hand, palm inward, her fingers bending downward, as though her hand were about to be kissed.

"I must say, y'all look more beautiful in real life, Miss Mulrooney. Those pictures on the dust jackets of y'all's books— well, not as pretty as the real thing."

"Thank you," Mulrooney told him, feeling genuinely flattered. "And it was so nice of you to offer to come all the way into town—"

"It's not often I get to have lunch with a celebrity, ma'am, and a pretty one at that."

She was being buttered up, she knew; and, she had to confess to herself, he was doing a remarkably good job of it. She wondered almost absently what this man had been like with women when he was twenty years younger, nearer her own age?

"I know a place for lunch that no one who comes to Charleston should miss. It's better for dinner of course, with the tides and all."

"You mean the Atlantic— yes, I've been there for dinner."

"Would y'all like to have some lunch someplace else, then?"

"No. I like the food there," she said honestly. Atmosphere could be murder for a woman counting her calories.

But she had never needed to do that. And she liked to eat. "But I insist we go dutch." Mulrooney added as he finally let go of her hand.

"Well, ma'am, if y'all will forgive me, well— I'm from a generation where a man goes to lunch with a woman, the man pays the tab."

Mulrooney considered that; Culhane always paid, of course, but that was different. She mentally shrugged. "If you insist, then."

"I hope y'all won't be upset riding in a police car."

"No— no. It should be fun." she lied. Police cars gave her the creeps.

They walked, side-by-side, past the checkout desk. Had the sun been behind Chief Hanks, she would have been lost in his shadow. Mulrooney had already left a message in case Josh Culhane returned from his business trip and should call. Just because Chief Hanks wore a badge, there was no reason that she should automatically trust him.

Through the double doors, then out the side door, the St. Peter's Island police car parked right at the curb. He got the front passenger door for her, Mulrooney seating herself, arranging her dress as he crossed behind the car. She watched Hanks in the right side view mirror as he opened the driver's side door. On the seat between them was the nightstick which would fill the baton ring on his gunbelt. The nightstick had a handle perhaps a quarter of the way up from the butt, the handle at a right angle to the

body of the club. It was shiny and black. She recognized the style; Culhane had one too. She had no idea why Culhane had one, except that he collected weird violent toys, seemed to attract bizarre guns and knives and holsters and things in the same way that nick-knacks attracted dust when her mother would come to visit. But she couldn't remember: Was the nightstick called an Adirondack or a Monadnock? A Monadnock yes...

\* \* \*

Lunch was good, the atmosphere exquisite. Conversation revolved around her books and the occult and unexplained in general more than it did Momma Cinda, eventually drifting over to writing in general. It continued that way for the ride out to St. Peter's Island.

Late summer or early autumn, depending on perspective, the foliage along the roadside would largely remain the same regardless of the season. It was tropically verdant here all year long. In the dead of winter— not much of a winter at all by the standards of someone who grew up in the North— the deciduous trees would lose their leaves and the omnipresent vines would wither, but the overall green would remain. Not as much as Culhane, who detested summer weather with what almost amounted to a mania, the sameness of the moderate seasonal variations along the coast would have been too much even for her to bear.

Chief Hanks seemed remarkably well-read. Yet, his eclectic literary references were more like encyclopedia entries than intellectual observations. He was intimate with the writings of a vast array of modern writers, from the fantasy of Tom Deitz to the science fiction of Brad Strickland to the historical romance of Susan Kyle to the timeless philosophical musings of Ayn Rand (whom he didn't like).

Mulrooney was retying her sash as Hanks changed subject abruptly. "Momma Cinda's house isn't far across this little bridge up ahead."

"Over Gunwater Creek, I was out here, but that was quite a few years ago." Mulrooney told him. Hanks was one of those effortless drivers, like Josh Culhane was. barely touching the wheel. "From what you said. Chief Hanks— well— why didn't Momma Cinda call the police?"

"Apparently the phone line— we found it cut— had been tampered with before the fire. I didn't mention this earlier," he began, his right hand cutting the wheel a quarter turn right, the police car slowing, stopping a hundred yards or so from the house. She stared at its gutted hulk as he picked up his train of thought. "But I spoke with an eyewitness to the fire. She claimed Momma Cinda had been followed by several men. All the men were apparently blacks. And the woman seemed to think they were Zombies."

M.F. Mulrooney shifted her gaze from the partially burned house; she remembered the interior of the house as having been neat as a pin. That was Momma Cinda's way. She looked into Hanks' blue eyes. Only half consciously, she ran the fingers of her right hand back through her hair; the police car's window had been open as they drove. "Zombies."

"Yeah— if y'all believe in that sort of thing. More than likely, just hopped up on drugs, Miss Mulrooney." Several times over lunch and the drive. she'd told him to call her M.F. or even Mary Frances. Evidently, he didn't care to. "And hopheads are the kinds of people who will do anything for money. We both know that." He took the cowboy hat from the rack which was mounted along the headliner just rearward of where the windshield mated into the roofline. He snatched up his nightstick as well, stepping out of the car.

Hanks walked around the front of the car, his hair whipping in the breeze that had been picking up ever since they crossed onto the island over the Intercoastal Waterway. His hair was long and full.

He opened the door for her and Mulrooney stepped out, the wind immediately catching at her dress, her right hand holding it down. Dark, grey clouds were scudding in from the direction of the sea, across the backdrop of the blue sky. "Watch y'all's step here," he cautioned her. "Lot of rubble in the house. some of it outside here."

M.F. Mulrooney licked her lips; her lipstick was gone. Holding her dress down, she followed him, the wind cool on her bare shoulders and arms. She remembered the storm the night she had called Momma Cinda's name, the night of Momma Cinda's troubles. She was sure there had been some sort of psychic contact. But how could she tell that to this man, no matter how sophisticated he had seemed over lunch?

She kept walking. the heel of her left shoe starting to sink into the ground a little: but, she pulled it out. following him.

A full third of Momma Cinda's house seemed to be burned, but curiously, the blue of the door posts and lintel seemed unburned, not even scorched or fire darkened.

"Watch out here," Hanks advised, stepping into the house, reaching back, taking Mulrooney's elbow. His rough textured hand seemed to radiate strength as he helped her over a low pile of unidentifiable debris. Inside the house, the air was deadly still. No breeze blew. She noticed that one of the windows flanking the doorway appeared to have been smashed, but the fire had burned no where near there. "Y'all noticed the glass, Miss Mulrooney. Be a good detective."

"Someone broke in? Right?"

She let loose of her dress, no need to hold it down any longer. Her right hand drifted up to the gold chain at her throat and she tugged at it, holding it between her thumbnail and first finger.

"One of the people described as Zombies did that. And that's all the more reason to think they were really hopped up, maybe on angel dust or some of that designer junk. But like I said, folks like that'll do most anything for money."

"What do you mean?" She let go of the chain, holding her hands in front of her, then remembering she had pockets and using them. "What do you mean. anything for money?"

"Well, it's seemed pretty clear all these years. Momma Cinda always had a kindly heart. She gave away more money than some folks earn. Seems clear she had some mysterious source of income, somethin' hidden away."

"I don't know what you mean." Mulrooney began, clearing her throat. "I don't know what you mean at all, Chief." She realized her voice was trembling and that she was very afraid of being alone with this so physically powerful, charismatic near-giant.

"Let's call a spade a spade. Miss Mulrooney. I aim to solve this crime. And, on the off chance Momma Cinda's still alive, I aim to find her, too. Now, I reckon whoever these heah dopers were what broke in, they were after what they thought she had. Don't matter if she had it; they thought she had it."

"But, Chief, wouldn't they have destroyed the house, torn it apart looking for it? I mean, rather do that

than burn it?"

"If it had just been the dopers. Miss Mulrooney, I reckon it would. But I think it's somethin' bigger. Somebody behind them. Maybe it was somebody that knows a lot more about Momma Cinda's source of wealth than any of us. Recently, well, this Cuban, this Cuban fella named Arturo Velasquez— calls himself Fidelito—"

"Little Fidel," Mulrooney murmured unconsciously.

Hanks nodded, his face grim. "He took up this Voodoo like Momma Cinda. Some folks say he maybe murdered some other folks, but there's no proof for any of the talk. This character and Momma Cinda, they were at odds with one another. Y'all know what I mean?" It wasn't a question, but Mulrooney felt compelled to nod anyway. "The way I figure it, Miss Mulrooney, this Fidelito character's usin' drugs to control some of these Voodoo types heah on the island, maybe on the mainland, too. Maybe Fidelito got wind of Momma Cinda givin' away all this money over the years and kidnapped her, to torture it outa her or maybe use drugs, but to find her treasure regardless."

"Treasure?" Mulrooney repeated. She took a cigarette from her purse, eyeing the Smith & Wesson revolver amid all the rest of the stuff, feeling more nervous than ever about Hanks. Before she could find her lighter. Hanks produced a Zippo, not like hers, but the fatter kind. nearly as beat up looking as the one Culhane's fictional creation "Sean Dodge" had always used in Josh's books. The flame was motionless, dead still. Beyond the confines of Momma Cinda's fire gutted house, the wind blew, hard and strong. Mulrooney leaned forward, putting the tip of her cigarette into the flame. She nodded, exhaling, taking the cigarette from her lips. There was no lipstick on the filter.

"Ma'am, y'all seem to know Momma Cinda real well. If y'all know anything that can crack this case, rescue Momma Cinda, well, it's y'all's moral and legal duty to tell me, and tell me now. Don't hold nothin' back, Miss Mulrooney."

She exhaled smoke again. "I mean, I've heard stories about treasures being buried up here, all up and down the coast, guarded by ghosts and things. In my racket, you hear that kind of thing all the time, but it's very seldom you can get anything close to proof. Supposedly, they call the town here Teach's Landing" because Blackbeard The Pirate actually landed here."

"I've heard the same stories ever since I was a little sprout, Miss Mulrooney." It was hard to imagine Jimmy Howard Hanks ever being little. "What I want to know." he went on, "is if any of them stories is true?"

"Uhh—"

"fore y'all answer me, Miss Mulrooney, jus' remember that Momma Cinda's life could depend on what y'all tell me or hold back on."

M.F. Mulrooney started trying to come up with an answer, but, before she could, something brushed past her leg and she sucked in her breath so hard she dropped her cigarette. When she tried to move away so it wouldn't burn her dress, the heel of her sandal caught something.

She started to fall.

But, she didn't fall.

She was in Jimmy Howard Hanks' massive arms, looking up into his face from the level of his sternum. His height had to be about six and one-half feet.

"Just a black cat, see?"

She licked her lips, looked in the direction his eyes were looking, saw the cat, coat gleaming, black as shadow.

"A cat," Mulrooney echoed. "I'm sorry. That was foolish of me."

"Y'all were gonna tell me about Momma Cinda and her treasure." Hanks reminded her.

Mulrooney pushed against his chest, out of his arms, regaining her balance— at least physically.

## Chapter Eleven

Whitlock J. Candler III studied his left shoe, his left leg crossed so that the left ankle rested on the right knee. He was trying to remember where he had scuffed the leather. "Hmm," he murmured, but he heard the door opening into JeAnn's office and he looked toward the sound, standing up. "Darling—" He crossed the room to the door, folding his arms around her.

She leaned her head against him— he could smell the perfume of her hair.

"Mary— my secretary— she said—"

"Yes— that I had uncovered," he said slowly, letting go of her, starting to walk toward her desk, "some information." He picked up the desk lighter— it was in the shape of a smooth brass ball. He took a cigarette from his inside breast pocket. He popped the top on the lighter and rolled the striking wheel under his thumb.

"What kind of information, Whit?"

He inhaled the DuMaurier, then closed the lighter, tossing the brass globe in his right hand. "The news isn't good, I'm afraid."

He could hear as she sucked in her breath. He set down the lighter. As he inhaled hard on the cigarette, squinting his eyes against the smoke, he looked at her across the room. "This Momma Cinda woman. Apparently, she was in some sort of conflict with another one of the local Voodoo practitioners. And also, there seems to have been a great deal of speculation on the source of Momma Cinda's wealth— or apparent wealth, I should say." He inhaled again on the cigarette, then still holding it, snapped his left hand down to his side. "This Momma Cinda— she made all sorts of benevolences to the community. And, apparently, she had a child— someone she sent away while the child was quite young. No one seems to know why."

Whit Candler waited.

JeAnn seemed to sag, against the doorjamb, her left hand pressed hard against her abdomen. She partially doubled over.

Candler crossed the room. "Darling— I— I hadn't realized this woman meant so much to you." He reached out and put his right hand to her left shoulder. She turned around, burying her face against his chest.

She was crying— he could hear that. "Momma Cinda— ohh, Whit— she's my mother—" His right arm folded around her waist as she seemed almost to collapse. "I'm black."

"You're, ahh—"

"Black," he heard her whisper. "I— I cheated you. I cheated everybody— my mother— myself. I— I—"

"Ahh— well— ahh."

She looked up at him, her eyes tear rimmed, her lips seeming to tremble. "Can you— I— I know you can't—"

"Look," Candler told her. "I fell in love with you— not because you were white or purple or anything else. Sure— I mean I would have preferred it if you had told me— trusted me— and we're going to have to talk about that. But, I still love you— nothing changes that. I still want you for my wife— nothing changes that either. And, now that I know Momma Cinda— well— that she's your mother— well— I'm going to dig out the truth on what happened. I don't care what's in my way. And, if she's still alive, then by God we'll get her back."

"Ohh my God— I love you," she whispered, burying her face against his chest again.

Now, Candler smiled— she would do anything he told her to.

## Chapter Twelve

He had set part of one of his early "Sean Dodge" novels at Dobbins Air Force Base, just Northwest of Atlanta. The runway they approached, he remembered, was three hundred feet wide, twenty-eight feet thick and ten thousand feet long.

The McDonnell Douglas Phantom II was coming in fast, Culhane thought, not verbalizing it. But somehow— Fanny would have put it down to unconscious telepathy— Major Waylon Hollister answered Culhane's unspoken question. "It's not really fast at all— the landing speed I mean, Josh. Just seems that way."

"Right," Culhane answered back through his headset microphone.

Seven thousand landings and take-offs at Dobbins each month, he had been told once.

He heard the screech, felt the subtle jolt, the aircraft touching down, something changing slightly in the pit

of his stomach. The aircraft was slowing. He could see the control tower which governed the air traffic for the two thousand acre base— it seemed under construction, plastic around the window areas. And there was a fence around the tower base.

"See that aircraft— way over there, those people getting aboard," Hollister said between bits and snatches of air ground chatter which Culhane's headset was picking up.

"Yeah— who are they?"

"They're FEMA volunteers, and some Red Cross. There's a big tropical depression about four hundred miles off the west coast of Africa and NOAH's storm trackers are saying everything looks right for it to turn into a hurricane." Waylon Hollister said. His voice was emotionless, as if relating the details of a laboratory experiment rather than a weather forecast which might impact hundreds of thousands of lives. "Computer models peg it as heading straight for the Miami area, I hear."

Culhane watched the stick figure heroes, saying nothing...

\* \* \*

The wind was still high as they left the wreck of Momma Cinda's house and again Mulroonev fought her clothing. Together. Mulrooney and her giant tourguide walked back along the road, over the bridge which spanned Gunwater Creek and past the Catholic rectory. Mulrooney had no desire to talk to an eyewitness as Chief Hanks had described the Priest's housekeeper, not with a policeman looking over her shoulder.

They walked to the cemetery, where Hanks had told her that the old woman claimed to have seen the undead. "This Zombie stuff— one of the principal reasons I link this to drugs," Hanks told her, Mulrooney threading her way between the graves and headstones as she tried to match his pace. This was one of the most beautiful cemeteries she had ever seen. Monuments dated from more than a century-and-a-half ago, some of the inscriptions, as graveyard inscriptions often were, beautiful in their sadness and simplicity.

She stopped at one of the stones reading aloud. "My Family." Beneath it were four names, three of them female. One of the females had been born in 1849, the other two in 1868. The male had been born in 1871. The common death date was 1874. A small marker beside the large one read, "Martin Coldbrick." Born in 1847, the death date was 1899.

All of the other dead were named Coldbrick.

Mulrooney looked at Chief Hanks. "The poor man— his family. All of them wiped out at once, and then surviving so long."

"Death is final, Miss Mulrooney. Maybe he realized that. After death, there just isn't anything."

She looked at him. "Since nobody has been dead and sent verified messages back— well—" Fanny Mulrooney thought about Josh Culhane's brother, Jeff. When they had buried Jeff, that had been the last time she had visited a cemetery. And she thought about a tape. She felt a shiver along her spine, saying nothing to Hanks. She turned her eyes away.

"I think Momma Cinda found Teach's treasure."

Mulrooney looked at Hanks again. "Blackbeard? The pirate?"

Hanks shuffled his cowboy hat in his hands, the wind playing with his hair, his jaw setting. "There been rumors about Momma Cinda's money for the last twenty years. There been rumors about pirates buryin' their treasure on these islands for the last hundred and fifty years or better. Way I figure it, it makes sense that what she did was find herself a treasure. And hold onto it, partin' with some of it when she needed the money to give away. Like that."

The wind shifted a little. Mulrooney catching at her hair which was blowing across her face— she should have put it up, she thought absently. "But why Blackbeard's treasure?"

"For most of that last hundred and fifty years or so there been rumors about treasure from some folks, there been other folks tryin' to dig it up. If she did find herself a treasure and she's been tappin' into it for more than twenty years, stands to reason it's a big one. And where's a nigger woman—"

"I don't like that word," Mulrooney almost whispered.

"All right— a black woman. Where's a black woman gonna get rid of jewelry and gold coins and the like? Hmm? The treasure woulda have to been big enough that some of it would have been easily convertible into cash. Blackbeard's treasure was supposed to be a big one. But whoever's treasure, whatever the source of her money— these dopers kidnapped her for it."

"Why haven't you arrested this Fidelito you mentioned, then? A man like you— you shouldn't have much trouble getting him to talk."

She watched Jimmy Howard Hanks' eyes— they smiled. "If I arrest Fidelito and he does have Momma Cinda, what do y'all think he's gonna do with Momma Cinda— hmm?"

"Kill her— and the hell with the treasure— if there is one."

"Dead kidnap victims don't talk too good."

"What if—" The wind changed again and ballooned her dress almost to her waist and, as she reached down to capture it, she saw movement by the bridge beyond the Rectory. "Who's that?"

She heard Hanks' voice, low, like the rumble of thunder. "Don't know. Aim to find out—" And suddenly Hanks went streaking past her, vaulting over gravestones, running.

"Shit!" Mulrooney started after him, the figure by the bridge— a black man, tall looking, lean— running away, disappearing from sight.

Mulrooney grabbed at a headstone for balance, snatching off her left shoe, kicking out of the right one, grabbing them up, running stockingfooted after Jimmy Howard Hanks.

He looked like a body builder— she decided he was also a sprinter. Big men— she didn't usually picture them as being fast on their feet.

Hanks reached the road, his pace seeming to quicken now. She heard him shout, "Hey! Hey!"

Mulrooney almost tripped on a low grave marker, sidestepping it. running, the road surface some twenty yards still.

"Halt! Halt! Halt!"

She expected it— and Hanks didn't disappoint her. A shot fired in the air, his gleaming long barreled revolver held in his upraised right fist. Her ears rang with the shot— she guessed it was some kind of magnum round— not as loud as Culhane's .44 Magnum, but distinctly different from Culhane's .45 automatics.

Hanks was at the bridge now. Mulrooney reaching the road, feeling a run as it zipped upward along the length of her left leg. "Damn it!" She kept running.

Hanks was at the railing of the bridge. His left arm shot out and he vaulted over the railing and was gone from sight. She could hear him shouting, "Boy! Y'all's ass is mine!"

Running— Mulrooney was nearing the bridge now. She didn't know what she'd do when she got there. A beige linen sundress wasn't exactly climbing gear for getting over the bridge rail, and what would she do in the creek?

She kept running anyway.

She reached the bridge over Gunwater Creek, sagging against the railing, winded.

She could see Hanks, about a hundred yards ahead, along the left bank of the creek, dodging from sight into a stand of scrub pines beyond the fringe of reeds and weeds.

Mulrooney looked below. She could see the creek bottom. It wasn't deep.

"Aww," she groaned. She ran back to the edge of the bridge, stuffing her shoes into the pockets of her dress, holding to one of the vertical supports as she started down the embankment, almost losing her footing, the hem of her dress catching on a half rotted tree stump: she pulled it free, no damage apparently done.

She half skidded downward, breaking into a narrow strided run as she hit the water, re-covering her balance.

The rocks in the stream bed were hard, slippery feeling through her nylons. Hitching up her dress, she started for the embankment once more, getting to semi-dry ground, running again.

She could hear thudding sounds, groans, from beyond the stand of pines. She could hear Hanks' voice booming. "Talk, damn it!"

Mulrooney reached the pines, grabbing to one of their narrow trunks, pulling herself up. Her purse slipped from her left shoulder and into the crook of her elbow. She thought about the gun in her bag; but, if Hanks saw it— She clambered along the edge of the pine stand, the weeds high enough to get under the hem of her dress, her right stocking running as it snagged on a cockleburr. She saw a flash of something light. Khaki? Hanks' uniform? She pushed past some brush, heard a tearing sound as her dress caught on something and pulled free. "Damn it!"

She half stumbled past the brush. And she saw Jimmy Howard Hanks, his right arm hauled back, then snapping forward almost faster than her eyes could follow, his fist connecting square in the center of the young black man's face. But, that face— despite the blood, the crushed nose— was placid seeming, as if somehow the man wearing the face weren't really there.

Hanks drew the man up from his knees where he had fallen.

"Chief!" Mulrooney screamed at Hanks. "He's a Zombie!"

Hanks right fist hammered forward again, undercutting the black man's jaw, the head snapping back with an audible cracking sound.

As Hanks' left hand let go the tattered shirt front, the black man's body crumpled, falling into the dirt.

"Get up boy!"

The black man didn't move.

Mulrooney licked her lips. Hanks took a step back. She dropped down beside the man, the knees of her stockings shredding. Mulrooney looked up at Hanks. There were little fleck's of blood on Hanks' knuckles as he rubbed his hands together. Not his blood, she thought.

Mulrooney looked at the man's face; his eyes were open, staring upward at the sky. She moved her right hand across their field of vision; his gaze didn't flicker or shift.

Mulrooney felt his neck. There was no pulse she could discern.

"I think— ahh— you—"

"Fuck— pardon me. Miss Mulrooney. But, damnit!"

Mulrooney tried to think of something to say as she looked up into the mask of rage that was Hanks' handsome face.

"Willie Boyle— used to be with Momma Cinda's Voodoo people. Joined up with this Fidelito. Coulda told us a lot."

"Did he disappear for a while— or was he presumed dead?"

"Y'all's sayin' he's a Zombie— like y'all shouted back there? Well then, damn, Miss Mulrooney! How the hell'd I kill some son of a bitch was already dead? Y'all pardon my language, heah?"

Mulrooney still knelt in the loose dirt. Chief Jimmy Howard Hanks walked away, shaking his head. . .

Whit Candler closed his Dunhill lighter, exhaling smoke as his Ferrari crossed the bridge from the Intercoastal Waterway. JeAnn's left hand came to rest on his right over the gear shift knob. Candler took his eyes from the road for a moment, looking at her.

"Not seeing Momma." JeAnn said over the slipstream, her voice odd sounding, strained. "It was part of it— what I did." She had cancelled all her appointments for the rest of the day at his request. "Momma

started it. She told me I looked white— she—"

"Your mother, JeAnn— If somehow this mysterious money she kept coming up with is tied in with all this, do you have any ideas that we could use as something to go on?"

He watched her again, JeAnn shaking her head. "No— no— I wish to God—"

Candler started slowing the Ferrari, using the breaks to avoid the noise of gearing down.

Police cars were ahead of him, not blocking the road, but flanking it, on both sides, bordering Gunwater Creek Bridge.

"What's— maybe they found—"

"No— I don't think it has anything to do with her— no— but we'll find out," Candler reassured her. "We'll find out."

He wasn't certain of the law, how long it took the FBI to come in on a kidnapping. Did Jimmy Howard Hanks, the local police chief, have to request Federal assistance?

But time was wasting, he knew. That was certain.

Candler drove between the police cars, a uniformed officer who looked barely old enough to drive waving him through. Candler said to JeAnn. "You've got to do some thinking, darling, if we ever expect to find your mother alive." There was a pay phone up ahead and he would use it rather than his cell phone to pry a little with the police. If Momma Cinda was really dead, then his only hope was to find some detail locked in JeAnn's brain.

He felt her squeeze his hand again...

\* \* \*

Josh Culhane shouted her name, even though the yellow Mustang was missing from the A-Frame's driveway. "Fanny?"

There was no answer. He set down his case, tossed his musette bag onto the table in the hall. He went down the three steps into the great room, crossed it, eyeballing the kitchen counter at a distance; she occasionally would leave a note there. But, he saw none. He took the three steps up out of the great room in one stride and entered his office. He spotted a yellow sheet on the carriage of his old Underwood Five, like those he had used for carbon copies in the days before he'd switched to a computer. He kept the typewriter for sentimental reasons, everything he wrote these days on diskette. "Hi Josh— You'll never guess what—"

"Aww, Fanny," Culhane whispered, reading the note, sitting down before the keyboard. He lit a cigarette, rereading. "Voodoo? Psychic vibrations? Aww. shit—" He shook his head, dialing directory assistance in area code 803 for the number of the Sheraton Hotel on Lockwood in Charleston, South Carolina.

Culhane got the number, scribbling it beneath the note. Dialing, he got an automatic busy; breaking the connection, he used the redial button.

Before the voice on the other end of the line finished answering. Culhane interrupted. "This is Josh Culhane. I'm trying to reach one of your guests. Miss M.F. Mulrooney—"

"The Josh Culhane? Sean Dodge?"

Culhane felt flattered, telling the man, "Yeah— is she in?"

"Miss Mulrooney went out about mid-morning— I was Just coming on— ahh— she did leave a note for you if you should call. Just a moment, please."

Culhane nodded uselessly to the telephone.

The voice came back, average sounding, pleasant. "I have it right here. Mr. Culhane."

"Read it, please."

"Certainly— ahh—" The man cleared his throat. 'Hi Josh'— ahh, that's the way it begins. 'Went off to get some dope on you know who— should be back late this afternoon— Love ya— Fanny'— Ahh— she's—"

"She's not back yet," Culhane volunteered.

"No, sir."

"Did she go out alone? Do you remember?"

"She left the note at the desk when I was doing some paperwork."

"Was she alone?" Culhane asked again.

"No, sir— she left with a rather tall, muscular police officer who was carrying a rather large gun and wearing a cowboy hat."

"If Miss Mulrooney arrives, tell her I'm on my way."

"I can leave a note, sir, or put you through to voice mail."

"A note, please— thanks," and Culhane hung up.

He hammered his fist against the carriage of the typewriter, then stood up. Stomping out of the office, he was already starting to unbutton his shirt as he walked, pulling its tails out of his Levis'.

The kitchen phone. He snatched it up and started dialing the commuter airline number he hadn't even realized he had memorized. "Damn it." Culhane rasped...

\* \* \*

Culhane's hair was still wet from the shower as he dressed. Underpants, grey crew socks, clean pair of black Levis. Shirtless and beltless still, he walked across the bedroom to the closet, opening it. Two

thirds of it was taken up with Mulrooney's things. He found a grey, long sleeved shirt, pulling it off the hanger. Stuffing the tails into his pants as he buttoned his fly, he took a black Garrison width belt off the hook where it hung by its brass buckle. He closed the belt as he walked back to the closet, putting his feet into a pair of black cowboy boots.

He had packed before showering— two more pairs of Levis, an assortment of underwear, shirts, a suit, tie and an extra pair of boots.

He never travelled unarmed, unless legal restrictions made being armed impossible. But, the commuter flight out of Athens, Georgia, would require all weapons to be shipped as luggage, of course. He put his knives and two pistols into a lockable airline approved case, the spare magazines and ammunition for the firearms packed as well.

Although Culhane owned a reasonable number of handguns and long guns, over the years his tastes in general carry had considerably simplified.

He pocketed his FAA legal Swiss Army knife.

The first leg of the flight was from Athens to Charlotte via commuter aircraft; but, from North Carolina into Charleston, he would fly by full-sized commercial air liner.

He hefted the case, heavy but not terribly so.

The drive to the airport in Athens would be reasonably short, the flight to Charleston via Charlotte short enough as well.

Josh Culhane decided he might try sleeping during his flights. What Fanny would call a 'sixth sense' told him that he might not get very much of that once he reached his destination...

\* \* \*

Hanks had not wanted her along, but she insisted and Hanks had apparently given up. Mulrooney, her all but shredded stockings removed, followed along barefoot in Hanks' wake, up the side of the stream bed. Two of his police officers in his train as well. She had said nothing to either of the two officers regarding what Jimmy Howard Hanks did to the man he had identified as Willie Boyle. That Hanks had beaten the man to death unintentionally didn't excuse the result. The man was still dead. But, what if he had been dead already? Mulrooney shivered.

Hanks climbed past a stand of pines, reaching behind him. Mulrooney hesitated a moment. "Well, Miss?"

Fanny Mulrooney took his hand and let him help her up, her dress gathered around her legs as best she could to avoid catching it in the brush.

Hanks plodded ahead, to the far side of the brush, then left.

Fanny Mulrooney heard him laugh.

It was a laugh about the pitch of a Santa Claus laugh, only not jovial, not happy at all.

She peered past his massive shoulders.

The patch of ground where Willie Boyle had fallen was clear. Willie Boyle was gone.

Jimmy Howard Hanks was saying, "Well, maybe y'all was right, Miss Mulrooney. Willie Boyle is a Zombie. Only kind of walkin' dead man I know of." And Hanks laughed again.

Fanny Mulrooney shivered again. She didn't know what scared her more— a walking dead man or a laughing killer.

## Chapter Thirteen

Fanny Mulrooney didn't stop at the desk for messages. She felt conspicuous during the overpriced taxicab ride back from the island. And she felt more conspicuous in the hotel lobby. The 'heavenly' beige linen sundress was mud-stained, half the hem was ripped down and bare legs and heeled shoes— even sandals— looked tacky, she had always felt.

So, she walked as quickly as possible past the front desk, making a mental note to phone and check if there had been any word from Culhane but only once she reached the privacy of her room. She had registered for both of them in the event he got back in time to join her, but she doubted that he would.

Mulrooney stood waiting for the elevator, feeling awkward. She had become terribly dependent upon Josh Culhane. And he had become dependent on her, she realized.

It was love.

The elevator doors opened, and Mulrooney stepped inside, letting her purse fall from her shoulder along the length of her arm, almost dragging it by the strap as she exited the elevator a moment later.

She hadn't noticed the time as she passed through the lobby; she even missed Culhane for his wristwatch...

\* \* \*

Culhane hadn't slept on either plane; there really hadn't been the time. Upon arrival at the Sheraton, he discovered there had been no word from Fanny Mulrooney since the note which had been read to him over the telephone. None of the hotel employees had recognized the policeman she had gone off with, nor remembered anything about the car which would have indicated it's origin.

All he learned was that Fanny had checked in for both of them.

It hadn't been the sort of room he would have rented; Fanny always went for medium priced accommodations. Culhane preferring the most expensive room a hotel had to offer (with a few exceptions). But the room was pleasant.

He had turned up the air conditioning. Either Fanny had left it low (which women so frequently did) or the housekeeping service had standing orders to conserve energy.

Leaving the chain off, lest Fanny should return while he slept, Culhane had stripped naked and rolled into bed, winding himself into the sheets against the heightening chill, falling asleep almost immediately. What seemed a second later, Culhane opened his eyes, squinting to focus, studying the luminous face of the Rolex Sea-Dweller on his left wrist. He almost never removed his watch, and certainly not for something like sleeping.

The time was not quite six-fifteen.

On the nightstand beside his head were his pistols.

He reached out for one with his right hand, pushing his legs against the sheet to untangle himself. He had come to be little used to sleeping alone.

With his left hand, he covered the handgun with a fold of the sheet, which he could wisk away if he had to fire.

The scratching of something on the outside of the door, he realized, was what had awakened him.

The door opened.

As the light switch came on, the change in brightness nearly blinded him, but he had squinted his eyes against it and could still see well enough to shoot at the distance— or not to shoot.

"Fanny." Culhane shifted the pistol into his left hand. Fanny Mulrooney smiled at him strangely, slamming the door closed behind her. Culhane was out of bed and across the room to the doorway in three strides. Fanny came into his arms.

"Ohh. God am I glad to see you," she whispered, her breath warm against his face, his mouth crushing hers, her body molding against him.

He could feel what was happening to him just from being near her and he stopped kissing her and just held her. Fanny Mulrooney laughed, touching him. "I could hang my coat on that, if I had a coat." She hung her sweater on it instead...

\* \* \*

Her clothes wound up on the floor in a not-so-neat pile. His gun wound up on the nightstand.

Fanny Mulrooney let out a little scream as he slid between her legs. It wasn't actually sliding; because contrary to the sort of descriptions Culhane put into his books, women weren't always totally perspiration free. And Fanny's inner thighs had been sweaty and their skin had frictioned as she curled her legs around his hips.

His right hand touched at the nipple of her left breast, his lips at her throat.

"I love you," she whispered out of the semi-darkness. He felt her right hand stop as it trailed along his left thigh.

Her arms folded around him. Culhane slipping inside her, her breath sucking in hard, her fingertips, then her nails pressing into his back. His left hand knotted into the hair at the nape of her neck, cocking her

head back as he looked at her. He touched his lips to her mouth, her fingers moving moving to caress his face. His right hand supported him over her, her body moving beneath him in rhythm with his own.

Culhane shifted his weight to his elbow, his right hand flat against the small of her back, arching her body closer to his. Her breathing came faster, Culhane feeling the unmistakable urgency of ejaculation welling up inside him.

Her body began to tremble, her hands kneading at his back, at his shoulders, her mouth seeking his, then her head falling back, her mouth partially open, eyes wide, her body shuddering around him. He felt himself explode...

\* \* \*

They showered together, washing each other's bodies, Culhane washing his hair, then exiting the shower while Fanny Mulrooney washed hers.

He took a washcloth from the towel rack— he never used washcloths anyway— and wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror so that he could comb his still wet hair.

The phone had rung at precisely seven, the hotel operator calling to arouse him. Not even noticing if it were a live operator or a only recording, Culhane managed, "Thanks anyway."

Before showering, Fanny Mulrooney had sat beside him in bed, smoking a Salem, Culhane smoking one of his own cigarettes, an ashtray between their legs on the top of the sheet. The sheet covered him to the waist. Fanny drawing it over her breasts. She recounted her day with Jimmy Howard Hanks. She suggested— and it seemed logical— that they contact the priest at the rectory of the small Catholic church near Momma Cinda's house. When Culhane agreed, she declared, "Fine; you call him while I brush out my hair before we get into the shower."

Why women brushed their hair before washing it and consequently tangling it had always been a mystery to him. She had shouted the name of the church to him from the bathroom. Culhane hearing the faint hissing sound as she dropped her cigarette into the toilet.

The priest's name was Whitehead and Father Whitehead was an avid reader of the adventures of Sean Dodge, Culhane's fictional alter ego. Father Whitehead invited them for a drink at nine that evening.

Culhane finished combing his hair, calling to Fanny who was still in the shower, "Hurry up or we're gonna be late,kid."

"You can leave the windows open and my hair'll finish drying while we drive."

Culhane shrugged, hearing the water shut off. He leaned— naked still— against the edge of the sink as the shower opened. He handed a fresh towel to Fanny. "You just like looking at me naked." she smiled.

"You're right." Culhane told her.

"Men are so obvious." Mulrooney cracked, her glance centering well below his waistline.

"I stand convicted," he nodded, starting from the bathroom. He hadn't unpacked; he rarely did in a hotel, just living from his suitcase which made it faster to leave. "You think this Hanks guy tried killing this Willie

Boyle?" he called out. He stepped into his underpants, sitting on the bottom edge of the bed to pull on his socks.

"That's the funny thing," Fanny called back. "Chief Hanks he looks like he's been in a lot of fights? I don't mean cauliflower ears or a flattened nose or anything. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah—I think I do. So you think he's experienced enough that he didn't kill the guy on purpose and he would have known how to go either way? Right?"

"Right."

Her hair was turbaned in a towel as she began plowing through her suitcase. She did the same thing, never unpacking except for things that needed hanging so they wouldn't wrinkle.

Culhane stood up, grabbing his Levis from the side of the luggage stand, skinning into them. She was stepping into a pair of white panties. "The important thing," she went on, "is that when we got back, Willie Boyle was gone. And I could swear he was dead. And Hanks thought he was dead too, and Hanks looks like the kind of guy who'd know if somebody was dead or not."

Culhane shrugged, taking another grey shirt from his suitcase, convincing himself the wrinkles would fall out as he wore it. "Even doctors make mistakes with it sometimes. There was a woman I read about. As a little girl she contracted some kind of illness and they were just about to bury her. This was before the days of embalming, I guess. And her sister wanted to give the dead girl a last kiss. They opened the coffin, the sister kissed the dead girl and the dead girl opened her eyes. She lived to a ripe old age. the girl everybody had thought was dead."

"That's even spooky for me." Fanny said, visibly shuddering.

Culhane finished dressing.

"The reason we went to the cemetery? Anyway, Hanks told me that Father Whitehead—the priest?"

"Right," Culhane nodded, tugging on his black cowboy boots.

"Well, Father Whitehead just complained to Hanks yesterday that he was having a problem with wild dogs or something— feral, Hanks called them—"

"Dogs that started out domesticated and were let go into the wild and had to fend for themselves. In Pennsylvania, they've got a big problem with feral housecats I've heard— my buddy Ron Mahovsky told me about it."

"See but. I don't think it's wild dogs— or feral dogs or anything," Mulroonev said, closing her bra, her hands reappearing from behind her. She produced a cream-colored half slip from the suitcase and stepped into it, then a pair of nylons. She sat on the edge of the bed putting them on. They were the thigh top kind that seemed to stay up in defiance of Newton and his apple. "I think the disappearance of Willie Boyle after Hanks killed him is tied in with the disturbed graves."

"Disturbed graves?"

"Yeah— oh, I didn't tell ya! See, Father whitehead was complaining about the dogs because freshly

closed graves were being dug up."

"Wonderful."

"Willie Boyle is a Zombie," Fanny went on. "And you can't kill a Zombie without doing some special stuff. You have to burn candles and pour salt in its mouth and sew the lips shut and stuff like that. I'll have to check it out, just in case."

"Pour salt in its mouth and sew— sew its lips shut? Aww, yuch!"

"No, I mean it! Have to find where the Zombie rests. I think— sort of like with a vampire?"

She had both her stockings on now and was moving toward the closet. Culhane whacked Fanny's fanny as she passed him. "You know, you gotta write something else for a living here. You really believe this stuff."

"Hey. I've made a believer out of you a few times, haven't I?"

Culhane admitted to himself that she had; he didn't like admitting it to Fanny. "But dead people not staying dead? I-mean, come on. Fanny, gee—"

"No. There's a lot of evidence to support the fact that Zombies really do exist. Look at those recent discoveries they've made about that disease porphyria and vampirism and werewolfery."

"Were-wolfery?"

"Werewolfery."

Culhane nodded, joining her beside the closet. He took down his dark brown leather sportcoat. It was so dark a brown that it went with black or brown or anything in between. Fanny didn't like it, but so far she hadn't made any of her usual cracks. He shrugged into it as Fanny took a dress from the closet. "If I had any brains, I'd wear pants."

He supposed that meant he always had brains. He walked back toward the bed and lit a cigarette. Compliments, however they were couched, were always welcome.

Fanny put the dress over a chair back, the towel whisked from her hair as she disappeared into the bathroom. He heard the hair drier start.

He looked at the Rolex on his left wrist. Less than forty minutes remained before they were supposed to be at Father Whitehead's. He smoked a cigarette; the hair drier noises stopped and Mulrooney reappeared.

"But this porphyria thing? It duplicates some of the symptoms of vampirism and werewolfery, the classic stuff, Josh."

She always continued conversations as though they were never interrupted, sometimes from weeks earlier. He supposed it was good memory training for him.

"The way I figure it, this Bocor Fidelito—"

"A what-cor?"

"A Bocor, an evil magic voodoo priest. The way I figure it," she told him, her head disappearing inside her dress for a moment, "is that Fidelito is taking freshly dead people and turning them into Zombies to help him out. But I don't know why!"

"Freshly dead people? How does he do that?"

Mulrooney was straightening her dress. It was chocolate brown, a sundress with wide straps and a very full looking skirt that, barefoot, reached almost to her ankles. She started tying the belt behind her, walking toward him. "See there's some research that's been done which seems to indicate that a special poison— I forget the name— that is so deadly— well, you just wouldn't believe it! Tie my sash and make a nice bow, huh?"

She turned her back to him and Culhane began fiddling with the belt. Just because he was one of the few men in the world who could actually tie a black tie when he wore a tuxedo, he had become her official bow tier. The fabric of the belt was a little on the thick side and it was tough going.

"See, the Bocors know all about this stuff. And Hanks says Fidelito is a Cuban and there's a lot of Voodoo in Cuba or there used to be. So—"

"What does Hanks think caused Momma Cinda's disappearance? There, your bow's fixed."

Fanny turned around; smiled and kissed him on the cheek. She crossed back to the closet. "Hanks thinks it's drug related. And he's really hot to find out about Momma Cinda's money. He thinks she found Blackbeard the Pirate's treasure. Isn't that silly?" Fanny smiled, stepping into backless wedgesoled sandals.

"He's silly because he thinks someone found Blackbeard's treasure and you're not silly because you think somebody's turning dead people into Zombies?"

"Then, what happened to Willie Boyle?" she asked defensively, disappearing into the bathroom before he could answer her. She reappeared again, brushing her hair; it was still a little wet looking.

"Willie Boyle either wasn't dead—"

"But he was dead before Chief Hanks killed him". He'd already been buried."

"Then he wasn't dead twice, or at least the first time. And maybe the second time this Fidelito guy hauled the body away while you and Hanks were up by the road."

"I don't buy that. And, what about the disturbed graves?"

"Maybe this Fidelito guy is trying to make people think he's turning people into Zombies, huh? What about that? He's a rival of Momma Cinda, right?"

"Right. So?"

"So, he's showing the voodooists on the island he's got more power than she's got. that he can make

Zombies and stuff."

"Ohh. Momma Cinda could make a Zombie if she really wanted to; she just never went in for that kinda voodoo."

Fanny was draping gold chains around her neck. He had given her a very nice, very functional, very waterproof ladies Rolex. She never wore it. She rarely wore the Timex she'd had before the Rolex.

"You about ready?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded, opening her purse. She was fishing in it— for lipstick, he bet.

Culhane took the smaller of his two pistols— a little Seecamp .32 in a Pocket Natural holster— and stuffed it into his jeans. The other pistol went into his trouser band, holsterless, behind his left hipbone. He put spare magazines for the larger gun into his jacket pockets, along with a thin pair of leather gloves, a small flashlight and his knife. At last, Fanny was applying her lipstick. "Ready," she announced...

\* \* \*

Fidelito had been unable to summon the demon. He sat. the Zombies perched well below him on the beach, the blond haired girl beside him. Fidelito just stared out to sea.

"I've never seen so much wealth. My God." the girl whispered.

"Material wealth is unimportant. I could empty that cave; my Zombies could carry it out for me. There's greater power in that cave than wealth," he told her flatly.

"We could go away. If you don't want what's in the cave— the gold and jewels. I mean— I can get money from my father."

A strong breeze was blowing up off the ocean, the girl shivering with it. He told her. "I don't want your father's money, either. I want what's in the cave. It's more than money. Money is only useful in the acquisition of power; what's in the cave is power itself."

He felt the girl's hands touch at his bare forearm. "I want you, Fidelito. That's all I want. We can be happy together."

"There's more than happiness," he told her. He searched his pockets for his lighter, then took a cigarette from his shirt's breast pocket, lit it. Coinlike, he flipped the lighter in his hands.

Fog lay in a blanket offshore and would soon roll in. Even now, the marker buoy lights were just barely visible.

It was cold.

Perhaps Momma Cinda had possessed the key to summoning the demon, since she had pilfered from the demon's treasure for some two decades. or, perhaps she possessed some secret for holding the demon at bay.

The girl huddled closer to him, and he folded his left arm around her bare shoulders, not out of affection,

but to keep her from complaining about the cold and disrupting his train of thought.

His entire life would be forged here.

His future would be written.

or there would be no future at all...

\* \* \*

M.F. Mulrooney gripped the wheel at its top, her left fist closed over it tightly, her right hand tugging up the light tan crocheted shawl. She had crocheted it herself, just as she had crocheted the grey one, the plum colored one, the black one. She decided to get Culhane to take her someplace where she could wear the black one. "Josh? When we get back, why don't we go to Atlanta and catch a play or something?"

Sitting beside her, Culhane answered quickly enough. "That's a good idea."

They hadn't spoken much since he had complained about the mess in her glove compartment as he stashed the larger pistol and its two spare magazines. She remembered the days when she had lived in Athens, Georgia, and the glove compartment had been filled with parking tickets.

For a long time, she had kept her apartment in Athens as an escape valve against the arguments they had always had the first time they lived together. They still argued, but not that way anymore.

"Fog's really rolling in," Culhane said from beside her. "Heavy."

She took her eyes from the road for a moment and looked at him. It was too bad one couldn't call men pretty. He wasn't; but, he was so nice to look at that he should have been. She smiled. Maybe he was reading her mind. His hand drifted across the Mustang's gear shift console and settled on her right thigh.

She slowed the Mustang a little. The fog was beginning to obscure the road in great grey-green patches.

"Do you think Momma Cinda is still alive?" Mulrooney asked Culhane, the words just suddenly spilling out of her.

"I don't know, Fanny. But we'll try hard, give it our best shot to find her."

"When I first got started writing, you know— Well, you know. It's easier selling Eskimos refrigerators than selling editors good copy if they don't know your name. You know."

"Yeah," he grunted beside her. "I know."

"Well, before I did the crime reporter stuff, back when I covered board of education meetings and beauty contests and little league— human interest, they always called it. Subhuman crap."

Mulrooney heard Culhane laugh, but she felt his hand squeeze her thigh. She shifted her right leg a little closer toward him. "Those articles I did on Voodoo? They were my first big break, helped my so I could sell my first book. If it hadn't been for Momma Cinda, I could never have done those articles. You know how you can love a friend? Different than I love you, but—"

"I know," she heard him almost whisper. Mulrooney thought she could see the Intercoastal Waterway bridge coming up. "If she is dead, we can't bring her back, but we can help the police find out who did it. help nail 'em. And, if Hanks is calling it a kidnapping and he doesn't bring in Federal assistance, well, I've got a few friends. Maybe he can get persuaded."

She looked at Culhane. He was barely visible in the greenish glow from the yellow Mustang's dashboard, but she knew his hair, reddish brown, would be partly in his eyes from the wind of the slipstream around the car, his window half opened. His brown eyes would be staring ahead along the road surface. He trusted her driving. He'd fallen asleep with her driving many times. But, while he was awake, he would be vigilant. She liked it that he watched out for her.

"Want a cigarette?" he asked.

"One of yours," she told him.

"Hang on a second." She heard him searching his pockets, heard the lighter being struck. She saw his face reflected in the glow of the lighter's tiny flame for an instant when she looked toward him again. The glow gave a warmth to his skin. Two cigarettes, light in the darkness. "Here— take it," his deep, slightly whiskey sounding voice told her.

She took the cigarette, hearing the click sound as Culhane opened the dashboard ashtray.

The Mustang was crossing the bridge over the Intercoastal Waterway.

"How'd this Father Whitehead sound over the phone?" she asked, exhaling a cloud of grey smoke which seemed to impact against the Mustang's windshield and bounce back toward her.

"Not a Damascus Santini type, if that's what you mean." he laughed, Mulrooney feeling the pressure as he returned his hand to her thigh.

"You oughta write Damascus a letter," she said, thinking of their friend the ex-Green Beret turned Catholic Priest.

"Yeah— I know."

She just laughed. Professional writers, with some notable exceptions, seemed to be terrible at writing letters. When they actually did write letters beyond some terse note scribbled in a barely legible hand, the letters were well composed, easily read, frequently overly long. But that was when they actually wrote them. She was no better than Culhane in such matters; she laid off the criticism. "So, what's he like Father Whitehead?"

"He's a fan of my books—"

"One of those, huh," she said, holding the laughter back.

"Bullshit," he hissed from the darkness beside her. "Seems like a nice guy. I didn't tell him you wanted to talk about disturbed graves and Zombies, just said you were a close friend of Momma Cinda's.

"How we playing it?"

"I don't think we need to Mutt and Jeff him. Let's just play it straight and you take it easy on the weird stuff for at least two minutes."

"But I've gotta ask him," she said, realizing her voice sounded a little defensive.

She could see the church now, a light visible through the stained glass windows at the rear. That would be the Sacristy.

But the church, brick and stone, was otherwise swathed in fog, as though portions of the building itself were shifting in and out, between this world and the next

The cemetery lay beyond. She started slowing the car, downshifting.

Fog rolled over the ground, the headstones beside which she had earlier stood now all but devoured in the grey dampness. She turned the Mustang slightly; the headlights bounced back from the fog bank.

The rectory loomed ahead. The Mustang was in second now, the engine rumbling loudly; she wondered if she had a hole in her muffler? She had to pass the rectory to reach the driveway, then swing a sharp left, across the road. There was a series of loud crunches, gravel under the tires.

She downshifted into first as she entered the driveway, but had to use her breaks at the last second, never quite able to stop the Mustang with engine compression alone. That irritated her a little because Culhane could do it; it wasn't the car, just her driving.

The Mustang rocked a little. She'd held back on breaks too long. She turned off the key. Culhane's passenger side door already open, the accommodation light on, making the fog around them seem all that much more dense. He cranked up his window, then slammed the door.

Mulrooney dropped her keys into her purse, hoping she'd see them again. But Culhane had a set anyway, just as she had a set of keys for his car. She rolled up her window, keeping the cigarette in her lips for the briefest moment while she did. She hated it when she saw a woman walking down the street with a cigarette hanging in her mouth. With the nail of her right first finger, Mulrooney picked the tobacco bits from her lower lip. If men wore lipstick, filterless cigarettes would have been as extinct as the passenger pigeon.

Culhane opened the car door to help her out, Mulrooney cocooning her shawl more tightly about her bare shoulders as she stood up and tried shaking the wrinkles from her dress.

"Ready?"

She nodded. Just like Ward Bond's rough and tumble Indian scout in the classic movie "Hondo", Mary Frances Mulrooney was born ready.

## Chapter Fourteen

Father Whitehead answered the door himself. Beneath an unbuttoned grey cardigan sweater, he wore a

black clerical shirt minus the traditional white collar. He was tall, lean, tanned— obviously a distance runner, Culhane mused. The Catholic priest greeted them as though they were long lost relatives, then ushered them through a narrow hallway into a spacious study, enthusing all the while over what a pleasure it was to meet two of his favorite authors. "Yes, I read your books, too," he reassured Fanny Mulrooney. "I particularly liked *Legend Beneath The Waves*." Showing them to comfortable leather chairs, unbidden Whitehead brought Culhane a drink.

Culhane took a swallow. Sean Dodge always drank a Salty Dog minus the salt and Culhane frequently drank them himself. Father Whitehead had prepared a Salty Dog without asking. The priest was a fan in the truest sense. "Perfect," Culhane murmured, nodding his approval. Father Whitehead asked Fanny Mulrooney's beverage preference and her ladylike answer shocked Culhane: white wine.

After presenting Fanny with a three-quarters filled, tulip shaped glass, Father Whitehead seated himself behind a quite large, relatively orderly desk. His craggy face seamed with a smile, one like that of the proverbial cat who had swallowed a canary.

For an instant, Culhane shifted his gaze to the fog beyond the rectory study window, behind the priest. What would ordinarily have been ghostly nighttime shapes— hulking trees dripping Spanish moss, tombstones and stone angels— seemed all the more eery amidst the swirling fog. The lights of the study— a lamp on the desk and another lamp near the doorway— imparted a yellowish, almost surreal glow to the room's reflection in the dark glass.

Fanny was trying to impress the early middle-aged priest, Culhane thought, slightly amused at the idea. She had barely touched the contents of the glass that was cradled in her hands, one cupped in the other, resting in her lap. Perched on the edge of the overstuffed chair to Culhane's right, her feet were drawn well back, the hem of her dress reaching almost to the floor.

Father Whitehead drank a Salty Dog as well. As Culhane's eyes returned to him, the priest laughed.

"What's so funny?" Culhane asked him.

"Well— I mean! Here I am, just a parish priest in the middle of nowhere and I'm having a drink with Sean— I mean Josh Culhane. I just identify you with your character. You'll have to forgive me."

"No problem," Culhane smiled.

"And M.F. Mulrooney, too!"

That Father Whitehead was a self-proclaimed regular reader of Fanny's books was not something Culhane found encouraging. "I read everything either one of you turns out. You know, you guys ought to do a book together!"

"What would we call it?" Culhane queried. "Sean Dodge meets *Frankenstein*?"

Fanny Mulrooney had been sipping at her drink, her pursed lips barely touching the rim of the glass— until she started to choke.

Culhane sprang to his feet, taking the glass from her. Mulrooney raised her arms, the shawl tumbling from her shoulders as Culhane slapped her gently on the back.

"Would you like some water, Miss Mulrooney?"

Shaking her head, inhaling hard, she managed, "No— no, Father—"

"I think she'll be fine." Culhane grinned. Fanny seemed to regain her composure and her breath simultaneously. She shot Culhane a dirty look. He picked up her shawl for her, re-draping it across her shoulders. She leaned back into the chair; he returned her drink.

"Sean Dodge meets Frankenstein." Mulrooney almost snarled, clearing her throat. She smiled at Father Whitehead. "What a lovely thought, Father."

"Yes," Culhane nodded. "Lovely. If we do write that book together someday, Father— well— we'll dedicate it to you."

Whitehead re-seated himself, picking up his drink again. "But, I really am honored having you both here. If I had known all these years that Momma Cinda was a friend of yours, Miss Mulrooney. I'll confess that I would have been presumptuous enough to ask her for your address so that I could send you a book to autograph."

"I'd be happy to autograph any of your books, Father," Mulrooney answered so quickly that it was a perfect set-up.

Culhane couldn't resist it. "And, not only the books that she's written. Father! One time, I actually saw Fanny autograph an entire set of Britannica III, including all the annuals. She'd be happy to sign yours," and Culhane nodded toward one of the bookcases.

Mulrooney glared at him. Whitehead laughed. "You guys!"

Her books were hardbound; Culhane's were invariably paperback. But she was very nice usually about not rubbing it in, so he dropped the subject.

"You mentioned Momma Cinda," Fanny said, dragging the reason for their being here in by its heels.

"Yes, Miss Mulrooney. And, despite her religious views and mine being in opposition, I had the greatest respect for her. We all did on the island. Or, most of us anyway, Miss Mulrooney."

"You can call me M.F., or Mary Frances, whichever feels more comfortable."

"Mary Frances— yes— what a charmingly old fashioned name. Mary Frances it is!"

"Father— was—"

"Was what, Mary Frances?"

Mulrooney was seeming to have an awkward time with it. Culhane stepped in. "I think Fanny is wondering about some remarks Chief Hanks made to her."

"What sort of remarks, Mr. Culhane?"

"Josh— please." Culhane suggested. "Chief Hanks told Fanny that you had mentioned some recently

disturbed graves—and that you presided at the Funeral services for Willie Boyle."

"Yes, on both accounts."

Fanny was going into action. "Willie Boyle was killed father."

"It appeared that way, but I'm afraid no official investigation ever got up any steam."

"No. I mean he was killed today. I saw him killed. Chief Hanks killed him. If Willie Boyle wasn't dead then, he certainly seemed dead. And Chief Hanks identified him as Willie Boyle."

"Well—I mean—that's impossible. He's— ahh—he's right out there," and Father Whitehead jerked his left thumb toward the cemetery as he took a healthy swallow of his vodka and grapefruit juice.

"What if he isn't? I mean, I saw him today. Father," Fanny Mulrooney insisted, quietly, almost emotionlessly. "He was alive, but almost as though he really wasn't. He was moving; he was resisting Chief Hanks a little, I guess. He fell down when Hanks hit him again and again. But his eyes; it was like his soul was someplace else," Fanny whispered.

Father Whitehead set down his drink. "That can hardly be possible. He was found dead. He was prepared by our mortician and embalmed. His body was sealed in a casket. I presided over the burial."

"Did you see inside the casket, Father?" Culhane asked. And he felt stupid for asking it.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I did. He was dead, as dead as I've seen anybody. He was dead. I mean, his body was cold, unmoving. He was dead. So, obviously, Mary Frances— Well, you and Jimmy Howard Hanks were somehow mistaken. I mean, well—"

"Did Willie Boyle have a close relative who looked very much like him?" Culhane suggested. It seemed, after all, like a logical question.

"No. I mean, uhh. Willie could have, certainly, but I didn't know of anyone like that."

"His grave is right out there?" Fanny persisted.

"Yes. I can show it to you if you like."

Culhane almost said "aww shit" out loud, but he smiled instead.

"Please—I mean— could you?" Fanny asked.

"Certainly. I'd be happy to show you both his grave. But, only if it will allay your misgivings. Mary Frances."

"Maybe," she smiled, setting down her drink, sliding slightly more forward in the chair, the hem of her dress almost touching the floor again.

"All right," Whitehead said brightly, standing. "I'll get a flashlight."

Culhane stood.

Father Whitehead offered, "I can loan you a jacket. Mary Frances."

"No. I'll be warm enough." she responded, smiling...

\* \* \*

Mary Frances Mulrooney's shoulders were so hunched and the shawl bound so tightly about her bare arms that she could barely breathe. "Sean Dodge meets Frankenstein." she muttered under her breath, picking her way around the headstones. Dracula seemed more likely, considering the swirling fingers of night fog and the old cemetery.

She heard a dog howl. She heard the thrumming of wings, convincing herself that it was an owl or something taking flight rather than a bat. As far as she was concerned, she'd just as soon pass on the music made by "the children of the night."

A dollop of water fell against the tip of her nose as she passed under low hanging Spanish moss. At least, she hoped that it was water.

Mulrooney was wedged between the two men as if they were bookends, the light from the priest's ordinary flashlight and Josh Culhane's Mini-Maglite giving the illusion of solidness to the otherwise textureless greyness through which they moved. Culhane's hand was at her right elbow.

Fanny Mulrooney recognized the grave site the instant that she saw it. She had been near it when one of her shoes had gotten stuck in the loose dirt earlier that day.

"So, my friends. This is poor Willie Boyle's grave. May Our Lord in His Infinite Mercy care for Willie's soul that he rest in peace," and Father Whitehead made The Sign of the Cross.

"Why is the dirt soft there? I mean should it be?"

"What do you mean, Mary Frances?" Father Whitehead asked.

"I mean today, when I spotted Willie Boyle and Jimmy Howard Hanks chased after him. I caught my heel in the dirt of the grave I stepped on. It was so much softer than the ground around it. It was this grave."

"Soft dirt?"

"May I, Father?" Culhane interrupted. Mulrooney looked at him. Father Whitehead's flashlight beam bathed the midportion of Culhane's body in light. He was reaching under his coat, his Bali-Song knife appearing, opening one handed with a click-click-clicking sound.

"That's Sean Dodge's knife! A Benchmade Bali-Song, right?"

"Right," Culhane responded. "Would you mind if I just tried inserting the blade into the dirt of the grave? I intend no sacrilege, Father."

"Ahh, well. Perhaps by the base of the grave, if that will calm Mary Frances's trepidations."

She watched Culhane's eyes as the beam of light shifted and his eyes darted once toward hers; mentally, she kissed him. "Yes. Father Whitehead. please." Mulrooney said, her voice soft. She was shivering slightly. Culhane must have realized it, because he put the knife into his teeth for a moment— just like Sean Dodge did in Josh's books— and shrugged out of his leather sportcoat, draping it across her shoulders.

She hunched into the retained warmth from his body.

Culhane dropped into a crouch beside the grave. "Will you shine your light down here as well. Father?"

"Yes. Certainly," and the priest re-aimed his flashlight.

Culhane beamed his light toward the gravesite. There was no marker. She imagined Willie Boyle, like a lot of the people on the island, had been poor and that being black had been a part of it.

Culhane began to talk. "The ground here should be normal ground, not a grave site," and he stabbed the Bali-Song into the dirt. "Good way to dull my edge," he seemed to muse out loud. "This ground offered considerable resistance. Now, I'll try the gravesite. And if Willie was buried anytime more than a few weeks ago, the ground should be the same consistency, correct?"

"Yes, it should," Father Whitehead agreed from the foggy darkness, his voice sounding a little less confident, Mulrooney thought.

Culhane stabbed the knife into the foot of the grave. It disappeared almost up to the handle halves. "Soft, Father, very soft. Either freshly dug, or— Well, I don't know."

"But, that's impossible! Maybe its just the surface dirt."

"My blade went down a good bit, Father. Try it yourself."

Father Whitehead took the knife cautiously. Mulrooney smiled to herself; he'd probably read about how sharp it was when Sean Dodge used it.

Father Whitehead crouched down into the beam from Culhane's flashlight. He turned the knife awkwardly in his right hand, into a downward pointing position. Culhane had called it an icepick hold once, she remembered.

Father Whitehead stabbed the knife into the ground beside the grave. Then he withdrew the knife, stabbing it into the foot of the grave.

"You're right," Father Whitehead whispered, his voice barely audible...

\* \* \*

Fanny Mulrooney refused to wait in the comfort of the rectory study; but, she kept Culhane's Jacket. He had wiped his knife blade clean on the sole of his boot, then put the knife away. While she kept lone watch in the swirling fog beside the grave, Culhane and Father Whitehead went back toward the rectory, Mulrooney never taking her eyes from the beam of Father Whitehead's flashlight.

They returned. It seemed like hours, but her rational side told her that it had been only minutes.

With them was the big Mag-Lite Culhane had given her to keep in her car, and in the light of her flashlight and Father Whitehead's, she could see two spades and a crowbar.

Father Whitehead had wondered aloud about getting the permission of his Bishop, or the permission of the Police Chief, at least.

Instead, she held the two flashlights— Josh had put his little light away— while Father Whitehead and Josh Culhane began to dig.

"We are committing sacrilege if this grave is filled." Father Whitehead said about midway through the dig.

Culhane told him, "Or, we're uncovering sacrilege if it's empty."

They kept digging.

Finally, after what she judged as nearly fifteen minutes, there was the sound of the shovels hitting something hard.

"The casket! I knew it was there. God forgive us!" Father Whitehead said, jumping up out of the open grave.

"Then why was the ground soft, Father Whitehead?" Mulrooney didn't know the answer herself, but she hoped that Culhane did.

"There's probably a very logical explanation." Father Whitehead told her, somewhat stern sounding.

"Can we open the coffin, Father?"

"I can't allow that—"

"Fanny. Gimme a light; pass it to Father Whitehead."

Mulrooney gave the priest her flashlight— it was brighter— and swung the beam of the one in her left hand into the open grave. She took a few cautious steps forward, getting closer. Culhane dropped into a crouch, pushing dirt away from the top of the coffin with his hands.

"Mr. Culhane— Josh— I can't allow—"

"Father, the casket's already been opened. Look."

Whitehead jumped down into the grave, dropping to his knees in the dirt.

"My God!" Whitehead's voice was a hoarse, tortured whisper.

"Or, something else," Fanny Mulrooney whispered almost inaudibly.

"Gimme the crowbar, Fanny."

She reached down into the dirt, shining the light there first. She picked up the crowbar, stepping nearer to

the open grave. "I'll do this," the priest declared, taking the crowbar from her hands.

Culhane stood up from his crouch, Whitehead gouging a spot in the dirt beside the coffin with the crowbar, then standing there, inserting the crowbar. Culhane bent to the lid, the two men lifting; it was times like this that Mulrooney was glad that she was a woman.

The lid was up.

Involuntarily, Mulrooney stepped back.

"That's why the ground was loose; this thing's half filled with dirt," she heard Culhane say. She couldn't see Culhane's face.

"Where is Willie Boyle?"

Neither Mulrooney nor Culhane answered Father Whitehead. Mulrooney shone the flashlight into the coffin.

Dirt, yes, but no body...

\* \* \*

Culhane had wiped off his boots with a damp rag; it wasn't good for the leather, but the boots looked cleaner at least.

His pants had stayed surprisingly clean.

He sat again in the chair he'd originally occupied, drinking this time rather than sipping at another Salty Dog minus the salt. Father Whitehead, he noticed, was doing the same thing.

Fanny had passed on the white wine and was drinking from a tumbler that looked to have nothing in it except a few ice cubes and a good amount of amber colored whiskey.

"Seventeen graves. What a fool I've been! If they are all like Willie Boyle's grave— My God!" Whitehead said, lighting a cigarette with the burned out stub of the last one.

"Where's your housekeeper, Father?"

"Ahh— she's off tonight. And I know. God help me, that I should have attacked the Voodooists harder. I know that now."

"Where is she?" Culhane asked again.

"She— ahh— she was always one of Momma Cinda's followers. But, it's not Momma Cinda who took Willie Boyle's body."

They had closed Willie Boyle's grave, then with Father Whitehead leading the way, gone to the graves of recently dead Voodooists, those who had died within the last few months.

Seventeen of the graves had been questionable. There were twenty-three graves in all.

Whitehead was talking again, as though to himself but out loud, his sentences breathless, staccato. "It's almost like some sort of gang war. This man Fidelito. He's not a Catholic. Some say he's a Satanist. I've tried reaching him. He won't even speak. He's rarely seen on the island at all. Just his handiwork. He was fighting Momma Cinda's flock. Trying to get them away from her. Willie Boyle. The story goes that Fidelito attacked Momma Cinda. Willie cut off part of Fidelito's little finger with a knife. And that was why Willie died. But, then he isn't dead. Maybe he is."

Father Whitehead looked up, his hands clasped together around the cigarette. Culhane followed the priests' eyes. They came to rest on Fanny Mulrooney's face. "There isn't such a thing as a Zombie. There just can't be. Mary Frances."

Culhane didn't speak.

Fanny Mulrooney did. "Is there a service tonight? For Momma Cinda's people?"

"Yes," Whitehead almost groaned.

"And that's why your housekeeper isn't here?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where it meets?"

"Yes. I think I do. In Gunwater Swamp."

"When?" Mulrooney asked him, lighting a cigarette of her own.

"At midnight, I presume. That's what I've always heard."

Culhane looked at his watch. It was nearly eleven-thirty.

"But you can't go there," Father Whitehead said softly. "Momma Cinda's people. They are good people. They come to church here every Sunday and for services in May and for Lenten services and— They are good members of the community. Decent. Hard working. But Arturo Velasquez—"

"Velasquez?" Culhane interrupted.

"Fidelito. His people— The things, the things I've heard."

Josh Culhane stubbed out his cigarette. He looked at Father Whitehead. Considering that the priest was such a fan of Sean Dodge, Culhane almost felt guilty not showing him the pistol in the Mustang's glove compartment. Sean Dodge used one just like it.

## **BOOK TWO THE UNDEAD**

## Chapter Fifteen

Culhane was driving.

Mulrooney examined her dress, holding its skirt between her fingertips. "Damn," she muttered.

"What?"

"Why the hell'd I have to dress like this?"

"You look pretty."

"You try wanderin' around in a swamp with a dress and wedge soled sandals sometime and see if it matters to look pretty," she told him. The idea of Culhane wandering around anywhere in a dress made a smile cross her lips.

Mulrooney began searching her purse for her cigarettes; she found her gun, but didn't need it. Yet.

"You've been on the island before," Culhane started, little visible of his face in the dashboard's glow as she looked at him. "Why do they call this place Gunwater Swamp?"

"Momma Cinda told me about it. She took me out here once. I didn't know that was where she still met with her people. But, I should have guessed it," she said lamely. She found her cigarettes, lit one, then tried to answer Culhane's question. "They call it Gunwater Swamp because, well, its from the days when they had pirates. All over these islands. That's why they call the town Teach's Landing, because Blackbeard supposedly landed here. And, it's Gunwater Swamp because one of the gangs of pirates who landed here— Well, the British had put a cannon on the island to repel the pirates. It didn't work, to keep them away, I mean." She shrugged, loosening her shawl from her shoulders. She pulled it back up, inhaling on the cigarette, then exhaling as she spoke. "Anyway, the pirates got ashore." She twisted around in the seat, pulling her dress down over her legs, tucking them half under her. The night air was getting to her, but Culhane seemed perfectly comfortable. "They took the town. There wasn't really that much to take. They took the gun. It was supposed to be pretty big, too big to haul out onto one of their ships. So, they forced the people of the town to drag it along the road leading into the swamp. Probably wasn't this road. That has to have been a lot of hurricanes ago. Anyway, they took it out to the swamp, then were forced to push it into the swamp. The gun sank out of sight. The pirates looted the town. And they left."

"No raping or pillaging, huh?"

"No— just looting," she laughed.

"So this Hanks guy? The chief. He really thinks Momma Cinda found Blackboard's treasure?"

"It was always supposed to be stashed further up along the coast," Mulrooney volunteered.

"You into pirates?"

She laughed. "What do you want to know?"

"Blackbeard. Now, he was the guy who was so mean that he used to shoot people just so they wouldn't think he was going soft. Right?"

"He— ahh— he made a pact with the devil, it was always said," Mulrooney hissed through a stream of smoke.

"Right," Culhane's voice came from the darkness.

"Well, I didn't say I always said it— but you wanna hear?"

"Sure," and Culhane cut the wheel a little. "Light me another cigarette, huh?"

She reached across in the darkness— feeling at his shirt pocket— not there. She found the cigarettes, but not the lighter in his right hand outside pocket.

She put the cigarette between her lips, then lit it with the fire of her own cigarette, inhaled on it, then as she exhaled reached across and held it to his lips. He took it.

"So," she began. "Okay. According to the legend— I did a thing on demons once and bumped into this. Well, supposedly Blackbeard made a compact with Satan. Might have been through one of his lesser demons."

"Lesser demons?" Culhane interrupted.

"Like God uses angels? Okay? Only for bad stuff." Sometimes, explaining something to Culhane was like explaining something to a child. She had to keep it simple. "Anyway, supposedly the deal was that Blackbeard would sell his soul if the devil would guard his treasure. I think he even talked about the devil when they swung him from the gallows, that he'd never really die. Stuff like that."

"You believe it?" Culhane asked her.

"Well, I guess Blackbeard believed it— if the legend's true. I mean, somebody could sell his soul to the devil and that wouldn't necessarily mean the devil was buying that day, right?"

"I guess. Worries me a little bit."

"What? Blackbeard and the devil?"

"No. It worries me. This Fidelito guy. Arturo— What did Father Whitehead say? Velasquez?"

"Yeah."

"I don't like the idea. In Haiti, the government used voodoo as an instrument of policy, to control people, keep the lid on. This Cuban guy could be more than he seems, not just some wacko drug pusher."

"What do you mean?"

"All right— aside from Voodoo and empty coffins, Charleston is primarily known as a seaport and there's a lot of naval activity around here. I mean— I don't know what I mean."

Mulrooney laughed. "Welcome to the club."

"I think this is it," Culhane said, gearing down. Mulrooney realized that she was trying to memorize the sounds so that she could do it, too. The car slowed, rolled, then stopped. "Now this could be kinda rough. I mean walkin' around in a swamp at almost midnight," he began. "Anyway, you might want to wait here, Fanny."

"Wait here? My ass I'll wait here."

"I didn't think you would." Culhane stepped out of the car.

Mulrooney made official mental note, that she had been warned. . .

\* \* \*

Culhane had his gun out, and Mulrooney had been digging in her purse for the last several seconds to get the junk clear enough so that she could open the center pouch all the way and get hers out, too.

She had it. The little, shiny stainless steel .38 Special was balled tight in her right fist as they moved ahead. In Culhane's left hand was the flashlight from her car, but it wasn't turned on yet.

Fog lay in huge, clump-like patches all around them, the smell of it foul, fetid. She wrinkled her nose against it.

"This is ridiculous," she whispered hoarsely.

"What? Wandering around in a swamp in the dark, searching for a Voodoo ceremony when we haven't been invited, or intentionally going someplace where there might be violence? Or, all of the above?"

"All of the above." She laughed, keeping her voice low still. "With that flashlight— hmm— all you need is a double breasted suit, a slouch fedora, a pencil thin mustache and alcohol on your breath."

"What are you talking about? I've got alcohol on my breath."

"You know," she smiled. "And I could get one of my grandmother's dresses and a hat and try and sound spoiled and innocent at the same time and we could get a Wire Haired Fox Terrier."

"Asta was a Schnauzer, in the original book. In the movies, they made him a Wire Haired."

"Why would they do something like that? I mean, Wire Haired Fox Terriers are so cute. But, then so are Schnauzers. Miniature or full size?"

"I don't remember. But, the dog who played Asta? His name was Skippy— shh!"

She stopped talking, stopped walking.

Ahead. She could hear it now, too. It was either the wind— but there was no wind— or it was chanting from a Voodoo ceremony.

Fanny Mulrooney had heard it before. And that was what it was.

William Powell would have had a hip flask on him. And, she could have used it just now.

## Chapter Sixteen

Jimmy Howard Hanks set the 12-gauge riot shotgun on the hood of the Ford.

"All right, now. Y'all listen up," he said, keeping his voice low enough that they would have to listen. He'd learned that years ago. People didn't strain to listen to a shout, so there was no active involvement on the part of the listener.

All of his men fell silent.

He looked at Carroll.

He looked at the rest of the men he had gathered.

Carroll was almost smarter than the rest of them. That was disheartening.

"All right. Now, this is a legally authorized law enforcement action, nothing more and nothing less. And I told y'all to bring along y'all's guns. But, that doesn't mean I want anybody shootin' less I give the word. Heah?"

"Yessuh." Carroll volunteered.

Hanks just looked at his brother-in-law.

"All right. In this heah country, there's what we call religious freedom. That means these Voodoo people can run around naked drinkin' chicken blood or whatever the hell they do and less'n they're breakin' some law, there's nothin' we can do to stop 'em. So, we go in there nice and peaceful like. I wanna identify the Voodoo cultists. I wanna talk to 'em. Can't do that with a dead man, contrary to popular opinion among the Voodoo folks." He got a laugh with that which was what he had intended; the crowd needed a little lightening up.

"But. Jimmy Howard?"

It was Buzzy Greenwood.

"Yeah, Buzzy. What's on y'all's mind."

"We gotta wait for them to shoot first? Don't make no sense to me."

"If the situation looks bad, then I'll tell y'all what to do. But, nobody does anythin' lessen I say so. And, if any y'all can't live with that, then go on home now and I won't think any the less of any man who does. We're gonna take us the trail there through the swamp. Watch out for snakes and other critters. Don't shoot. It'll just alert the Voodoo people and they'll high tail it every which way but Sunday. Got me?"

There were various grunts of assent.

"Now, check y'all weapons. And, if y'all got a gun with a safety, use it. Keep handguns holstered until if and when y'all need 'em."

The men began checking their weapons, Hanks drawing the Python from the leather. He pulled back on the cylinder release catch and gave the cylinder a spin; he closed the cylinder and holstered the stainless Colt revolver.

He didn't check the little .25 auto inside his left boot.

Hearing enough clicks and snaps to be satisfied that the men had checked their weapons, he called for their attention once again. "All right. Now, y'all just remember. Nobody mashes a trigger without my givin' the word. Right?"

There were nods, more grunts.

"Let's go," and Jimmy Howard Hanks hefted the riot shotgun, a six-cell Mag-Lite in his left fist. He started along the path into Gunwater Swamp. If Momma Cinda were alive, there was always the chance she would be at her ceremony in the swamp. Or, that someone who knew where she was would be. He knew how to threaten all the participants with arrest: material witnesses to a possible homicide. That would serve since between all the Voodooists, he doubted there was enough money for one decent lawyer to come and say otherwise.

He could hear the rattle of slings, the thudding of footsteps. Hanks counted on the fact that Voodoo people supposedly made a lot of God-awful noise during their ceremonies. That would cover him and his posse until they got close enough to strike.

Carroll slogged up alongside him. Carroll's hands were vice gripped on the single Thompson submachinegun the department had invested in during the 1930s. It had never been fired until Jimmy Howard Hanks took office; he had taken it out back on his place and put five hundred rounds through it, then cleaned it and put it away, making cleaning the old Tommy Gun a monthly ritual.

Carroll had never fired it and Hanks hadn't bothered to tell him not to; he'd seen the look of terror in the boy's eyes and if there was one thing in life that could be counted on, Jimmy Howard Hanks knew, it was terror...

\* \* \*

Fanny Mulrooney at last fully comprehended the meaning of the old saw "...my heart was in my mouth." If hers wasn't, it felt that way.

One of the Zombies she saw as she crouched beside Josh Culhane, one of the Zombies moving through the swamp along a path which was at a tangent to the path she and Culhane had followed— one of them was Momma Cinda.

Mulrooney realized that she was digging the nails of her left hand into Culhane's right forearm; but, he didn't move, didn't whisper.

She looked at him, with her eyes trying to tell him she was sorry. And she was very suddenly very cold.

Mulrooney stayed crouched, her dress gathered up, wrapped around her legs, her right hand clutching both revolver and fabric.

Momma Cinda. A Zombie.

The Zombies were clearly discernable from the others who travelled the trail; the Zombies were the only ones who were unarmed. And one of the men who was armed was clearly the leader. Tall. Thin; the muscular kind of thin. He was black, but his skin was really brown, his hair short and a shirt that could have been white rolled up at the sleeves past his elbows.

Two of the armed men carried lanterns, battery operated, the kind with the impossibly huge seeming batteries that formed the bottom portion of the light, the battery uncased.

She looked at Culhane again; she knew enough about guns from having lived with him to realize that the guns which the armed men carried were assault weapons, probably the illegal, fully-automatic kind.

In the distance, beyond the silent file of armed men and Zombies of both sexes, she could hear the wild chants from the Voodoo ceremony. It was a ceremony for the dead; much of Voodoo was focused on death, but in a different way than the more widely known religions.

One of Momma Cinda's flock would be attempting to summon Momma Cinda's spirit into her own body.

Mulrooney shivered again.

She felt Culhane's hand touch her shoulder and, for an instant before she realized that it was his hand, Mulrooney almost screamed.

He nodded to her, then took his left hand from her shoulder and gestured toward the sounds of the Voodoo ceremony. She nodded back.

Culhane was up, in a low crouch, moving ahead, Mulrooney gathering her dress around her to keep its skirt from entangling in the brush. She was right behind him.

The sounds of the Voodoo ceremony, she realized, would mask any tell-tale sounds they would make as they moved. They would also mask the sounds of the man called Fidelito and his men.

Momma Cinda— Fidelito's Zombie.

Mulrooney was starting to cry; there was no sense holding back the tears. She let them come. Mulrooney blinked her eyes against them so that she could see, sniffing, trying not to sniff too loudly. She focused her attention away from Momma Cinda, to the armed men with Fidelito who moved roughly parallel to them.

She remembered Father Whitehead's remark, that it was almost as if there were some sort of gang war going on between Fidelito's and Momma Cinda's faction. But the gang war would be all one sided, she knew. Momma Cinda in almost every word she spoke abhorred violence.

Mulrooney remembered; the tears came more strongly. She had asked Momma Cinda once about the use of the Voodoo doll. And Momma Cinda had admitted that she knew how to make such a thing, that

the Voodoo doll, though, could be used for good or for evil. Those who used it for evil were using Petro, the bad magic. And, evil magic corrupted those who used it, made them evil.

Culhane stopped, Mulrooney almost bumping into him.

He leaned toward her, his mouth to her left ear. "You try and make it back to the car. Use your cell phone and call—"

She shook her head violently; she didn't want to hear the rest. "No!" Mulrooney hissed.

Culhane just stared at her for a moment, then touched his lips to her forehead. As he moved his face away, he nodded.

He started ahead again.

Mulrooney knotted her shawl in front, awkwardly because she was holding the gun.

She let Culhane stay only a few feet ahead of her, following close at his heels.

The sounds of the Voodoo ceremony were louder now, and there were drums. The fog here seemed less dense. She realized they had been climbing, slowly, gradually, toward an island in the swamp.

She froze. The stick which she had been about to step over was moving. A snake. "Wonderful," Mulrooney said under her breath. The snake slithered along—surprisingly rapidly—and she closed the distance between herself and Culhane. She hoped that Culhane was right, that things she had heard about poisons being used to create Zombies were true. That the dead didn't walk, and that somehow Momma Cinda could be saved...

\* \* \*

Josh Culhane's right fist clenched tight on the butt of the SIG 245, his left hand locked to Fanny Mulrooney's right.

Culhane could see a man of about sixty, loin-clothed body glistening with sweat in the firelight, the drum the man beat something Culhane hadn't seen since his last "I Love Lucy" re-run—it was a conga drum, but the man wasn't playing "Bobba-Loo" or anything similar.

Times change, Culhane thought.

There was a main fire. Culhane judged its circumference as a dozen feet or more. Voodooists, he surmised, were ambitious wood cutters.

Smaller fires dotted the perimeter of the island clearing, the flickering yellow-orange flames making the swirling mists of Gunwater Swamp appear more dense, steel grey and impenetrable.

He could smell something cooking; and, for a moment. Culhane he was filled with revulsion.

It was as if Fanny Mulrooney had read him. Crouched beside him, her dress trailing on the ground, she whispered, "They're making food, for the feast. The stuff that woman there's drinking—"

A woman of about thirty, black, very pretty in what was either a bikini or bikini panties and a smallish bra, was drinking from a large cup.

"That's Tafia— kind of home brew."

"I hope these people realize they could get in trouble with Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms if they make too much of that—"

"Ohh, shush! You're incorrigible." And Mulrooney edged closer to him.

There was something he could smell now besides food. A man at the near edge of the central fire was dousing himself with a liquid. It smelled like men's cologne. Musk. And the man, clad only in a loin cloth like most of the other men, unknotted the top of a bleached canvas bag, then reached inside. His hands reappeared holding a snake.

Mechanically, Culhane recognized it: a boa, harmless unless you let the thing start to wrap you at the neck or rib cage or some other sensitive area where its constricting could cause suffocation. The man held the snake high in his hands, shouting something Culhane couldn't understand. Mulrooney, her voice strained sounding, whispered, "He's invoking Damballa, one of the most powerful gods."

"What's the snake got to do with it?" Culhane whispered. He realized he could have been using a vacuum cleaner and with the crackling of the fire and the beating of the conga drum and the whistling sounds of the flute which started now, no one would have heard him.

"Damballa is the most powerful of the loas. Loas are intermediaries between the maker of the Universe and man. The snake represents his power and his wisdom. Snake handlers use Musk Oil or Patchouli to quiet the snake. That's what you smell: Patchouli."

Culhane nodded, impressed— and thinking, "What am I doing here?" But he didn't say it. He wondered, as he had many times, what sparked Fanny Mulrooney's obsession with what he labelled as wierd.

The fog on the slope leading to the highest point of the island was in wisps, approaching them as tentatively as a frightened animal. Culhane saw Fanny Mulrooney's face clearly. The firelight was captured as a reflection in her grey-green eyes.

Then there was something strange in her eyes, her right hand going almost rigid in his left.

Fidelito, he thought. Mulrooney was thinking of the evil man who had done harm to her friend.

The one with the rolled-up sleeves white shirt and the submachinegun had to be Fidelito. Fidelito and the other armed men they had seen moving through the swamp, moving toward the sounds of the Oumphor, would be coming soon.

There were heaps of clothing on the ground at the fringe of the clearing, and among these he saw an occasional sheath knife or pouched lockblade folder slung from a belt.

These people were not armed.

Fidelito and his rifle and shotgun armed men would have a slaughter. And, there were the dozen Zombies (or whatever they were) to consider.

If Culhane ran into the clearing now, interrupting the ceremony, warning the participants, would they believe him? Would they heed his warning to run for their lives?

But Fidelito would hear, too, and the chances of recovering Momma Cinda would be lost. And, maybe this would be their only chance.

He looked at Fanny Mulrooney again, her hand jerking from his as she stood bolt upright.

Mulrooney raised her arms, her shawl bunching around her neck. Culhane started to reach for her as she began to speak.

It was her voice, but somehow it wasn't.

"I am Damballa! This woman's body is my instrument!"

"Holy shit," Culhane whispered.

The conga drum stopped. The flute stoooped. The man holding the snake turned. The two dozen dancers around the bonfire, staring.

Culhane did the only thing he could do. He smiled, waved his left hand and hid the pistol behind him. "Fanny," he hissed through gritted teeth.

She walked forward, as if she didn't see him, stepping through the underbrush, her dress catching, tearing; but, it was as if she didn't notice or didn't care.

Mulrooney's body weaved rhythmically. She moved toward the nearly naked man who held the snake as though she were following some invisible path in the dirt, her shoulders rising, falling, her arms moving outward almost beseechingly, her hands open, fingers splayed, her palms upraised, the tips of her fingers searching the air somehow, her voice cooing the words which Culhane knew weren't her words. Culhane shivered.

"The Bocor who worships at the feet of The Evil One is coming, my faithful!" She seemed to dance, slowly, erotically. As Culhane watched her, he could feel himself stirring involuntarily. She stood, swaying, before the man with the snake, reaching lovingly for the creature, caressing it in her hands as he surrendered it to her.

Mulrooney's fingers stroked the snake, her cheek brushing against its head as the voice came again. "The Bocor possesses Momma Cinda. He wishes to possess you. Go my children. Now! Do not forget Momma Cinda. Be true to me," and Mulrooney surrendered the snake. The nearly naked man, his body reeking of musk even at the distance at which Culhane stood, received the snake from Fanny Mulrooney's hands. Mulrooney's body weaved, swayed as she moved toward the fire, her hands pressing against her abdomen. Her fingers trailed upward, cupping beneath her breasts in the instant that she reached the fire.

Mulrooney's head lolled back, her hair cascading across her shoulders. "Go my children. Be true to me! Go. Now!"

Culhane shivered.

Fidelito was at the far edge of the clearing, Fidelito, his subgun slung casually under his right arm. His right hand held a cigarette. His left hand held Momma Cinda's right arm, as though dragging her forward.

Momma Cinda.

It was clear that despite her bedraggled appearance— clothes torn and stained and dirty, hair wildly tangled— that once she had been pretty. She was fat now, but not grossly fat. More old lady plumpness.

But the prettiness, despite it all, was there.

Fidelito, his English perfect, unaccented, called. "Momma Cinda's magic is no good! Only my magic works!"

Fidelito's band moved forward. Mulrooney sank to her knees beside the upward licking tongues of the bonfire, her shoulders sagging. A man moved slowly into the clearing, out of the undergrowth, his eyes riveted on Fanny Mulrooney's sweat glistening arms, her face.

Mulrooney looked up.

Culhane looked into her eyes.

The man advancing toward her carried a riot shotgun, tromboned the slide, raised the 12-gauge toward Fanny Mulrooney.

Culhane brought his pistol from behind his back. He thrust the pistol on line with the shotgun armed man's head. "Freeze!"

The man wheeled, the shotgun swinging into line with Culhane's chest.

Fidelito shrieked, "Momma Cinda— she is my Zombie! She is my Zombie! Look as she kneels to me! Damballa is nothing!"

Culhane pulled the trigger, a splotch of red appearing just above the shotgunner's brow ridge, a spray of blood and grey matter discharging from the back of his head.

Mulrooney cried out, but it was not her voice. "Evil one!"

Shouts, screams, "Dumballa Oueda! Dumballa Oueda!"

Culhane swung his pistol toward Fidelito. "You're fuckin' dead if you move!"

Fidelito shrieked, "I am the Bocor. You will do my bidding or you all shall be like Momma Cinda! Be my Zombies!"

Culhane didn't move the muzzle of the pistol. "Let her go, man! Let Momma Cinda go!"

Fidelito's hands moved, his right hand raising the Uzi submachinegun, his left shoving Momma Cinda down from her knees.

"Fidelito!" Culhane shouted the man's name. "Don't do it!" The first finger of Culhane's right hand started squeezing back.

There was another shout. "This is Chief Jimmy Howard Hanks! Lay down y'all's weapons!"

Fidelito's men turned almost as one, opening fire in the direction of the voice that sounded like a southern accented FM announcer.

"Aww, damn!" Culhane snarled.

Mulrooney screamed. Culhane ran toward her. One of the Zombies was charging toward her with a section of tree limb swinging at the end of his massive arms, the tree limb about six inches in diameter and four feet or so long.

Mulrooney looked up. Culhane heard her shout, "Willie— Willie Boyle! Don't!"

As the Zombie started the tree limb into its downswing, Culhane swung the muzzle of his pistol and fired, then fired again, the Zombie's body staggering, but the swing still following through. Culhane stabbed the pistol out at arm's length and fired again.

The Zombie's face seemed to disintegrate as the bullet struck, the tree limb flying, free of the Zombie's hands, the Zombie's body snapping back into the fire.

Mulrooney screamed again.

There was gunfire all around them, the sounds of heavy caliber bolt actions, shotguns, the rattle of assault rifles and Fidelito's submachinegun. The ground beside Culhane rippled under a fusillade of automatic weapons fire. Culhane dove for Mulrooney, grabbing her, cradling her into his arms as they impacted the ground together.

The body of the Zombie lurched out of the flames, a living torch.

Mulrooney rose to her knees beside Culhane. "That— that was— that was Willie Boyle," Mulrooney managed. "The— the man from the empty grave." The body— in flames— fell inches from them.

"He's dead now," Culhane nodded, shouting over the roar of gunfire. "Finally, God rest his soul. Come on!"

Culhane pulled Mulrooney into a dead run. "Fidelito's going to get out of here, and take Momma Cinda with him!"

Mulrooney was stooped over, her flesh cold to his touch.

Culhane started toward the far edge of the ceremonial site, the Zombies, men and women, in hand to hand combat with the men who had obviously come with Hanks, machetes and clubs in the Zombies' hands.

Culhane saw a flash of movement to his right— the man seemed half the size of a mountain, the butt of a Remington 870 beating aside any of the Zombies near him, a cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes. From the description Mulrooney had provided back at the hotel, it had to be Jimmy Howard Hanks.

"Oh boy," Culhane murmured.

One of Fidelito's men raced into the firelight, an M-16 spitting a short burst, then jammed. The man threw down the weapon, grabbing at a revolver in his trouser band. Culhane twisted toward the man, leveling his own pistol. Culhane's trigger finger drew back as the revolver in the other man's hand stabbed toward him.

Culhane fired first, a double tap, the Fidelito gunman going down to his knees, the revolver falling to the ground, both hands clutching at his abdomen. On his knees now, the man's head slumped forward.

Dead, Culhane realized.

He grabbed Mulrooney's hand and began to run, Mulrooney swearing a blue streak over her impractical shoes.

On the far side of the clearing, Culhane could see Fidelito and two of his men, one of the men half dragging Momma Cinda away from the clearing and along the trail. Fidelito's submachinegun opened up. Culhane grabbed Fanny Mulrooney by the shoulder, throwing her down, throwing his own body over hers to shield her. Bullets plowed a furrow near Culhane's head and right arm. Culhane, still holding Mulrooney, rolled left, dragging Mulrooney over on top of him for an instant, then under him again. He pointed the SIG 245 the one round left.

Fidelito's body fell back, as if the man had only stumbled. He sagged against a tree trunk. The subgun turned toward Culhane to spray. Culhane rolled again, dragging Fanny over him, then under him, Mulrooney beneath him now. "Josh!"

The subgun fired, chewing into the dirt where a second earlier their bodies had been.

Culhane looked up, his right hand buttoning out the empty magazine, his left inserting one of the two spares. But, Fidelito was already disappearing along the trail, one man with him.

"Up, kid!"

Culhane was to his feet, dragging Fanny Mulrooney to hers.

"Kiss off another dress," Mulrooney groused, already breaking into a run, her shoes in her left hand. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" I hate running barefoot!" He was happy to see she was back to normal.

Culhane sprinted past her, one of Hanks' men thrusting a lever action Marlin toward them. No time for explanations, Culhane wheeled half-left, double kicking his right leg, knocking the rifle barrel aside. Culhane's left fist crossed the man's jaw and he went down.

Culhane looked at Mulrooney— "Watch Sean Dodge try and top that!"

He started running again, looking behind him that Fanny was following unmolested, seeing a patch of white disappear into the trees and brush as he looked forward again— Fidelito's white shirt.

The fog was clearing a little, brilliant moonlight for a moment illuminating the path along which he ran— and as he looked down, he could see a dark spot against the broad leaf of a plant. His left index finger

touched at it as he ran past— he felt it between his index finger and thumb— it was sticky enough to be blood. "Why am I touching a perfect stranger's blood? I'm nuts!"

He had hit Fidelito.

Culhane kept running, glancing back toward Mulrooney. "I'm coming as fast as— as my short little leg's 'll carry me, damnit!"

He kept running, catching a fleeting glimpse of white shirt again, grabbing a handful of leaves from a low hanging oak branch above his head, rubbing his left index finger and thumb free of Fidelito's blood.

Culhane's left hand moved to his left outside pocket as he jumped a deadfall log rotting in the center of the track. "Watch it— deadfall, Fanny!"

Fidelito's white shirt again. Assault rifle fire hammered into the trees just ahead of him, Culhane rasping through his clenched teeth, "Look out, Fanny!"

Culhane stabbed the .45 toward the gunfire and fired two shots.

No more gunfire. Culhane started running again, thumbing down the hammer drop, safing the pistol lest he should fall. There was another flicker of white. Fidelito's shirt, Culhane saw it for only an instant, but didn't dare fire lest he might hit Momma Cinda.

He heard assault rifle and submachinegun fire ahead, but not aimed in his and Fanny's direction.

There was the sound of an automobile engine starting— "Damn!"

The momentary wail of a police siren, then it cut out, replaced by the screech of tires.

Culhane broke from the tree cover into a clearing beside a road— he could see a police car peeling off at high speed.

Culhane glanced behind him, Mulrooney emerging from the undergrowth, her shawl and her hair— in total disarray— decorated with pine needles sprigs of tree branches.

He looked along the ground, near where two other police cars and a half-dozen civilian cars and pickup trucks were parked.

A man lay on the ground, his face visible in the glare of a flashlight still rocking back and forth in the dirt a few feet away.

Culhane ran toward him, a police officer.

The man's eyes were staring up wide open into the patchy and the somehow more intense moonlight.

"Bastards," Culhane snarled, closing the young police officer's eyes.

"They killed him— just—"

"They needed a car— and so do we," Culhane told her, running for the nearest of the two police cars—

"Thank God it's the South," Culhane shouted—the keys were in the ignition switch. Sean Dodge always carried a pair of thin leather driving gloves, Culhane doing so only occasionally. Culhane took them from his pocket and pulled them on. Sean Dodge also hotwired cars in books, faster by far than Culhane did in real life. He slid behind the wheel, warning Mulrooney. "Don't touch anything with your bare hands." Fanny hitched up a handful of skirt and opened the passenger side door, then got in. "Use your seat belt— you'll need it!"

Culhane turned the ignition switch. As the engine roared into life, he popped the emergency break— another habit of Southern drivers more so than their Northern counterparts— and threw the transmission into drive. He stomped the gas pedal, his door slamming shut by momentum as he cut the wheel hard left, toward the road. The Ford bounced, swerved, the rear end fishtailing, gravel spraying up as rubber hit pavement.

There was a low roar. "All right— she's got an interceptor engine in her!"

Mulrooney, beside him, shouted over the slipstream, "I never stole a police car before!"

"Do I know how to take my girl on a date, or do I know how to take my girl on a date, huh?"

Ahead of them, Culhane could see the taillight pattern he had memorized. It was the first stolen police car, the one with Fidelito and Momma Cinda in it— and at least one other armed man.

He had the pedal nearly to the floor, but not risking full acceleration just yet on the two lane blacktop— he didn't know the road, didn't know if there were curves ahead. Instead, he matched his speed to the police interceptor ahead of him.

Before slowing to match the first car's speed, Culhane narrowed the distance between them to less than a hundred yards.

He saw the flashes of light before he realized, gunfire hammering into the windshield. Culhane swerved the Ford left, into the oncoming lane. "Damn it!"

The windshield was spiderwebbed across the top, but with the angle of the windshield and the distance factor, probably nothing had penetrated— he hoped. "Fanny! You all right?"

"No! My nylons are shot to hell and my feet are bleeding! You try running barefoot through a swamp sometime!"

Culhane cut the wheel hard right again, then recovered left, stomping the gas pedal.

"Check this thing out—" he hit the light switch to put the dome light on. "See if there's a shotgun or something?" He doubted there would be.

"Beer cans— last month's Penthouse— ha!"

"What— ha?"

"Sean Dodge #14— your typical reader!"

"Aww, shut up!"

He killed the dome light, narrowing the gap between the car he drove and the interceptor carrying Fidelito. "Keep down, Fanny; they're gonna shoot again."

But, this time, Culhane was ready for them— he hoped. Culhane flicked on the cruiser's high beams, hit the switch for the light bar, hoping that the lights were strobes. He aimed the driver's side spotlight. The lights would serve two purposes, to disorient both the driver and the shooter or shooters as well as making target acquisition and holding more difficult. And, the lights would give him a clearer view of the vehicle ahead, so that he'd have an instant's warning when shots were going to be fired and could swerve, making for a more difficult target.

Culhane saw movement by the passenger window, cutting the wheel left a split second before the muzzle flash. In less than the blink of an eye, sparks flew at the right corner of his peripheral vision, the sound of bullets pinging off metal. He recovered the wheel, swinging the Ford back into the right lane, almost flooring it. The passenger side spotlight and mirror were gone and there was a long crack in the passenger side window. Before Culhane could ask, Fanny called out, "I'm okay, but it was a near thing!"

There was a toggle switch on the dashboard that looked after-market. But it wasn't for the lights or the siren. "Hang on—" Culhane flipped the toggle switch. There was a sound like a series of tiny explosions and the engine seemed to roar, Culhane feeling his body hammered back against the seat. "Supercharger— must be Chief Hanks' car."

The distance between their car and the first car was narrowing dramatically, Culhane glancing down once to the speedometer— the needle was off the numbers.

He licked his lips. He glanced once to Mulrooney— he shook his head. She was putting on lipstick, her left hand, arm outstretched, braced against the dashboard.

Culhane gripped the wheel with both fists locked tight— one slip and the car would crash into the trees that lined either side of the road. Less than thirty yards remained between their car and Fidelito's stolen interceptor.

"I'll get him!" Culhane glanced toward Fanny Mulrooney but it was too late. She had already powered down the window and was thrusting her right arm out, the Model 60 Smith out of her purse and in her fist. He started to shout, but she fired. "Damnit!" If her bullet had struck anything, he couldn't see it and, apparently, neither could she.

"You all right?"

"Yeah— how come that never happens to Sean Dodge?"

"He uses his eyes— stay down! What happened back there? You were— well, I don't know what you—"

"I know what I was doing, but I don't know why Dumballa spoke through me!"

"Spoke through you?"

Culhane swerved the Ford again, more gunfire from the car carrying Fidelito. It had no perceivable effect.

Fidelito's stolen interceptor turned right, onto a side road. Culhane flipped off the supercharger, braked, skidding a little, but was able to wrestle the wheel hard left. He over-steered, almost losing control, braking again, cutting the wheel right, sliding to a screeching halt. "You okay?" He didn't wait for Fanny Mulrooney to reply, instead, throwing the selector into reverse, powering the wheels straight and passing the side road. He made another less than perfect stop, shifted into drive and made the turn, pursuing Fidelito.

By the glare of the brights and the blue and white flashes from the light bar, Culhane could see the rutted ranch road clearly enough to convince himself that he'd spot an ambush.

The lights from Fidelito's patrol car were fifty yards dead ahead— but they weren't moving.

Culhane killed the light bar, then the headlights. In a whisper, he told Fanny, "Keep low— might be an ambush."

"What the hell are you whispering for?"

"I don't know— just keep down."

The Ford was barely doing twenty now, Culhane taking the pistol from his belt, into his left hand, ready to fire through the open window beside him.

There was a flash of light from the end of the road— as if someone's foot inadvertently had touched the interceptor's brake pedal. "Keep down!" Culhane commanded.

Culhane slowed the Ford, breaking, stopping.

Slowly, he edged the car door outward, inserting his right foot between the door and the jam, to find the white plastic button and keep it depressed in order to kill the dome light.

"Fanny— reach down here— stay down— keep your hand on the button— hurry."

"Right—"

He heard the rustle of fabric as she slid across the seat, felt her hand by his ankle. "Got it— be careful."

"I was planning on it," Culhane whispered, sliding the rest of the way out of the seat, then edging around the outer side of the door. He crept forward along the left front fender.

The moonlight was all but gone, but so was the fog here. Culhane could make out the shape of the stolen police car, the shapes of figures moving away from it. Culhane edged further forward, keeping the pistol close.

He moved ahead, slightly stooped, the SIG .45 by his right thigh.

Sean Dodge had better night vision in the books. Culhane thought bitterly.

He kept moving.

He heard a sound—

"Fanny! Get the car rolling! Now!" She'd holler at him for ordering her around. Culhane broke into a run, the .45 beside his right hip, ready to fire.

What he had heard was the sound of a boat engine— a powerful one.

Culhane kept running, hearing the sound of a second engine an instant later.

He passed the police car Fidelito and his men had used, dodging right, running toward the sound of the boats.

A ski boat was tearing away across the water like a bat out of hell, he thought— but it was a terribly inappropriate simile. A second ski boat was gone as he looked around.

A third ski boat. There had been two men with Fidelito. The third man was at its controls. Culhane threw himself into a run now. The boat was starting up. Culhane jumped, crashed down, amidships, his left shoulder impacting against the mainly white, padded engine box.

To his right knee. The man at the helm was turning a pistol in his right fist. Culhane fired the SIG twice, then twice again. The body of Fidelito's henchman thudded back against the instruments panel.

Culhane was up, grabbing for the controls, shoving the dead man away. The pistol from the dead man's hand fell into the bottom of the boat. Culhane picked it up, safed it.

Culhane took the wheel, throttling back as the ski boat started away from the wooden jetty.

He cut the wheel hard left, shoving the dead man overboard as he did— "Have a nice morning." It was a pretty lame quip. Sean Dodge would have come up with a real zinger.

The craft was a Ski-Nautique 2001. He recognized it from his research for #16. He started recalling the facts as he cut an arc, toward the jetty again, the police car coming, Fanny at the wheel he knew. He waved toward her.

Cruising speed— thirty-five miles per hour.

Maximum speed— dead out— was forty-seven only if they had sense— so he had a chance. Culhane thought.

Fanny was climbing out of the car. He shouted up to her. "Fanny— wipe off anything you might have touched."

"Already doing it— I watch television too!"

Culhane picked up the pistol that had fallen into the bottom of the boat. He knew it from the shape of it— and there was just enough light to confirm it visually. It was a Czech CZ-75, an original and not one of the modern clones. Three kinds of people had CZ-75s of the vintage— people with a lot of money to spend on a superb quality European 9mm that took forever to import in the old Com-Bloc days, persons who stole or otherwise illegally acquired these imported guns, or people who didn't have to import one or steal one but were issued one back home.

He guessed the body which floated in the water near him, the body which had seconds earlier been a living man, had used the latter system. The CZ-75s had been standard issue for the old Soviet Spetznas, and found their way into the hands of a lot of pro-Soviet agents in other countries. Cuba?

Culhane looked back toward the jetty. Fanny was already clambering down toward him as Culhane reached up for her. The engine almost purred; he let it idle.

"See how considerate I am? After all this fun. I'm taking you for a boat ride." he told her.

Fanny's shoes were back on. The boat swayed under him. His hands went to her waist and he swung her down, nearly losing her. She was a lightweight girl— but he never understood how ballet dancers did it, lifting a woman over their head just by holding her at the waist.

He eased Fanny down. "Take the love seat— there," and he pointed forward."

"I thought we were going after these guys," she laughed.

Culhane shook his head, sliding down into the cockpit. Fanny was beside him, twisting around so she wouldn't face rearward. "Hang on," and Culhane throttled out, the 2001 instantly on the water, spray lashing toward the windshield. He was glad it was a 2001— with most other ski boats, the design was such that the driver looked over the windshield and hence the spray went into the face.

He cut the wheel hard left, the boat angling out into the deep water channel— they were on The Intercoastal Waterway.

He had checked his Rolex when he'd pushed the body overboard and he checked it again: roughly four minutes had passed. He made it five minutes lead time for the other two boats.

He began calculating time to interception. At cruising speed of thirty-five miles per hour they would cover roughly point five eight three miles per minute. With the boat carrying him and Fanny at forty seven miles per hour, they would cover point seven eight three miles per minute. Assuming five minutes ahead of them, the speed boat carrying Fidelito— and he hoped Momma Cinda— was roughly two point nine one five miles ahead.

"What are you mumbling about?" Culhane heard Fanny Mulrooney shout to him over the hammering of the wake which cut at the 2001's bow.

"Shh— I'm figuring something—" He looked at the Rolex. "Okay— got it. If they keep a constant speed of thirty-five miles per hour and we keep her at full throttle— forty seven miles per hour— we should be dead even with them in just a hair over eighteen minutes. That's if they stay on the water that long and neither of us runs out of gas." He realized he was predicating all of this on the assumption that Fidelito's boat and the other boat were Ski-Nautiques like this one and that the other two boats had full tanks— this one had.

"How the hell did you figure that out?"

"Don't ask," Culhane told her; it hadn't been algebraically...

Fanny Mulrooney was soaked; her dress was sticking to her legs and she gave up, hitching her dress up

past her thighs. For the ten thousandth time, as she gauged it, she pushed her hands back through her soaking wet hair. "How long has it been?" she shouted to Culhane, feeling like a kid in the back of a station wagon whining. "Are we there yet?" The engine noise of the boat seemed on the quiet side, at least based on her limited experience with boats. But the sound of the water was making up for it.

"Almost sixteen minutes," Culhane called back, his hands locked on the steering wheel.

She'd already plucked the spent cartridge from her Model 60 revolver, chipping a nail in the process, and replaced it with a fresh loose round it had taken several minutes of plowing around to find at the bottom of the pouch that held the holster for her gun. The manufacturer recommended placing nothing in the holster pouch except the gun. She had given up on that. The pouch was, after all, a perfect spot for her hair brush, a Bic pen, her speedloader, her keys when she remembered to put them there and a lipstick when she remembered—hardly ever—to put it there. An organizer was what she thought of the pouch as.

Culhane had turned on something called the electric baler— or at least she thought he had turned it on. He had said to her, "The electric baler's working," when she complained about water accumulating in the bottom of the boat.

She crossed her left leg over her right, starting to peel off— literally— her wet, shredded thigh top stockings. The left one split as she tugged it from her foot. She stuffed it in a pouch at the side of the hull, but thought better of that and took it out again. She recrossed her legs, this time right over left, and removed the right stocking. The water actually felt good on her bruised and cut soles.

But she slipped on her slightly squishy shoes again— they were getting close to the interception point. Mulrooney took the purse from the love seat and slipped the strap over her head so there would be less chance of loosing it if she were pitched into the water.

The dress she wore had been one of her favorites, but she doubted that the mud-stains would come out. On the bright side, however, it was brown to begin with she reminded herself.

"See 'em yet?" Mulrooney shouted to Culhane.

"I'm not deaf— no— not yet."

"What are you going to do—" She tried not shouting as loudly this time.

"What?"

"What are you going to do?" Mulrooney shouted louder.

"Two boats— Fidelito in one of 'em— probably has Momma Cinda with him. Second man in the other one alone."

"Are these their boats?" Mulrooney asked him, trying a different volume level. Culhane seemed to hear her and she hadn't shouted as loudly.

"I think so— contingency getaway plan— I think this Fidelito isn't just some cockamamie weirdo—"

"What— he's an out of the ordinary weirdo?"

"Been thinking about it," Culhane said, glancing at her. Josh Culhane looked handsome, she thought, the wind, the water— all of it had done nice kinds of wavy things to his hair and the spray that had accumulated on his face— it gave his visage even more of a chiselled look than it usually had. The fog was completely gone now— and there was starlight that made the boat as well lit as a bedroom in the dark when a street lamp was glaring from across the street— king of grey, Mulrooney thought, soft. "This Fidelito," Culhane said, interrupting her thoughts. "I think he's some kind of Cuban agent— just a gut feeling. But the automatic weapons. The pistol the guy who was trying to use this boat had was ComBloc years ago. And these boats aren't cheap— the instruments are the marine versions of the ones they use in a Mercedes, I think."

"What would a Cuban agent be doing involved with Voodoo? I mean, there's a lot of interest in Santaria in Cuba, always has been, but you don't picture a secret agent for a Communist country being much into any religion. Communists are supposed to be atheists."

"Friend of mine— used to write a series of novels about a mercenary with an eye patch—"

"Those? Those jokes you showed me were terrible—"

"Yeah— but this one time," Culhane persisted, "he did a book about a KGB agent using devil worship as a cover. It worked well in the book."

"But this is real life," Mulrooney insisted. "Not some damn adventure novel."

"Then how come I killed Willie Boyle about fourteen hours after Jimmy Howard Hanks killed him, considering he'd been dead and buried before that?"

Mulrooney didn't say anything— she'd make a believer out of Culhane yet.

"I see 'em—"

"Me too," she shouted, sticking her head up over the level of the windshield, getting it slobbered with spray for her trouble. "Me too," she said again.

"These things drive pretty much like a car— think you can handle it?"

"Yeah— God help me!"

Culhane looked at her and grinned— impulsively, she leaned toward him and planted a kiss on his left cheek.

"I love you too," he told her, turning his face away. She watched him in profile and it was as if his eyes were boring toward the two ski boats just ahead. "They'll pick up speed, so we'll have to rely on out maneuvering them to get up close."

"Sure— took the very words out of my mouth," Mulrooney agreed. "What's that— up ahead?"

She looked over the windshield again— the hell with the spray, Mulrooney told herself, her face almost touching-Culhane's.

There were three speedboats, at least two of them considerably larger than their own, the hull size of the third partially obscured by the other two. The vessels were starting out from a pier on the far right hand side of the watercourse.

"I don't think its the welcome wagon," Culhane noted with a note of sarcasm.

"Stop it with the Sean Dodge quips, huh! What's going on?"

"Fidelito's guys. Must have been a rendezvous. He's passing them." Culhane cut the steering wheel left. Gunfire was rippling across their wake when Mulrooney turned and looked behind them. Men standing in the power boats, rifles to their shoulders. Culhane cut the wheel back right, the ski boat bouncing across the wake of one of the two other Ski-Nautique craft they were pursuing. Mulrooney tucked down and shouted, "Josh!" as she reached for him.

Mulrooney heard the shots. She looked up, her hands clutching Culhane's arm. The windshield had spiderwebbed. Culhane was still zeroing their boat toward the ski boat with the single gunman aboard. Fidelito's man fired again.

Culhane cut the wheel hard left, Mulrooney feeling it as they bounced and lurched over the ski-boat's wake.

"Josh!"

"Hang in there, Fanny!"

She hung. As she looked up, the man had stopped shooting— she realized why. Culhane was narrowing the distance between them. "When we get alongside, he's gonna try shooting— but he'll be steering and shooting at the same time," Culhane shouted.

More gunfire thundered from behind them, bullets pinging maddeningly off the stainless steel looking hand rails in the gunwales.

The boat cut sharp right, bouncing over the wake of the nearer of the two Ski-Nautiques again. "When we pull alongside," Culhane ordered, "you grab the wheel and just hold it so we stay on course, just for half a minute. Right?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill him," Culhane shouted back.

Fanny Mulrooney shivered.

She looked up, past Culhane, the boat cutting the wake of the other ski-boat again, her head bumping against the dashboard for her trouble.

The man at the wheel of the rearmost Ski-Nautique was turning to fire his pistol again.

"Take the wheel!"

Mulrooney grabbed it in both hands. "Culhane!"

But Josh Culhane was already stabbing his pistol over the top edge of the partially shattered windshield, firing again and again and again.

Mulrooney peeked up over the dash, through the windshield. The ski-boat they chased was just a few yards from them now, their vessel almost dead level with it, travelling a parallel course.

The man at the wheel— his left arm hung limply at his side— but he was raising the pistol-sized automatic weapon again. It looked like he was aiming right at her face. Fanny Mulrooney didn't let go of the wheel and she was too frightened to scream. She looked at Culhane. He held his pistol in both fists, and the pistol boomed and rocked twice, in rapid succession.

His left hand covered hers on the wheel. "Got the guy." Culhane snapped.

She looked into his face as he cut the wheel left— after Fidelito's boat she knew. And she gazed into his eyes— she could see that his words belied his feelings. She had seen him kill— and she felt good about it that he didn't like it and she felt good about it that men had macho sounding things they could say like 'got the guy.' But, the truth was in his eyes and she loved him...

\* \* \*

The hollow feeling consumed him, but Culhane couldn't let it. Sean Dodge never got that feeling, although Sean Dodge didn't enjoy killing. He just did it. Culhane tried shaking it away, intentionally dividing his concentration between reloading his pistol— the last magazine— and trying to narrow the distance between their boat and Fidelito's. There wasn't time to think about the pursuit craft.

And, Culhane was narrowing the distance between their craft and Fidelito's boat, but only by hairpinning the curves in the waterway, gaining inches and feet, not yards. The two craft were evenly matched, evenly weighed too, he thought— Momma Cinda was heavier than Fanny by a good sixty pounds he guessed, but Fidelito was slender, smaller. Culhane judged that he outweighed the Cuban by a good thirty pounds or more.

Gunfire, Culhane looked back, the three pursuit craft impossible to ignore, locked in behind him, only one of them seeming unable to keep up, but none of them catching up.

Except for the one that had dropped back, which was also a ski boat, the other two were larger craft, less maneuverable.

Culhane sucked in his breath, taking another hairpin left, cutting the distance again— grey light in a band to the east. He could barely make out the shape of Momma Cinda in Fidelito's boat.

But it had to be her.

And he couldn't shoot at Fidelito because of her.

The smaller of the three pursuit craft was out of range for gunfire now, but the larger two weren't. There was another burst of automatic weapons fire, pinging sounds as bullets ricocheted off metal.

A good solid burst could chew a hole in the hull, Culhane realized. He glanced over at Fanny Mulrooney. He should have bundled her back to Georgia when it started looking serious, but she wouldn't have gone.

Aside from his lover, she was his buddy. Above all. Culhane didn't want anything to ever hurt her.

Culhane cut the wheel hard right, bouncing the Ski-Nautique 2001 over the wake of Fidelito's boat.

There was only one thing he could do.

Fidelito was stabbing his subgun across his starboard side, making to fire. Culhane cut the wheel hard left, bouncing the wake again, then hard right as Fidelito fired, his muzzle following, still spitting fire. Another hard left.

"You're trying to make me seasick," Mulrooney grouched.

Right, then left, then right, the 2001 rocking but holding true. Culhane made a mental note to write the manufacturers and commend them.

Fidelito stopped firing, Culhane shouting to Fanny Mulrooney, "There's a— I don't know what the hell it is— maybe a dredger— there see it?" The vessel, whatever its purpose, loomed ahead of them, huge by comparison to their own craft or even the two larger pursuit boats.

"Yeah— what are we doing?"

"I'm gonna edge him over so that he goes around it on the right. I can take a sharp left and we'll be dead even with him by the time he gets to the other side."

"What about Momma Cinda—"

"I'm not shooting unless I have to. I'm going to make a transfer."

"Jump? From this boat to the other one?"

"Yeah," Culhane nodded. "Yeah— yeah, that's what I'm going to do. You take the wheel and keep it at full throttle unless you have to cut back. If I get Fidelito, I'll put myself between you and those other guys."

"Bullshit!"

"Do it— hang on!" And Culhane started cutting a gradual diagonal toward Fidelito's ski-boat. Culhane slipped out of his jacket, first stuffing its contents into his trouser pockets. If the leather sportcoat was lost. Fanny wouldn't cry. Sean Dodge would have had a handy sealable plastic waterproof bag available to protect his drivers license and money.

Fidelito's craft edged away to starboard, the dredging equipment looming ahead. Culhane handed Fanny his pistol. "Keep this, just in case." She wasn't much with semi-automatics, but he'd had her out firing the SIG a few times.

Ignoring her protest as she began it. Culhane told her, "I'll use the dead guy's gun." He press-checked the CZ-75— there was a round chambered— and he checked the magazine; thirteen of the possible fifteen rounds it could have held were present.

As Culhane's eyes looked away from the pistol, back to the business at hand— Fidelito's boat—

Culhane realized that Fidelito had his own plans for the dredger. He was trying to cut them off, force them into a high speed crash with the hulking vessel just ahead.

Culhane cut the wheel hard left, his body rocking to starboard, the dredger less than a dozen feet from the hull of their ski-boat. He cut the wheel hard again, the steering holding as he skimmed along beside the dredger, cutting a forty-five degree right now, coming out from around the dredger. What had transpired was the exact inverse of Culhane's original plan, but the result should still be the same. Culhane cut the wheel a hair left. Theirs and Fidelito's craft were almost exactly parallel and only four or five feet apart.

"Take it— Fanny!"

Culhane felt the pressure of her hand on the wheel and he jumped, Fidelito's boat veering to starboard. Culhane's hands grasped for the grab rail along the portside bulkhead, the momentum of his body weight in motion carrying him half into the boat. Fidelito wheeled, his submachinegun coming around.

Culhane lunged for him. Fidelito wheeled right, toward Mulrooney and the second Ski-Nautique. Culhane heard twin reports from Fanny Mulrooney's little .38 Special, the windshield behind Fidelito shattering. In the same instant, Culhane impacted Fidelito's body below the subgun, Culhane's head smashing into Fidelito's crotch.

The Bocor— Mulrooney had called him that, a priest of evil magic— sagged back. Culhane's left hand grabbed for Fidelito's testicles, Culhane's right hand locking over the frame topstrap of the submachinegun. Culhane's left hand twisted and ripped what it held. Fidelito screamed. Culhane's right hand— Culhane cursed against the pain as Fidelito made to trigger a shot and the bolt handle caught against Culhane's flesh.

Culhane's left hand released Fidelito's crotch, drew back, then hammered forward as a bunched fist, smashing into Fidelito's testicles, the Bocor screaming once again.

Fidelito's right hand released the submachinegun. Culhane grabbed at it, pulling his bloodied right hand free, letting the bolt fly forward— but there wasn't enough impact now.

Fidelito's body pounded against Culhane. Culhane fell back, the small of his back slamming against the engine cover amidships. Culhane's blood smeared right snapped upward, tipping Fidelito's jaw at the base of the chin, the Cuban falling back.

Culhane looked up and forward. The driverless skiboat was veering toward the starboard bank of the waterway, fast enough that it would crash with enough impact to shatter the craft into burning debris. He threw himself off the engine cover, grabbed at the wheel, spinning it left, turning into the waterway again. Fidelito's fists hammered at him his neck, his back.

Culhane back-kicked with his left foot, feeling impact with bone.

He looked aft— Momma Cinda was at the rear of the boat, seemingly unconscious. Fidelito's right hand held a knife.

Culhane vaulted toward him, stumbling over the engine cover as the driverless boat rocked and pitched. Culhane's hands reached out, grabbing Fidelito's left arm, jerking back. He jerked the Bocor off balance, but lost his own balance in the process lurching against the portside gunwale.

Culhane reached to his waistband for the CZ-75. As he brought it on line, Fidelito's left foot snapped up and out. Culhane felt a shot of pain in his right wrist, then nothing but numbness. The 9mm dropped from his fingers, his fist suddenly gone limp. Culhane threw his weight forward, crossing Fidelito's jaw with a left hook as he clambered to his feet. Fidelito fell back.

Before Culhane could recover the gun, Fidelito was up, the knife in his right hand. Culhane started to reach for the Bali-Song in his right hip pocket, but his fingers wouldn't respond. He edged back. Fidelito's eyes gleaming, "Mother fucker— you're dead!"

"Hey, pretty good! When you're pissed off and you slip back into your accent, you sound just like that little taco dog!" Culhane's left hand moved to the breast pocket of his shirt, for the little B&D Grande pen shaped folding knife. It wasn't made to be opened one handed, but as he edged back, he got it open, holding it down along his left thigh.

Fidelito wasn't a good knife fighter. For that, Culhane reminded himself to thank God at the first opportunity. With an ice-pick hold, Fidelito stabbed the knife forward and down. Culhane sidestepped, away from the love seat, nearly losing his balance in the wildly careening skiboat. He fell, instead, into the cockpit chair. As Fidelito turned, Culhane arced his left arm up, then down, slashing Fidelito across the inside of the right forearm with the Grande.

Fidelito shrieked with pain.

Culhane's left foot snapped up and out, catching Fidelito in the crotch. Culhane threw himself out of the cockpit chair, his left hand still gripping the Grande, but slapping upward now, backhanding Fidelito across the left cheek and the teeth. The Bocor's head snapped back.

Culhane was to his feet. Pain be damned, he thought, launching his right fist outward, straight arming Fidelito a glancing blow across the forehead and to the left temple. In the instant of contact, bone to bone, feeling returned to Culhane's hand and a wave of nausea started to wash over him.

Fidelito's body stumbled back, the Bocor suddenly gone over the side.

Culhane looked around. "Aww, shit!" There was another dredger. Culhane grabbed the wheel with his left hand and cut it sharp right, then left, his body slamming into the gunwale.

He looked aft. Momma Cinda was slumped beside the loveseat.

Culhane looked ahead. He let go of the wheel, open water ahead. Looking aft again, he spied one of the pursuit craft slowing, a figure bobbing in the water near its hull— Fidelito.

Culhane grabbed up the Bocor's submachinegun. He could see Mulrooney's boat coming closer alongside. He waved her ahead, nodding that he was still all right.

He drew back the bolt on the subgun, the unfired round locked into the chamber. Quickly, he removed the magazine, fired, but the round in the chamber wouldn't discharge. No time to wait for a hangfire. With the bolt drawn rearward. Culhane pried at the chambered round, but it wouldn't come out. "Shit," Culhane snarled throwing the Uzi into the water, but keeping the magazine. The 9mm cartridges it held would work just as well in the CZ-75, if he needed them.

Culhane picked up the CZ-75, the skiboat rocking under him, making accuracy almost impossible—almost.

He sucked in his breath, taking the CZ into his left fist, bracing it against the top of the aft bench, dropping on his knees in the seat. He was trying to time some rhythm for the skiboat's movement.

The safety was already down.

The second of the two remaining pursuit craft was skirting the first. Fidelito already being boathooked out of the water. Culhane settled the CZ's sights on the pilot of the second craft. The man's body was silhouetted on the flying bridge. If Culhane hit him in the right side, the body would fall left and take the wheel with it, steering the second craft into the bow of the one that had stopped for Fidelito.

Culhane held his breath, firing, then firing again and again, the man on the flying bridge moving, the skiboat rocking under Culhane. Culhane kept working the trigger.

One round left, Culhane inhaled, half exhaled and held it, timing the next swell. He twitched his finger against the trigger, the pistol barrel moving in his fist. For a moment, Culhane was certain that he'd missed. In the next instant, the second craft cut hard to port.

Culhane dropped back to his haunches.

The figure at the helm in the flying bridge was down and the sport fisherman was already erasing the distance between itself and the boat which had stopped to rescue Fidelito. Culhane could only watch. After what seemed an eternity, but could only have been seconds, there was an earsplitting crash of glass and metal and wood and fiberglass crunching together.

"Y— esss!!!" Culhane shouted the word so loudly that his throat ached.

The next word he said was, "Oops!" when he remembered that nobody was steering the skiboat. With another glance at Momma Cinda— she seemed to be alive— Culhane raced forward. He threw the empty pistol onto the seat and got his left hand onto the wheel. Cutting the wheel a little right, he headed toward the center of the waterway, Mulrooney's craft a few hundred yards ahead of him. She was waving her tattered shawl at him, like a semaphore signal.

Under his breath, Culhane said, "Let's see Sean Dodge top this one!"

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Momma Cinda was alive, but barely. Culhane judged her condition as comatose. And overweight, this confirmed as he picked her up in his arms and tried carrying her from the skiboat and up onto the jetty as which both his and Fanny's vessel were moored. "Now I know how Clark Gable would have felt carrying Vivien Leigh up that staircase if she'd had cement shoes on." Culhane volunteered.

They had worked their way back the way they'd come, giving a wide berth to the partially wrecked sport fishermen and the considerably smaller skiboat (which made no show of force, no attempt to impede their movement along the waterway). They passed they spot where they'd originally acquired the skiboats

and found a jetty on the other side of Gunwater Swamp. It was close, Culhane sincerely hoped as he carried Momma Cinda, to where they'd parked the Mustang. Hopefully, it hadn't been stolen or impounded. Before leaving the skiboats behind, Mulrooney wiped both boats clean of any possible fingerprints. She even remembered to grab up the spent cartridge cases for his .45.

There was specialized laser equipment which still might pick up a latent print, but Culhane doubted Jimmy Howard Hanks had access to it. And, calling in the FBI— which certainly did— didn't seem to be on the Chief's agenda.

It was extremely doubtful that Fidelito— who was hotter than a three dollar pistol after the three-sided battle in the swamp— would come forward and implicate them in the theft of two ski-boats and the destruction of two tuna towered fishing boats, not to mention killing two of his men.

By the time Culhane and Mulrooney reached the road. Culhane's arms ached and his legs felt rubbery. His right hand was stiff and the wound from the submachinegun bolt hurt. They gambled that going to the right along the road would get them to the car, and they walked that way for almost ten minutes. No familiar landmarks evidenced themselves, but the previous evening's fog would have mitigated against noticing any. Just as Culhane was about to declare that they had chosen to go in the wrong direction, Fanny— some paces ahead of him— announced, "I see it, Josh!"

"Be careful, in case it's a trap." Culhane cautioned her, having no idea what they would do in the event that it were.

The car seemed undamaged and no one was in evidence. Culhane checked the obvious locations for an explosive device, found none. Still rubbing his arms to get the feeling back, he half-collapsed into the passenger seat. As Fanny fired the ignition and started into the road, Culhane said, "Once we get to Father Whitehead's, he can help me carry her." And Culhane nodded his head in the direction of the back seat, Momma Cinda unconscious or drugged— he wasn't sure which or if— but breathing...

\* \* \*

There had been no place to go with Momma Cinda but to the rectory, the sun rising over the high. Spanish Moss dripping trees which had looked so somehow sinister only hours before, the trees, the moss— all of it now gold tinged.

It was too early in the day— or too late— Culhane didn't quite know which. But he drank orange juice and coffee, alternately, although what he really felt he needed was a drink.

Fanny Mulrooney— her dress ripped and stained— knelt on the floor beside the couch where Momma Cinda lay, a cup of coffee on the floor beside Fanny. They had spoken no more of what had happened to Fanny out there in the swamps.

Father Whitehead— wearing a jogging suit and track shoes— stood rocking on his heels. Priest or no, Father Whitehead was a strong guy, something which Josh Culhane sincerely appreciated as he looked once again at Momma Cinda. "I'm going to call Mrs. Saddler. She may be in danger. Or, she may even have been arrested."

"Hanks would have been too busy— a bunch of farmers and shopkeepers with hunting rifles and duck guns against men with assault rifles and their Zombie berserker buddies. No, if she didn't get hurt, she'd be all right. Anyway— you call her and Hanks gets wind or it, he'll know we came here or somebody

did. And Momma Cinda won't be safe."

"Then a doctor, for Momma Cinda."

Fanny Mulrooney spoke for the first time in several minutes, and as she spoke she was digging in her purse. "A regular doctor wouldn't do any good—"

"Surely Mary Frances— well you're not suggesting—"

"No— but in a way I am. We need someone with the skills of a medical doctor and a Momba or Hounгон."

"Hounгон?" Culhane interrupted. "What's a Hounгон?"

"A Momba is a good magic priestess. A Hounгон is a good magic priest. But I don't know a Houngon— no offense, Father Whitehead. Not your kind of priest. But I do know someone who should have the skills of a Momba, and of a doctor." She finally found what she was looking for, Culhane presumed, because she put down her purse. Her address book was in her hands.

She started up from her knees, Culhane standing to help her— but not fast enough.

He didn't sit down again.

Fanny stood beside Father Whitehead's desk. With her shoes off and with the hem of her stained dress ripped almost completely, she looked like a Dickensian street urchin wearing her mother's oversized rags. "Can I use your phone, Father?"

"I guess I'm an accomplice in this thing, whether I like it or not. Aren't I, Mary Frances?" But Whitehead didn't wait for an answer. "You know," and Father Whitehead looked at Momma Cinda on the couch. "Somehow, I can't help but feeling that if the situation were reversed, Momma Cinda would do the same for me. So call."

Fanny smiled and picked up the receiver.

The priest said, "If it's off this island, dial one first."

Fanny only nodded, dialing— actually touch toning, Culhane reflected.

She held the phone receiver by her ear, starting toward the couch, then her eyes flickered to Culhane. Culhane smiled at her. She smiled back, but a smile saying 'I love you,' not an expression of happiness a smile saying 'I'm glad you understand— glad you're here'.

Mulrooney spoke into the receiver. "JeAnn Bonaparte? Hi— I'm M.F. Mulrooney, a friend of your mother's? She gave me your private line years ago; hope you don't mind. We got her back— no." There was a long pause. "Look— we need a doctor, and we need a doctor who might just be a latent Momba as well." Another long pause. "And I don't know if this is being presumptuous— but what's your dress size?" A short pause. "Never mind why. What's your dress size?" A short pause and Mulrooney's mouth turned down in a sneer. "Got anything that's loose on you?" Another pause. "Well bring it— I've got hazel eyes and Momma Cinda's with me at St. Peter's Catholic Church rectory. And hurry."

Mulrooney hung up the phone. She looked at Culhane. "Size six— would you believe that?"

Despite it all, Culhane started to laugh.

## Chapter Eighteen

"He must be an American agent— he's not a lucky amateur— I'll tell you that."

"What do you mean," she said, her hands moving to her face to push her blonde hair back.

Fidelito Just looked at her. "The hand-to-hand combat skills. The way he used a pistol— he's probably one of the CIA's top ranking terrorists." He cleared his throat and when he did his crotch hurt all the more." And the woman— probably his assistant. She was pretty good too. But I can't understand them getting the local police involved— but maybe they didn't."

"We should get out of here, honey— please?"

Birds twittered— he could hear them like he used to hear them through the screened-in front porch of the house he used on the far end of the island. But, Fidelito couldn't go there now.

His chances of controlling the Voodooists of St. Peters Island were gone— and gone was the manpower he had needed.

If Momma Cinda had somehow found out how to control the Demon Asmodeus, that too was lost to him.

He started down from the grotto, toward the ocean, the sun fully up now. The water was flecked with orange and gold.

Arturo Velasquez was thinking out loud— he did not seek the blonde haired girl's counsel nor would he have considered it had she offered it. "If the man is an American agent, then it must be suspected why I am in the United States. So, my plans for the Charleston naval yard and the Savannah River nuclear plant must be radically altered from their original form."

"The Charleston—"

He ignored her. "I wanted to punish the Americans for their sins against the oppressed peoples of the world, make them fear the very technology which has allowed them to trample so ruthlessly upon their enemies. If I am to achieve my goal, I do not have any choice now."

Fidelito lit a cigarette and stood. He wondered, as he had wondered many times, why the stone of this grotto and the cave beneath it were black. "I am going now— to summon him. I may need you. You will come with me."

"Asmodeus?" She whispered.

"Asmodeus," he nodded.

"You don't need to do this— I can get us enough money that we can—"

"I don't care," Fidelito said quietly, inhaling the smoke of his cigarette.

"Castro— he'll take you back. Even if you fail— you've been loyal—"

"No. I don't want him to take me back. I want such power that he cannot resist me."

"But— even if you can summon— summon him—"

"Asmodeus," Fidelito supplied.

"If you can— he won't— what would—"

"What would make him do my bidding?"

He looked at the girl, her blonde hair caught in the wind again. She nodded only, her eyes downcast. Finally, she whispered, "You can't sell him your soul. Fidelito."

"If I ever had one. I sold it long years ago. But Asmodeus will have no way of knowing that. You see, for someone who doesn't believe in God, what harm is there to sell my soul to the devil's underling? With his power, I can do this thing."

He started walking, toward the rocks which concealed the stairway. Fidelito mused once again over its origin.

He beckoned her, "Come with me." If he could not sell something he didn't have, then he could perhaps trade off the woman's body. He had had that many times...

\* \* \*

Fidelito had learned.

He had tried merely to summon. He had been unable to summon.

But he had learned how to make a Pact.

He had spoken to Marcella Hobson of not having a soul— but on the off chance that he had, he had been reluctant to relinquish it. But there was no choice, now.

Hedging against this day, he had secured in the cave beneath the black rock grotto a knife, a knife which he had used once to kill.

He took the knife now and told the girl, "Hold out your left arm to me."

In the glow of the battery operated lights he had arranged as to illuminate the treasure, he watched her eyes, pinpoints of light of greater intensity than the light which illuminated them.

"I'm afraid."

"Do as I say," he whispered, holding the knife in his right hand.

She extended her left arm to him and he said the name, the name scrawled on the black rock wall at the base of the mysterious staircase of living rock. Who had etched it there, he did not know. Perhaps whosoever's treasure this was had done it.

"Asmodeus," he whispered, then drew the knife edge across the inside of the girl's left forearm. She shook like a reed in the wind, winced with the pain. With his left hand Fidelito made an inverted Sign of the Cross.

He repeated the name again— "Asmodeus."

He wet the flats of the blade with the woman's blood.

He walked toward the altar-like pile of gold ingots and precious gems, then dropped to his knees, raising the knife toward it, the blood dripping across his body. And he began to recite, something he had taught himself over the years since he had first learned the way, something he had hoped never to use.

Sound for sound, syllable for syllable, word for word, he said The Lord's Prayer— backwards.

On his knees still before what he in his mind now called The Altar, with the blood dripping knife he began to etch a circle, staying on his knees until his body was fully circumscribed.

As he made the mocking symbol over his body and concluded the mocking prayer, he spoke the name, "Asmodeus!"

Among the gold and gems was a cross, fabricated of both. Fidelito stood, keeping one foot inside the circle of blood he had made before the altar, reaching out, grasping the jewelled cross. He set it within the circle, flat— then raised his left foot. "Fidelito!"

The girl screamed, "Fidelito! No! This is blasphemy!"

He smashed his left foot on the cross, then raising his voice shouted toward the 'altar'— he saw it so— "I renounce The Christ and his Cross."

The girl screamed, "Fidelito! For God's sake!"

He continued to cry, "I renounce His Father. I renounce The Holy Spirit. I deny the Baptism of Christ's blood, and the vows made for me that day! I worship thee, Asmodeus— come now to me!"

He waited.

Marcella screamed.

A wave of nausea passed through him as he stared now at the pile of gold and jewels.

A thing— it was at once there and yet not there. Something seemed to be fading in and out, shapeless, amorphous. He felt the rock floor beneath him tremble. The gold ingots, the jewels— they began to shift and tumble.

He felt rock and gravel and dirt pelting down around him from the ceiling of the cave.

And he was cold, colder than he had ever felt, his body shaking with it, the bloodied knife tumbling from suddenly numb fingers.

He fell to his knees, not daring to look.

He could hear the girl screaming.

Nausea swept over him, a stench more powerful than anything he had experienced filled his nostrils and his mouth, his body convulsing, freezing, sweat dribbling every pore of his body.

Noise— like thunder, but like laughter too.

The screaming of Marcella.

Fidelito started to raise his eyes from the ground on which he knelt within the circle of the girl's blood, his left knee upon the cross. Fidelito's voice trembled as he called, "Hear me, Asmodeus!"

Fidelito felt it. He could not hear it, but only a rushing sound, like wind yet not like wind, a dullness to his ears— as though he could not hear. The words were in Fidelito's mind. "I am him."

Fidelito did not raise his eyes— but he heard the girl screaming insanely, unceasingly, and inside his head again the words, the thoughts, "I am him."

Fidelito shouted— to be heard by the demon over the screaming over the woman. "My soul, my life— they are yours, if you will serve me!"

Fidelito's body rocked and he felt himself thrown prostrate to the cave floor, tears in his eyes from the pain that seemed to be crushing the breath from his body.

He felt the words, "I do not serve!"

Fidelito was gasping for breath, screaming now like the woman screamed, "Help me! I pray that you help me!" He was crawling forward now— and he didn't know why he was doing it— but he was crawling, up the heap of gold ingots, the facets of the myriad gems gouging his hands, his knees. His head was being drawn up.

Fidelito's eyes opened. "No!"

Again the form, the shape— he could see it but not see it and nausea swept over him, pouring from his mouth, racking his abdomen, a vice of pain crushing his throat, his chest, his testicles, a feeling of intense heat burning behind his eyes.

He touched his lips to the thing he could not see clearly, and his stomach heaved and what had been inside him covered his chest and his thighs and his hands and he knew he had touched his lips to the anus of the demon.

"For what you seek, I must have blood sacrifice, as I did from the others."

Fidelito sagged downward, across the pile of vomit reeking gold and jewels, crawling, his eyes focussing on Marcella Hobson. Her eyes were saucer-wide, her body crumpled to the floor, her hands clawing the rock, the screaming still coming from her throat, blood trickling from the corners of her mouth.

Screaming.

Fidelito picked up the knife he had already wetted with her blood.

He was to his knees, crawling toward her, the knife upraised in his clenched fists. The girl's eyes looked past him, almost seeming to glow.

He fell toward her, the knife crashing down as an extension of his arms, its blade biting deep, to the hilt, through her left breast, blood spraying across his face and into his mouth and his eyes.

He fell, across her body, his face resting against the wound in which the knife was buried.

Fidelito felt the words pulse through him. "You shall serve me well and forever." He coughed up vomit mixed with blood— her's?

"Look upon me!"

Fidelito felt his body being twisted, his neck and back arching, his arms and legs spread eagled in the growing pool of the dead girl's blood the dead girl who had loved him.

The thing— the shape moved in and out of focus— he could not take his eyes away.

A face— human but more evil than Fidelito had thought could be. Heavy brows which masked colorless eyes with pinpoint of red which bore into Fidelito's soul. A mouth— huge, down-turned, the lips thick, above the mouth something that was like a mustache, yet wasn't, the hair black and coarse like the brows.

Beneath the mouth was a beard, fuller, wilder, thicker than he had ever seen. And, like the hair which cascaded over the head, it was black.

Above the smell of vomit, Fidelito smelled sulphur burning. Smoke encircled the face, trailing in curls from the hair and the beard where matted braids were intertwined with strings of cord.

And, inside his brain, Fidelito could only hear the demon's laughter.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

"I wouldn't trust this Mulrooney woman," Whit Candler told her.

"I don't have much choice, do I. Whit?" JeAnn Bonaparte said, looking at him. Candler didn't answer her. She adjusted the white silk scarf she had tied over her hair, the morning breeze and the red Ferrari's slipstream having assaulted her hair the moment Whit had started driving toward the island.

She had packed a small suitcase and an extra medical bag, all of these in the boot. Since the woman who had called and identified herself as M.F. Mulrooney— JeAnn knew the name— had been inspecific, JeAnn had brought a wide range of drugs with her that might prove useful. Her mother had always been in excellent health, and she told herself just to be grateful that Momma Cinda was alive at all.

That this M.F. Mulrooney had known about her— JeAnn wondered who else her black mother had told about her white looking, white living daughter?

JeAnn licked her lips, opening her handbag, searching momentarily for lipstick, finding it. She turned the mirrored side of the Ferrari's passenger side visor toward her, beginning to apply it.

The nerve of the woman, she thought— asking her to bring clothing for her. Something that was loose. She smiled— it was the ugliest dress she had, a gift from a patient. And it was extremely loose.

She wished for a moment that it had a higher neckline— so this Mulrooney woman would choke on it. . .

\* \* \*

Jimmy Howard Hanks stepped over one of the black bags. Inside the black bag was Homer Corey— Hanks had grown up with Homer Corey, served in Viet Nam with Homer Corey on the buddy system.

A Zombie had chopped Homer Corey's head half away from his body with a machete.

Four of the Zombies had died— again? Three of them were men he had personally known to have been part of Momma Cinda's Voodoo cult. And he had personally known them to have died. In one case— Marcel Brown— Hanks had driven the dead body to the mortuary.

Hanks leaned heavily against the van. He was using his private car, his police car still not found, stolen along with one other.

Carroll, holding the Thompson Submachinegun more casually now after having used it there in Gunwater Swamp just after midnight, was running toward him. "Chief!"

Hanks just stared at the boy. Finally, "Yeah?"

"Y'all won't believe this. That last Zombie body— got me a look at it? It's Willie Boyle again! Damn!"

Hanks closed his eyes. "Go away, Carroll— get on y'all's radio and see if anybody reported seein' the cars yet."

"Yessuh."

Hanks opened his eyes again, watching as Carroll ran off toward the one remaining police car of the three they had parked beside the road.

Hanks had played this wrong, he realized. He should have contacted the FBI when he had become convinced Momma Cinda was kidnapped and not dead.

And he had seen her last night.

And he had seen another woman— if he had been certain it was Mary Frances Mulrooney he would have gotten the Charleston PD people to hold her.

But Hanks hadn't wanted to bring in anyone else, not with Momma Cinda's treasure out there someplace.

"That damned Fidelito," he murmured. . .

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Fanny Mulrooney's right hand squeezed Josh Culhane's left hand. She stood beside him in the open doorway of the rectory. Culhane was smoking a cigarette. She liked standing beside him.

Her left hand was buried in the patch pocket of her ruined dress and she hadn't bothered putting her shoes back on. She was surprised at herself— she wondered what the size six JeAnn Bonaparte would be bringing her to wear. Anything was better than this.

So long as it wasn't size six.

She thought about that. She'd been a seven, but nothing had ever been long enough.

Eight was all right— she smiled.

"What are you smiling about?" Culhane asked her softly.

"Ohh— nothing important. Do you think this thing is over?" Mulrooney asked Culhane, changing the subject to something that wouldn't make her sound stupid.

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Look— this Voodoo stuff. Gotta be chemicals, poisons. That's what makes the Zombies."

"Ohh, yeah— I agree," she told him easily. "But that's only the Zombies. The rest of it."

"Superstition, Fanny— that's all. But this Fidelito guy: he's something different. Cuban agent, or maybe worse. And I don't think he's just going to give up."

"All right, fine. But, there's more to Voodoo, I mean. Well— you read my note?" She added lamely.

"Momma Cinda? Sending you psychic vibrations?" Culhane shrugged, snapping his cigarette into the driveway. "I ahh— well— I just—"

"You don't want to believe," she told him. "Admit it."

"All right. I admit it; I don't want to believe. I mean ahh— I don't go to church that often, you know? But, I mean— I don't see how you can have Voodoo and Christianity or Judaism or something, I mean at the same time. I mean, ahh—"

Josh Culhane was very sweet, Mulrooney thought as she turned to face him, both her hands firmly in her pockets. And she felt very short without any shoes on as she stood there looking up at his nice face. "All right— follow me, Josh. When the Arab slavers came in with their British or American or European clients— they sometimes stole, kidnapped, just excised entire villages and entire cultures. The slaves came here— the official religion was Christian, whether the language was English or Spanish. And the Africans were made to be Christian, even though the white people who owned them didn't think they had souls. Remember your history? Missionaries went out to the Indians to save their souls, but there wasn't a big missionary push into Africa by Catholicism."

"A lot of people were sincere about Christianizing slaves," Culhane interjected.

"Fine, I know that; but a lot weren't. Hell, Josh! Christian philosophers used to debate whether or not women had souls! And if we didn't go to church, or we wore our hair uncovered or our skirts too short or didn't do this or didn't do that— hell— then we were doing something bad for the souls they didn't even think we had! Shit— I mean— talk about duplicity! It was the same for the black Africans. They were forced to be Christian. And they had their own religion. How would you feel—" she felt taller, and absently wondered if it was because she realized she should have been standing on a soapbox. "How would you feel," Mulrooney began again, "if somebody treated you like an inferior, doubted your true humanity and forced you to give up a religion you believed in very deeply so you could practice the religion of the people who enslaved you? Huh? Well, hell, that's what it was with the Africans. So—"

"So they kept their own religion," he said. She tried telling herself it wasn't patronizing the way he said it.

"Damned right they did, some of them. And, after a while— well especially with Catholicism— they used one religion as a springboard for the other, Africanized Catholicism into modern Voodoo."

"Then they're neither one—"

"You're a bigot— no offense."

"I'm not a bigot, no offense," he snapped.

"Don't snap at me—"

"For God's sake, Fanny!"

"What?"

He didn't answer for a moment; she realized that she was losing her temper.

"All right—" Culhane began.

"All right?"

"Yeah! All right! So make your point!"

She thought about that— what was her point? That Voodoo was something real. "All right, I'm saying that just because you're into Voodoo doesn't mean— well— look. Do you think Voodoo is Satanic?"

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"But that's just the point! It isn't! Most Voodooists are like Momma Cinda. Just like most—" she stopped trying to think of a good example. "All right! Most of the Nazis— they were at least nominal Christians. But, because they were supposedly Christians doesn't mean they were good. No real Christian, no real believer in any of the great religions would do what the Nazis did. So—"

"So?"

"All right— maybe this Fidelito guy's a bad Voodooist— a real Bocor. Fine. But one rotten apple or even a couple of dozen rotten apples—"

"Spoils the barrel?"

"You don't judge an entire group by an evil minority. I mean, what do you really know about Voodoo? Voodoo dolls?"

"All right." he nodded, firing another cigarette— offering her one. She took it, inhaling, Culhane pocketing his Bic lighter.

She exhaled, saying, "Fine. Voodoo dolls are a manifestation of utilizing the powers of the mind, the same sort of thing as faith healing, what the yogis do to control heavy bleeding, like that. All you've heard about is somebody in some damn movie using a Voodoo doll to kill somebody."

"All right; so, I don't know anything about Voodoo. And so Momma Cinda's okay and everybody likes her. But, stuff like this," and he looked down at his shoes. She followed his eyes— his shoes weren't that interesting. She looked back into his face. "It gives me the creeps."

"Why?" she said, without even thinking.

"Well— I mean— spirits and— ahh—"

She put her arms around him, holding him. "I love you," she said into his ear, leaning up on her toes to do it.

"Aww, Fanny," and he held her tight.

She heard a sound, like something tearing and she looked past Culhane. A red Ferrari was turning into the driveway. The sound had been its exhaust. A very good looking man with steel grey hair who could have been anything from thirty-five to fifty was driving it. And, beside him sat a woman. The woman wore a white silk scarf covering most of her hair, but it only served to frame one of the most beautiful faces Mulrooney had ever seen. And Mulrooney recognized the face— from Momma Cinda's scrap book.

The woman was JeAnn Bonaparte, Momma Cinda's very white looking daughter...

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"What made you think I knew anything about Voodoo?" JeAnn Bonaparte said matter-of-factly, but her voice lacking conviction, Culhane thought.

Fanny Mulrooney answered her, hovering over Dr. Bonaparte's shoulder as the woman— very pretty— examined her mother. "At the ceremony on the island in the swamp— Momma Cinda hadn't picked a spiritual successor. And there's only one reason she wouldn't have. You."

"You're as crazy as those books of yours— I started reading one once and threw it down. I don't know—"

"Well— you'd better," Mulrooney seemed to hiss. "Because if you don't, and its a cinch we can't get this Fidelito guy to help— well— Momma Cinda can't last long."

JeAnn Bonaparte, on her knees beside the couch, turned to face Fanny Mulrooney, Culhane seeing the Bonaparte woman's eyes. "You said that man's name— what was it?"

Mulrooney answered her. "Fidelito."

"Cuban perhaps," the steely grey haired, tall, athletic looking man who had identified himself as Whit Candler mused.

"Cuban," Culhane nodded, lighting a cigarette.

"Then he's into Santaria," JeAnn Bonaparte nodded, as if to herself.

Father Whitehead, changed from his jogging clothes to a black short sleeved clerical shirt, the white clerical collar in place, entered the room. "Have you determined what's wrong with Momma Cinda, Doctor Bonaparte?"

The girl leaned back, resting on her heels, her hands balancing against the floor, her fingers splayed, the full skirt of her white dress completely obscuring her feet. "I'm not a neurologist. I don't have any specialized equipment. They've told me if I try taking my mother to a hospital there may be an attempt to kidnap her or kill her. I can't answer you."

"All right," Fanny Mulrooney began. "Now— can you tell if she's been turned into a Zombie or not?"

"No— not without some way of testing for higher brain functions."

Culhane leaned against Father Whitehead's desk as the priest spoke. "I'll admit it. I don't know a thing about Zombies— what are we talking about here?"

Culhane was faintly amused, watching as JeAnn Bonaparte's eyes and Fanny's eyes seemed to meet.

JeAnn spoke. "My mother— she never used Zombies, never made a Zombie— she thought it was evil."

"You're talking about the undead, Father," Fanny told him. "Those graves weren't empty because the dead rose, from them."

"Empty graves? What are you talking about? This is crazy," Whit Candler started.

JeAnn Bonaparte shook her head, as though weary. "No— no it isn't, Whit. I wish to God it were. If this man Fidelito, if he's a practitioner of Santaria, then he could have learned how to do it in Cuba or maybe in Haiti."

"Somebody tell me. How do you make a Zombie, if you can really make a Zombie," Father Whitehead persisted.

JeAnn Bonaparte licked her lips, nodding, leaning her head against her mother's sibyl-like right arm, her mother unmoving, breathing barely detectable. "I never did it. Momma never did it. But she told me how it was done so I'd know. I told her— I always told her— I didn't want anything to do with Voodoo. But she only told me someday I would, that I'd take her place. I tried not to listen, sometimes. But, then I realized I wanted to listen. I think— I think the things she would tell— I think that's what got me into medicine."

"Gynecology?" Mulrooney asked, not a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

JeAnn Bonaparte shook her head. "Momma wanted me to be a G.P.— come back to the island. I didn't want that. I looked white. When I'd come back here from school in the summers— well— I'd have a white girl friend— until— well— by the time I was in college— well, I didn't come back anymore.

"The lung fish," JeAnn Bonaparte went on. Culhane wondering what she was talking about. "Sometimes they call it the puff fish. The aeration vents in it puff up with air and it floats, you know?"

Culhane nodded. He didn't have any idea why in the world the woman had suddenly started talking about fish. But. JeAnn Bonaparte's sad face was beyond beautiful; it was exquisite. The thought crossed Culhane's mind that Whit Candler was a little old for her. He shrugged it off.

She went on. "You have to be very careful. But you grind up the aeration vents; they're right behind the gills. Then somehow or another you extract the oil from the glands. You mix it with some plant— I forget— but it's an alkaloid."

"Alkaloids? They're the basis for many of the hallucinogens, aren't they?" Father Whitehead asked, coming over to share the edge of the desk with Culhane.

JeAnn Bonaparte nodded. "Hallucinogens can be introduced to the system in any number of ways. There are some tribes in Latin America that take them rectally."

"Yuch," Mulrooney said under her breath, Culhane smiling as he heard her.

"Some alkaloids can be absorbed through the skin. So you have to be very careful."

"Alkaloids— I was never much for chemistry, darling." Candler smiled.

"All right. There are about five thousand different alkaloids, although most of them aren't hallucinogens. The ones that are— well— a lot of those are indoles or indole related."

"Indoles?" Mulrooney said— Culhane could tell the tone of her voice. Indignation had shifted to fascination. Sometimes he thought he actually loved her because of her mind; but there were other reasons, too.

"They're all nitrogen containing compounds."

Culhane had known most of this concerning the drugs, because in number eight, Sean Dodge had been

fighting international drug smugglers.

"So how do they make a Zombie?" Culhane asked.

JeAnn Bonaparte nodded. "They inject or otherwise cause the resultant concoction to enter into the body of the intended victim. Sometimes, the really skillful Bocors will paint the mixture on the unfortunate person's door handle and it is absorbed through the palm of the hand. Of itself, if the amount were right considering body weight, metabolism, what-have-you, the victim might recover. But what the mixture does is cause the victim to drop into a deep coma—"

"Like Momma Cinda," Fanny interjected.

The Bonaparte girl nodded. "But then what they do is place the person in a coffin and bury the coffin—that's very important. The metabolic rate slows—the heart, respiration— so the body can subsist on a reduced oxygen supply. It's a combination of oxygen deprivation and sensory deprivation— imagine yourself opening your eyes and there's nothing but darkness and you can barely breathe and you remember before the drug had its full effect that persons around you were crying, talking about you having died. And there you are— in the grave. And there's nothing but eternal blackness. stillness. You go insane, and because of the oxygen deprivation, gradual brain death begins and it's the higher brain function, that control free will and personality, that go first. After seventy two hours or so— the Bocor's are very precise. Then the Bocor opens the grave, opens the coffin. Sometimes, the victim is really dead or mistaken for dead. Otherwise, the Bocor has a Zombie. In Haiti, and elsewhere I guess— they use Zombies for heavy manual labor, slaves that will never rebel, never demand. Just work themselves to death."

"It sounds like being a housewife a hundred years ago," Mulrooney remarked. Her voice lightened. "Is there—"

"If he gave my mother the compound in the right amount, there's a chance she'll revive without significant brain damage. A chance— and there is no antidote— I mean, I'm sure there must be— but I don't know what it is. Maybe Fidelito might. If he put her in the grave, then there isn't any hope."

"There wasn't time to put her in the grave for seventy-two hours," Culhane announced.

Father Whitehead began to speak— it was as though he were alone, Culhane thought. "While I slept here at night. while I served mass— I had people who were still alive that were buried in our cemetery— God—" And his voice trailed off as he made the Sign of The Cross.

Mulrooney sat down on the floor. covering her feet with her dress, her legs crossed under it like a child. Her elbows were propped against her knees and she hunched to balance her chin in her hands. Her nose scrunched up a little and her brow furrowed slightly, her eyes half shut.

Culhane had seen this before.

"We must contact this fellow Fidelito," Whit Candler announced. "If we can't persuade him to release the antidote, then we'll force him to release it."

Culhane just looked at Candler. "And how are you going to do that? I mean, say we find him. say we get him alone and we've got plenty of time. This guy's a Cuban agent."

"Well. I suppose we could take desperate measures—"

"Desperate measures'," Culhane repeated, just shaking his head.

"Stop being heroes— I got this thing psyched out," Fanny announced.

Culhane turned to look at Fanny Mulrooney. "Psyched out?"

"Yeah, Okay. I got the idea from what you said. Josh. Momma Cinda couldn't have been in the grave seventy-two hours. And from what you said. Father Whitehead. That these people were in graves in your cemetery. And that's the whole thing."

"The undertaker," Culhane smiled. She was smart, ohh was she smart. "The undertaker— he would have embalmed them—"

"There used to be a black undertaker— Mr. Manning. But he died a few years ago." Father Whitehead said. "And since Hardy was the coroner and frequently had blacks in his facility for establishing causes of death, he bought out Mr. Manning's business from his widow."

"Funerary rites are among the last bastions of overt racial segregation," Mulrooney noted. "I was reading about it in one of the newspapers a while back."

"Not on this island," Father Whitehead declared.

"So the coroner— this mortician—" Culhane began.

"Mr. Hardy Lovecraft," Whitehead supplied, the enthusiasm returning to his voice.

"He has to be in on it," Mulrooney declared. "I'm so stupid! I should have thought of it the moment—"

"How can a coroner not be a doctor?" Candler interrupted.

"It's an elective office. He consults with Dr. Hempstead at his discretion," Whitehead answered.

"Okay, follow me," Mulrooney began again. "He's gotta know these people aren't dead. But he buries them anyway. And can't embalm them, or he'd kill them in the process."

Culhane and Mulrooney said it together, Culhane thinking it sounded almost as though they had been rehearsing it. "So the undertaker works for Fidelito."

"We should call Chief Hanks." Father Whitehead said.

"Chief Hanks is an animal— he always was," JeAnn Bonaparte said soulessly.

"No," Culhane thought out loud. "If this undertaker's in it with Fidelito, there should be some stuff there that will tie him into it. And even if there isn't—"

"Would a blood test on someone who had been a Zombie but was dead prove anything?" Mulrooney asked.

JeAnn Bonaparte answered her. "The presence of the chemicals— sure— maybe— but what—"

"We get blood samples from some of the Zombies who died out there in Gunwater Swamp on the island last night and we've got this undertaker dead to rights."

"Wait a minute," Candler interrupted. "Evidence like that would be inadmissible in court I'm sure."

"We'll worry about courts later," Culhane said flatly. "I want to nail this guy, get him spilling what he knows about Fidelito and everything else— and maybe then—"

"We can help my mother," JeAnn whispered.

"And find Fidelito before he does whatever it is he's in this country to do."

"What do you mean, Mr. Culhane?" Candler queried.

"If Fidelito's a Cuban agent," Fanny summarized, "and he's got the budget for all the stuff he'd been doing, there must be something behind it."

"We're not at war with the Cuban government," Candler cautioned.

"No, but I don't think they're exactly fond of us, either," Fanny noted.

"Then an expedition to the undertaker's is doubly in order," Candler declared. "JeAnn? Do you have some hypodermics, darling, that we could take blood samples with?"

She nodded only, looking at her mother's comatose form, then back to Candler, "Yes."

"That place should be crawling with Chief Hanks' friends—"

"Perhaps, amid such confusion, we'll have a better chance," Candler suggested. "The ladies can remain here under the protection of Father Whitehead. We can go in my car. It's fast enough for a getaway if we need it."

"Ohh, Whit," JeAnn Bonaparte began. Candler crossed the room from the wall beside which he had been standing, then stood beside her, touching his left hand to her hair. She rested her head against his thigh.

"Father," Culhane said. "Is there a gunshop in town? I need some ammo. I'm down to only a few rounds for my .45."

"Surely—"

Candler said, "There's a Colt Officer's ACP in my glove compartment and a box of .45 caliber ammunition in the boot."

"Can I—"

"Borrow some— certainly, Hollowpoints, I believe. I'm not much of a marksman, I'm afraid, but I can handle a gun to an extent."

Culhane nodded...

\* \* \*

The demon spoke inside his head. "Why have you chosen to make this covenant? What power do you seek?"

On his knees, the girl's blood drying on his forearms, around his mouth, the stench of his own vomit overwhelming him, he stared at the demon Asmodeus in the form of John Teach. The restaurant in Teach's Landing was called "Buccaneer's Hideout." Dominating the rear wall was a clumsily painted mural. The flowing black beard and mustache and hair, the upturned brim black hat, the eyes— and smoke encircling the head— all those elements were there. It was said that Blackbeard, before entering into battle, braided strands of chemical soaked rope into his hair and ignited them in order to make himself look like a demon.

Inside his head now, Arturo Velasquez heard the demon's laughter.

His voice strained as he spoke, his throat dry and foul tasting from the blood the demon had forced him to consume, from his own vomit. "I had planned— for a long time— and now—"

The voice— hideous, depraved— spoke inside him. "You wish to bring about destruction. Speak to me of it."

"You know my thoughts," Fidelito screamed at the demon.

"Speak to me of this! I command You so!"

Fidelito's body trembled and his chest felt tight, his breathing suddenly labored. He fell forward, into a drying puddle of vomit, prostrating himself, "Asmodeus!"

The tightness in his chest ceased, his breathing coming again more easily.

He lay there, debasing himself before the altar of gold and jewels and the demon in devilish human form which squatted upon it. "To revenge myself on the United States, to bring it to a more lowly state than I am before you, Lord Asmodeus, to destroy Charleston harbor with a nuclear incident, to irradiate the Savannah River nuclear plant. A ship is coming and it is the greatest of their Ohio Class Trident submarines. It carries twenty-four nuclear missiles. The destruction, Lord Asmodeus—" Fidelito felt his penis hardening at the fleeting image of the mushroom shaped clouds, each devouring the other in rapid succession.

The voice within him spoke. "I must use your mind and so through it focus my power."

Fidelito lay there before the demon— weeping...

\* \* \*

"Some car," Culhane told Candler. And it was.

"My one weakness, I'm afraid, Mr. Culhane— this car.

And of course JeAnn; she's my greatest weakness."

"A lovely woman," Culhane agreed, balancing the red and white box of Federal 185-grain jacketed hollow points on his thigh as he reloaded his empty magazines. For years, this brand and bullet weight were his round of choice, Culhane only switching to the 230-grain Hydra-Shok Federal rounds relatively recently. "Have you known her long— I mean, if I'm butting in or something—"

"No— no, not at all, Mr. Culhane. No— I've known JeAnn rather casually for some time— and well, we're only Just engaged."

Culhane didn't say anything.

Candler did. "You are wondering. Mr. Culhane," Candler said, smiling— his teeth were perfect and so white they seemed to gleam. "You are wondering how long I've known about JeAnn's racial heritage— correct?"

Culhane nodded. "I'm transparent— forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, sir," Candler smiled again, downshifting and looking away as they went into a curve. "I recently found out— she told me. I was pleased that she did. Trust, Mr. Culhane— it should be the watchword of any relationship, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," Culhane nodded. "I certainly would." The three magazines were full. "You seem like quite a man, Mr. Candler— I mean that sincerely."

"I gather, sir, that YOU and Miss Mulrooney are shall we say—"

"Lovers," Culhane supplied.

"Yes. Then a question, since we're speaking frankly. Would her race, were you to find it different than you had originally presumed, change how you feel for her?"

"No," Culhane said honestly. "I hope it wouldn't," he added, even more honestly.

"Bravo, sir— I had a moment's doubt when she made the revelation. But, I realized it was the person I cared for, not some pre-conceived notion about her. And JeAnn— well," and Whit Candler smiled, "she's just JeAnn all that I want I've had the material things. My family was always well off. I own a string of very successful antique dealerships. I'm frequently called upon to evaluate rare objects all over the world. The rarest object I have found— well— you know her name," Candler fell silent, staring ahead, the wind over the windshield of the red Ferrari playing with his hair, his jaw hard set, the teeth gleaming again.

There was something about Whitlock J. Candler that Culhane couldn't put into words; and, that itself unnerved him.

He could see the town ahead, a gas station looming up on their right, a small roadside diner that looked less than prosperous, poor houses; experience suggested that this was the black part of the town of Teach's Landing. A little child dashed out onto a half falling down front porch, the child naked from the waist up, his mother chasing after him, catching him, sweeping the child up into her arms, then turning to

stare at the Ferrari. The woman looked very poor. Culhane estimated the car's worth far exceeded the combined value of the five houses which occupied the same block with the diner— and he suddenly felt terrific sorrow for the woman and more for the child.

He considered this, however: they looked happy, mother and child. Was Candler really happy?

"Hand my gun over to me, if you would, Mr. Culhane. Less conspicuous while we're driving."

Culhane grunted something affirmative, still lost in his thoughts; he opened the glove box, taking the blued Colt Officer's ACP from it and the spare six-round magazine as well.

"You might need this too," he said, handing the gun and spare magazine into Candler's right palm. Candler thrust both out of sight beneath his suitcoat.

"I can see that you are more experienced in these matters, Mr. Culhane. I merely carry a gun in my car because I do occasionally carry large sums of money. Some people insist on being paid for family heirlooms in cash, I'm afraid."

Culhane nodded, starting to close the glove compartment— but his eyes caught something. "A PCS set?"

"Ahh— the lockpicks— yes. Often, valuable antique dressers and chests may be locked and without a key. Then you have a choice, to pretend you're Jimmy Valentine or damage the item. I've gotten quite good with certain types of locks."

"Sean Dodge uses one of these sometimes—"

"Sean Dodge?"

"The main character in the adventure series I write?"

"Ahh, yes! I seem to recall someone mentioning you were a writer. Does it pay all that well? Forgive me; that's—"

"No. A valid question. It pays well enough— sometimes. Sean Dodge is popular— so it pays well enough."

"Planning a serious novel, no doubt."

Culhane just looked at Candler. "High adventure doesn't have to be devoid of character, setting, like that. Nor does 'good literature', whatever that is, have to be lacking in physical action. It all depends on the story. I consider what I do serious."

"I'm sorry that I'm offending you, Mr. Culhane; believe me that I didn't intend it. Now," and he smiled, his eyes hardening as he glanced toward Culhane, "if memory serves, the funeral parlor should be down this street," and Candler took a fast right— a little too fast, Culhane thought, but he was in a mood to be critical.

"If you don't mind, let's take this lock pick set; we might need it."

"Certainly. Again. I defer to your obvious expertise, sir."

Culhane was beginning to seriously dislike this man.

They had passed from the poor fringe of town into an area where the homes were, at the least, magnificent. Each one here easily equalled the cost of three or perhaps four of the red Ferraris.

"This doesn't look like the place for a funeral home."

"On the opposite side of town; this is the fastest way. We can drive on the high road past it, then park the car and approach on foot. I believe that's the way it's usually done, isn't it?"

"As good as any," Culhane nodded.

"What do we do if this Chief Hanks is there?"

"We'll play it by ear. If Hardy Lovecraft is involved with Fidelito, he'll want to get rid of the bodies of the Zombies as quickly as he can, and without Hanks being any wiser about it."

"That makes sense," Candler nodded, upshifting as they passed out of the residential area, the speed limit rising— but Culhane didn't think to as high a speed as the Ferrari was travelling. "What do you think of this Voodoo nonsense?"

Culhane shrugged.

"And what do you expect to find at the mortuary besides Zombies— my God, they've got me thinking that way."

"However they became Zombies, they're Zombies— and Doctor Bonaparte's explanation seemed quite rational," Culhane said. "As to what we'll find— well. There should be the usual trappings of arterial embalming: formaldehyde, trocars for removing cavity fluid—"

"Trocars?"

"Long hollow needle. In number 5, Sean Dodge— well, anyway, I read up on it."

The Ferrari made a sharp left, taking a two lane black top upward, then onto a rise, the Ferrari crossing over an expanse of water then following the road beyond the bridge as it dipped. The road split, right and left, Candler taking the left fork.

In a book, Culhane would have chosen the left or right fork for its symbolic value; he wondered if life were mirroring art? The Ferrari began to slow. Candler putting the machine through a racing change as he took a curve off paved road onto dirt, the dirt track a car's width only. Culhane tucked his right elbow back inside the open topped car. The Ferrari's engine sounded labored now, Culhane glancing to the gear box. Candler had it in first, the Ferrari turning once again, into a small clearing, Candler making a tight circle of the clearing before the Ferrari stopped, facing back the way it had come. "For our quick getaway," Candler smiled, not bothering with his door, but pushing up and over the closed door, like someone getting out of a race car.

Culhane wasn't about to be outdone; he did the same, catching his foot a little, but exiting the Ferrari with what he felt was at least moderate grace

"Well, Mr. Culhane," and Candler clapped his hands together once, then frictioned the palms against one another, a smile dropping his lower jaw, showing his teeth, his eyes pinpoints of light. "What now, sir?"

Culhane didn't answer; he started out along the dirt single lane road...

As they worked their way down the hillside, no need for silence, Culhane began regaling Candler with his knowledge of mortuary science since Candler apparently didn't like it. "Lord Nelson— before modern embalming, of course— his body was brought back from Trafalgar in a cask of brandy. There was a couple somewhere in Europe who had their bodies preserved in a giant wine vat. In Europe, embalming isn't all that frequently practised—"

"Charming, sir," Candler grunted, Culhane reaching the bottom of the sandy slope an instant or so ahead of Candler.

There was a grass splotched area Culhane judged as seventy-five yards or so, then the freshly looking paved parking lot. There were only two pickup trucks and a Cadillac hearse— grey in color— parked there. From the rise overlooking the mortuary, it had been easy to see the entire area. A single police car was parked out front, alongside it a spotless looking pickup truck dripping with chrome. Culhane assumed that the latter was Hardy Lovecraft's vehicle.

The rear of the mortuary, the building itself like a large, single level Victorian era ranch house (beautifully executed, idiotically conceived), had massively wide double wooden doors. These were for 'deliveries' he knew.

Culhane glanced from right to left— no one. He broke into a dead run, telling himself how easily he'd outdistance Candler who could have been fifteen years his senior; but, Candler appeared in Culhane's right side peripheral vision the next instant, running effortlessly, it seemed. Culhane made for the double doors, running his legs off under the bright sun just to keep Candler from outdistancing him.

Culhane sagged against the brick wall which formed a patchwork effect against the otherwise wooden structure. He assumed that the double doors led directly down into some sort of basement or ground floor work area at the least.

Culhane felt in his pockets. The wrapped hypodermic needles were there. The pick set. Opening the leatherette case's flap, eyeballing the lock, he extracted an appropriate seeming pick and a pry. "Get out a credit card." Culhane told Candler.

"What for? I thought that was why you were using the picks?" Candler was pulling down his tie, unbuttoning his collar, his right hand balled on the grip of the Colt pistol.

Culhane shook his head. "This is a reasonably modern lock. I might only be able to get it partway open, then you can slide a credit card in and push it the rest of the way back."

Candler nodded, Culhane saying, "Keep a look out. And don't shoot anybody, for God's sake. I can talk my way out of breaking and entering, but not a deadman."

Candler nodded again. Culhane setting to the lock. He wished it were as easy as it seemed in movies. Even as easy as he made it in his books— and he strived for realism. He began probing. It was the right pick— he realized that But it wasn't going to be something that was textbook simple.

Culhane glanced at his Rolex, shaking his head, probing again.

As he finally got it. Candler at last stopped saying (each minute, it seemed) to hurry, to be careful, that he had thought he'd heard something. The credit card hadn't been necessary.

Culhane took out his handkerchief, wiping the lock plate and the lock itself clean of any fingerprints. Culhane wiped the picks clean too, handing them to Candler. "Don't touch anything," he cautioned, reaching into the inside breast pocket of the leather sport coat he wore, extracting the thin leather driving gloves Father Whitehead had loaned him for the job. He smiled at that, a priest supplying him with some of the essentials needed for a burglary, Culhane's own gloves were still sodden. As he finished pulling on the gloves, he reached under his coat with his left hand, drawing the pistol from his trouser band.

Chamber loaded, full magazine, seven rounds altogether. Culhane passed through the doorway. The mortuary was lit here, but this was no reception area, rather a concrete slab back hall, grey painted, dreary—the perfect thing for such a place, he thought.

His thoughts were drawn back to the last time he had been in a mortuary, to plan his identical twin's funeral. Culhane shook his head to clear away the memory, like seeing himself lying in his own coffin.

Josh Culhane moved ahead, along the wall of the rear hall, toward what looked to be swinging doors.

Culhane took the right side, Candler the left, Culhane looked hard at the antique dealer.

The man was comporting himself in what seemed a reasonable professional manner.

The gun was held high in both hands, muzzle up, a firm two hand hold ready for a downward snap of the elbows into a firing position, the pistol's hammer cocked.

"Hmm," Culhane murmured.

Candler looked at him.

Culhane stepped slightly away from the wall, the SIG 245 shifted to his left hand, the palm of his right hand pressing against the swinging door, pushing it inward, Culhane ducked through the opening, going left, flattening himself against the left side wall beyond the doors.

He could smell formaldehyde, carnations, death.

It was the mortuary lab, the ceiling rising some ten feet above the floor, banks of florescent lights fully lit, not a tube out of service. Three gleaming stainless steel tables occupied the center of the workspace.

The door beside Culhane opened and Culhane drew back, the pistol still in his left hand, at his side, ready.

But it was only Candler, Candler's combat grip still intact, his jaw tensed, the tendons in his neck rigid.

"This place smells like a—"

Culhane supplied, "Funeral parlor?"

Candler smiled, but his eyes didn't.

Culhane shifted the SIG 245 to his right fist. Moving ahead, he said to Candler in a hush, "Check the far end; make sure we don't have any unexpected company."

"Right," Candler nodded grimly, running toward the far end of the room, double swinging doors there as well.

Coffins were stacked on Culhane's right—a few pine boxes, some of the even cheaper fiber body ones, most of the rest the expensive kind.

The table at the far end of the room caught Culhane's eye, riveted his attention; on it lay the body of a black man, a utility sheet covering the lower half of the body. As Culhane drew nearer, he could see blue lines etched vividly in the face.

Culhane had never seen it before in a black man; he had seen it first on the face of his father.

Culhane slowed, but still approached. He would never use a line such as the one which passed through his mind now—it was too trite for a book, 'Death was not pretty.' But, it wasn't.

His left hand moved to his outside pocket, finding the first of the hypodermics.

A plastic covered index card was beside the dead man on the table, Culhane read it. "John Doe #3." Culhane set the SIG pistol on the table, beside the body. He could see the femoral artery easily as he pulled the sheet away from the deadman's groin. The artery along the interior of the thigh was badly distended. He didn't know why.

Culhane's stomach was churning. He always looked the other way when he got a shot or even a tuberculin skin test. He admired diabetics for the courage they showed with self-injection. He could not fathom drug addicts who willingly inserted needles into their flesh. Culhane slipped the hypodermic into the femoral letting up on the plunger watching the clear plastic fill, turning dark red, darker than normal. The syringe filled slowly. At last, he capped the needle and penned "John Doe #3" on the label.

It would be necessary to find other bodies on the chance that this one had been one of Fidelito's gunmen and not one of the Zombies.

On the wall in front of him, opposite the coffin storage area, were stainless steel doors arranged in a bank—eight of these, Culhane started toward them, looking to his right where whitlock Candler was poised flanking one of the double exit doors.

Their eyes didn't meet and Culhane assumed nothing wrong. He stopped beside the nearest of the freezer doors, putting away the first syringe; he had three of them only.

Culhane opened the nearest door and nearly cried out, Two bodies, one stacked atop the other, and both of them dressed, bullet wounds evident on the upper body's chest. Regaining his composure—at least slightly—Culhane pulled out the slab drawer.

This was obviously one of the Zombies; the clothes alone spoke volumes. They were torn, dirty, little more than rags. The face was unshaven, apparently for several weeks.

Steeling himself, Culhane began to undo the zipper on the deadman's pants; the zipper was partially torn apart.

The man wore no underpants, and Culhane found the femoral artery, plunging in the syringe. Again, there was a darker tinge to the blood than Culhane thought there should have been.

He set the syringe on the table, his pistol in his trouser band. With the Bic pen from his pocket he wrote on label, "Apparent Zombie occupying freezer drawer with second body." He checked the toe-tag. "John Doe #5." Culhane appended.

Culhane placed the second syringe in his already bulging pocket, as gently as he could moving the head of the first man in order to study the face of the body beneath. Another Zombie, Culhane rolled the top body—it was stiff—slightly aside, getting to the second body. This one wore underpants, but from their condition Culhane was glad for the borrowed gloves. Had they been his own, he could have thrown them away. He took the femoral blood sample, then rezipped the dead man, shifting the top body back into position. He had used his three hypodermics. He made out on the toe tag, "John Doe #6." He wondered what had happened to number four?

Culhane stripped away the glove, making a mental note to buy Father Whitehead a new pair of driving gloves, then inscribed the data for the third syringe.

He picked up the glove, throwing his weight against the stainless steel tray to push the double load of humanity into the compartment.

He closed the freezer door, holding the right glove in his gloved left hand.

Culhane checked his watch; time was his enemy.

There was a choice: inspecting the remaining drawers for what bodies they held or checking the laboratory for anything incriminating against Mr. Hardy Lovecraft, Culhane chose the latter. Looking at dead bodies wasn't something he relished, at any event.

Culhane looked toward the exit doors; Candler had not moved.

Culhane glanced about the laboratory.

If these chemicals were organic, the ones used to make sentient beings into Zombies, then there might be reason to suppose they needed refrigeration to remain fresh, potent. Large stainless steel double doors were located further back toward the rear of the room, Culhane started toward them, breaking into an easy run, pulling on the glove again to avoid fingerprints.

In the Sean Dodge novel, terrorists had been using a mortuary. As part of his research, he'd read quite a bit about mortuary science, even visited a lab where it was practised.

Culhane stopped in front of the refrigerator door and opened it.

Nothing out of the ordinary as far as he could detect.

He closed the refrigerator door, opening the identical door beside it.

Unmarked containers. He had no additional hypodermics.

but there was a bottle of spring water on the counter beside the utility sink. Culhane crossed the room, picked up the bottle and poured out its contents, hoping the bottle wouldn't be missed.

Returning to the still open refrigerator door, Culhane extracted the container which somehow seemed most suspect. Setting it on the floor, he untwisted the cap. The liquid inside was almost clear. It might have been unsafe to smell if it were a distillation of the poison from the puff fish which was used in the Zombie-making process. As carefully as he could, he poured some of the container's contents into the water bottle. He could only risk taking a few ounces, a pronounced change in the container's level sure to be noticed. Culhane screwed the water bottle tight shut, placing it in the outside pocket of his jacket.

There was a second unmarked jar which he noticed as he replaced the first. "Shit," Culhane hissed. In this jar, the liquid was murky, disgusting looking in fact.

There had to be something else nearby into which he could safely pour a few ounces of the stuff. But what? In one of his books, Sean Dodge would have been suffering from a headache in some earlier chapter and had with him a bottle of acetomenophine tablets or aspirin. Just pour out the contents and—"Yeah," Culhane rasped under his breath. There was, after all, the First Aid Kit near the utility sink. He'd caught sight of it when he'd commandeered the water bottle. There'd be aspirin in it.

Culhane retrieved the aspirin bottle (thankfully, the old-fashioned glass kind with a screw top"), pouring its contents into the sink. He gave the bottle a quick rinse, then turned his attention to the second jar once again.

There was nowhere to write any remarks about the contents of the second bottle.

These two were the only ones which seemed to bear scrutiny. And at any event, he was fresh out of ideas for finding containers which wouldn't easily be missed.

The fill levels of the two jars, if their depletion were detected, would give away that there had been tampering. But without putting water into the containers and diluting their contents, there was nothing he could do to disguise that some of the liquid in each of the containers had been removed.

Culhane closed the refrigerator.

He removed the right glove again, reaching down inside his shirt front—the holster compartment from inside Mulrooney's gun purse, Gently, he settled the filled syringes and the aspirin into the nest of stuffing taken from an old chair in the rectory, separating each from the other. The pouch was already padded and fitted with Velcro closures which he now sealed. The plastic spring water bottle would have to survive on its own.

His job was done. "Candler," Culhane called, his voice a low whisper.

Candler turned from the door, starting toward him in a run, Candler calling. "I heard something just now. We'd better—"

The last words were lost, the doors into the mortuary lab beside which Candler had a moment earlier stood bursting open, a police officer— hatless— running through, but not looking toward them, firing his

pistol toward the front of the mortuary.

There was a man beside him, staggering. From Father Whitehead's description, the man could only be the mortician/coroner, Hardy Lovecraft— and Lovecraft's left arm was limp at his side, blood drenched.

"Aww—" Culhane wheeled toward the doors, stripping away his gloves, stuffing them into the already stuffed pocket of his jacket. Candler turned toward the doors as well. The insert from Fanny's purse was under Culhane's arm. Whatever happened, he had to get the samples of Zombie blood and the samples of liquid from the unmarked containers safely away so that they could be analyzed.

His right hand swept under his jacket, finding the .45 ACP SIG pistol.

The young police officer turned toward Culhane. "Who the hell—"

"We're good guys," Culhane answered, smiling, in the next instant shouting, "Look out!" A man— a Zombie— hurtled through the double doors, a blood dripping machete in his upraised left hand, its blade starting a downswing toward the young policeman's left shoulder.

The cop dodged, Culhane triggering a shot, the Zombie's body rocking with it, the machete falling from his hand. But the Zombie didn't fall; he picked up the machete and hacked with it across the young policeman's left kidney and spine. The cop's eyes went hard and the scream that had started a microsecond earlier died in his throat.

The Zombie turned toward Josh Culhane. Culhane fired, then fired again, the Zombie staggering.

"The door!" Candler shouted.

Culhane fired a fourth round, the bullet hitting the Zombie in the left temple. The Zombie toppled, skidding along the stone floor on his face and chest, the body coming to rest inches from Culhane's feet. Even the force of the headshot hadn't thrown him back.

Culhane looked to the door, his ears still ringing from the reverberations of his own gunfire as the pistol in Candler's hands fired and Culhane's ears rang again.

A second Zombie— the Zombie's body slammed against the wall from the force of Candler's shot, then lurched, hands splayed, arms extended, fingers reaching for Candler's throat as Candler fired again.

Culhane started forward, toward Hardy Lovecraft, the mortician sagging to his knees, blood spraying onto the floor from his arm.

Culhane's right foot— he felt something snag at it. He started to fall, pushing his left hand out with the insert for Mulrooney's purse and the precious bottles inside. Culhane pulled his body into a poor excuse for a roll. He impacted the stone floor hard, his breath gone for an instant, but nothing seemed broken.

Culhane still clutched the SIG and Culhane fired it out, all three remaining shots into the Zombie's face, the hollowpoints making the exit wound explode like an overripe melon hitting pavement, Culhane's eyes closed involuntarily as he turned his face away.

He pulled his foot free of the Zombie's right hand. To his knees, buttoning the magazine release catch, Culhane stood. He swapped one of the two loaded spares up the SIG's magazine well, his right thumb

swatting down the slide release, Culhane left the hammer cocked.

In the next instant, Culhane touched his finger to the trigger. Another Zombie, wielding something that looked like a bayonet in each fist, was coming at Candler, and Candler's gun looked to have jammed.

It could have happened to anybody with any gun, Culhane thought mechanically, the Zombie's body rocking with Culhane's bullet, but not falling.

Culhane's eyes scanned the floor for the insert from Mulrooney's purse; he spied it, near the body table with the naked black man stretched out on it.

The Zombie with the two bayonets was still in play. The Zombie's fists hammered downward, both bayonets thrusting toward Candler's chest. Candler dodged, rolled away and sprang to his feet like a gymnast. The Zombie dove toward Culhane. No time to shoot. Culhane launched himself across the floor, Culhane twisted onto his back. The Zombie's bayonets had impaled the body of the dead man on the table. As the Zombie raised his arms, for a brief instant the body clung to the blades. The Zombie shook his arms, as though ridding himself of an insect— and the already dead man's body was flung away, against another of the stainless steel tables.

Culhane fired his pistol, then again and again. The Zombie carried four of Culhane's bullets and kept coming, Culhane glanced to a lab table near him, shifting the pistol to his left fist, reaching for a beaker there. It was labelled with the chemical symbol for sulfuric acid. He flipped the top from the beaker, the glass shattering on the lab table surface, Culhane's right fist curled around the beaker. The Zombie streaked toward him, his bayonets upraised, sticky and dripping black with the oddly tinted blood.

Culhane threw the beaker of acid, into the Zombie's face. The Zombie screamed insensately, stumbled back, Culhane stabbed the SIG outward, his left arm at full extension as he fired twice, the Zombie's eyes exploding with the double impacts as he— it?— fell down dead, the face smoldering, a sickening stench assailing Culhane's nostrils.

Culhane stepped back and loaded the last full magazine into his pistol, only six rounds. He thumbed down the slide stop, thumbed down the hammer drop as well. He would have to be prudent in the extreme. As if this realization needed added reinforcement, another Zombie, then still another behind it, lurched through the double doors. One had a club, the second a machete.

Candler's .45 fired; Culhane lost track of the number of shots. The Zombie flailing the club toward Candler's head staggered, fell to his knees, then stood. He threw himself toward Candler.

The second Zombie— his machete was upraised, the mortician Hardy Lovecraft, screaming like a woman would scream, running from him— presented a perfect shot, Culhane placed a bullet through the once— still?— living man's left temple. The Zombie fell away, apparently dead, Again? Or, for real this time? There was no time to puzzle out an answer.

And, whether reflex action or something else, the machete at the end of the Zombie's right arm finished enough of its arc. The blood spray as Hardy Lovecraft's head was severed from his neck was more obscene than anything Josh Culhane had ever witnessed, could ever have imagined.

Culhane half stumbling over Lovecraft's head as it rolled across the floor and Culhane backed away.

"Candler! We've gotta get out of here! Now!" Culhane shifted the pistol into his left fist, his right hand

slipping under his coat and re-emerging with his Bali-Song knife. Click, click, and the handle slabs were joined, the knife in a saber hold.

Culhane wheeled toward Candler. Candler had been a boxer once, Culhane thought absently. The Zombie with the club was coming at Candler. First Candler's right fist, then his left flicked toward the Zombie's face, hammering at it. The Zombie straight-armed Candler, Candler impacting the wall, Culhane heard a thud that he hoped wasn't whitlock Candler's skull cracking. Candler sagged to the floor.

Culhane threw himself into a dead run.

The club— nails dotted it— was hammering downward toward Candler's face.

Culhane lunged, right arm to full extension, the Bali-Song penetrating the Zombie's carotid artery. The artery burst, Culhane turning his face back from the spray, the Zombie shrieking animal-like in pain, then falling over dead. The body forced open the double doors leading into the front portion of the mortuary. As the doors swung closed again, they impacted the Zombie's skull; they bounced, struck, then remained wedged open.

The human being that had once been inside the Zombie, the soul, if that were the operative word— had it left the body in the split second just passed or had the Zombie been only an empty husk?

Culhane's knife dripped blood and his right sleeve was saturated with it. He was feeling a little sick, something that never happened to Sean Dodge. "Candler?" Culhane leaned heavily against the wall.

Candler's eyelids fluttered as he raised his head.

"We've got to reach the rectory; they'll be coming for your JeAnn, and for my Fanny." And then Josh Culhane started to laugh, his eyes tearing with the release of tension.

Syntax— it was a funny thing...'

\* \* \*

JeAnn Bonaparte didn't like her— that was clear to Mulrooney as she looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was something someone had brought back from somewhere— maybe as a joke? It fell straight from the bustline beneath wide straps which suspended it from the shoulders— and suspended was the right word for it, she thought. Beneath the straps it was nothing more than a huge circle of something the texture of heavy silk. But she didn't think it was silk for real. Even with her shoes on, the hemline reached to Mulrooney's ankles.

The dress was red, with ridiculously huge yellow flowers all over it. And there weren't any pockets.

"Yech," Mulrooney groaned, turning away from the mirror in disgust. She had showered and changed back into her still slightly damp underwear, her hair wet from the shower. Father Whitehead didn't own a hair dryer.

And, looking at herself in the dress made her feel even more terrible.

She picked up her purse and started from the room Father Whitehead had let her use to shower and change. It was a guest room and the bath had been small, but adequate. Her purse was in disarray;

Mulrooney laughed at the thought. It usually was, but it was worse now after loaning Culhane the center pouch to carry back his samples.

She shook the purse and she could feel the gun somewhere in there. Closing the door behind her, Mulrooney started along the narrow hall and to the stairs, then down toward the rectory office. She could hear JeAnn Bonaparte and Father Whitehead talking. They were talking about Fidelito. And they were talking about Satan worship.

As she entered the rectory, Father Whitehead was saying, "If this Fidelito is a Satanist— well, I suppose all of us are relatively safe here. Doctor Bonaparte. Rather like something— ohh— Mary Frances! You— ahh— you look very— ahh— clean?"

Father Whitehead turned away and lit a cigarette.

Mary Frances Mulrooney turned toward JeAnn Bonaparte, setting down her purse in the nearest chair, then turning around once, fast, the dress swirling around her. "Gee, it's so pretty— gosh. I'll be really careful with it. I know it's got to be one of your favorites!"

JeAnn Bonaparte was forcing back a laugh from the look in her eyes.

Mulrooney didn't think it was funny.

"Ahh— I was just about to mention something from one of your books, Mary Frances."

"What was that, Father?"

"We were discussing Fidelito and his apparent involvement with Satanism and I was telling Doctor Bonaparte that if she really believes in these practices we should be relatively safe here. After all, the church, the cemetery— the entire area is consecrated ground. He might come here to steal bodies, but not to attack us, I remember one of your books talked about persons who have the aberration of taking on the supposed characteristics of the creatures they think they are, Like psychological vampires, for example, who think they are vampires and so never go out in sunlight even though it really wouldn't hurt them. And the extreme cases of persons who are so obsessed that their minds are able to cause lesions to appear after exposure to sunlight."

"It's like some types of hives," Mulrooney supplied.

"Exactly," whitehead nodded enthusiastically.

"They should have been back by now; I'm worried about Whit," JeAnn Bonaparte said.

Mulrooney sat down. She hadn't sat wearing the dress before and, as she did, she bent slightly forward; the thing promptly fell over her feet. She bunched it up toward her waist, but that didn't do very much good.

"I'm worried about Josh, too— but he's done stuff like this before. I wouldn't tell him to his face, but he's pretty good at it."

"Well— Whit had never done anything like this before I'm sure," JeAnn Bonaparte breathed; she had one of those voices that sounded sexy without trying. Another point against her, Mulrooney decided. "He's an

antique dealer—a recognized authority all over the world—I— well—I'm worried, Mr. Culhane isn't getting him into trouble. Running off to a mortuary to steal blood samples from dead bodies. I mean—"

Father Whitehead, his eyebrows raising as he exhaled cigarette smoke, said, "It sounds rather exciting, actually. And— well— of course stealing is wrong, but it is in a good cause— to help your mother. Doctor Bonaparte, perhaps to help others of these unfortunate people whom we've been calling—"

Father Whitehead was perched on the edge of his desk. The window behind the desk shattered inward, a body flailing through it.

"Zombies!" Mulrooney screamed.

Mary Frances Mulrooney grabbed her purse, all but sprang from the chair— nearly tripping over the hem of the borrowed dress— and ran for the door. Shoving JeAnn Bonaparte ahead of her, Mulrooney cried out, "Father— run for it!"

Fanny Mulrooney looked back once; Whitehead was right behind her.

Into the hallway, the sound of glass shattering around them on all sides. Mulrooney urged JeAnn Bonaparte ahead of her. Father Whitehead shouting from behind her. "Yes— that way— into the cemetery— we can run for the church!"

JeAnn Bonaparte was staring back; Mulrooney screamed at her, "Move your ass!" Mulrooney Pushed her ahead, running. JeAnn Bonaparte near the kitchen. The back door was there, Mulrooney remembered.

She prodded JeAnn ahead again, sidestepping as Father Whitehead dashed past her, into the kitchen.

Mulrooney had the little .38 Special out of her purse. She stabbed it back along the hallway, firing toward the nearest of the Zombies. He was bare handed, but somehow she didn't think she was taking unfair advantage.

Once, Twice. Three shots— and, at the distance, she knew that even she couldn't miss.

The Zombie kept coming.

"Shit!"

Mulrooney turned, running again, the back door open. Father Whitehead standing beside it. "Hurry, Mary Frances!"

On the kitchen counter— Mulrooney reached out with her left hand, almost losing her purse. But, she had the largest of the butcher knives out of the wooden block.

Mulrooney ran, reaching the door, Whitehead waiting for her still.

Through the doorway.

Mulrooney looked back. Father Whitehead was slamming the door into the face of the Zombie she had shot three times with no effect; the Zombie smashed the door outward, Father Whitehead stumbling,

scrambling to his feet and running.

Where was Josh Culhane and his big .45 automatic when you really needed him, Mulrooney asked herself?

Mulrooney kept running, losing one shoe, stumbling, stopping, kicking off the other one, grabbing it up, hurling it toward the Zombie, the butcher knife in her teeth like she had seen Errol Flynn do it in his pirate movies. JeAnn Bonaparte stumbled, falling, screaming, "My ankle!"

Sissies like JeAnn Bonaparte gave all women a bad name, Mulrooney thought, skidding to a stop on her bare feet, dropping to her knees beside JeAnn. "Get up, damnit! Or they'll kill you!" JeAnn started to get up. Father Whitehead beside them, helping her.

But one of the Zombies hurtled past, tackling Father Whitehead, both bodies twisted together, slamming into one of the gravestones, the gravestone toppling over.

Mulrooney stuck the little .38 out in both fists, the knife back in her teeth. A Zombie was running for her. She fired once, the Zombie still coming. One round left in the revolver, the Zombie six feet from her, his arms outstretched toward her.

Mulrooney fired the last shot— "Let's see Sean Dodge top that!" Mulrooney screamed. The Zombie's left eye was gone and the Zombie crashed to the ground at her knees.

"Come on!" Mulrooney had the butcher knife in her left hand, the empty revolver in her right, her purse slipping from her shoulder. JeAnn Bonaparte scrambled to her feet.

More Zombies were exiting the rectory, running across the graveyard, smashing into headstones, brushing them aside, running on.

Father Whitehead— the Zombie the priest battled was over him, the headstone raised in the Zombie's hands, to crush the priest's head.

Fanny Mulrooney shoved the revolver into JeAnn

Bonaparte's trembling hands. "Run— and don't lose the gun!"

With both hands on its handle, Mulrooney grasped the butcher knife like a dagger, thrusting with all her strength into the center of the Zombie's back where she hoped the spinal column was.

The Zombie's body seemed to tremble.

"Father! Run for it!"

Whitehead was up, to his feet, edging back. He made the Sign of The Cross; the Zombie's body swayed backward and fell, the headstone crashing down across the Zombie's face.

Mulrooney could see JeAnn nearing the church on the far side of the cemetery.

Mulrooney ran, Father Whitehead sprinting beside her, the left side of his face dripping with blood.

Mulrooney looked behind her. "Holy—"

A Zombie, He reached out for her, Mulrooney feeling hands like vices grabbing her shoulders, feeling it as the left strap of the awful dress ripped away, feeling herself being dragged down. "No— no!"

She fell into the dirt, her mouth filling with it, her teeth hurting her, her throat closing as she gagged on the dirt that she was trying to spit away.

She looked up. Father Whitehead was hammering his fists against the Zombie's face and abdomen, like a boxer would. "Let this woman alone, unholy thing!"

The Zombie's right arm flicked out his hand backhanding Father Whitehead. The priest's head snapped back, his body launched toward the gravestone some six feet or so away. "As he impacted the gravemarker, Whitehead's body went limp, like a discarded ragdoll.

Mulrooney tried getting to her knees, to her feet.

The Zombie was reaching for her. His body smelled like dirt and human excrement. He dragged her toward him, Mulrooney clawing at his face, blood streaming down his cheeks, her nails missing his eyes. The Zombie's left hand came crashing down toward her face. "Fuck you!" she screamed...

\* \* \*

Josh Culhane stared at the rectory window where the office was. He climbed out of the Ferrari, drawing the SIG from beneath his coat. It and the spare magazines were freshly loaded from candler box of hollowpoints.

Culhane broke into a dead run, jumping the low hedgerow, clambering up to the window Ledge and stepping through, the .45 in his right fist.

An older looking black woman knelt beside Momma Cinda's body on the couch, something that looked like a Voodoo charm in her upraised hands. "In the name of Damballa, go away!"

Culhane just stared at the woman. "Where are the others— Fanny, Momma Cinda's daughter. Father Whitehead?"

The old woman just kept holding up the charm— like a shield against him. Culhane didn't bother to look at it.

He started to run, through the rectory office doorway, into the hall— he looked to right and left. "Fanny! Fanny!"

He ran toward the rear of the rectory, shifting the pistol to his left fist, opening the Bali-Song with his right hand.

The kitchen. The door leading out of the rectory was smashed into splinters, chunks of it hanging from the hinges. Culhane sprinted through the doorway, abandoning caution. He spied JeAnn Bonaparte, her white dress dirt stained. She stood in the middle of the cemetery.

"Fanny! Where's Fanny?"

The Bonaparte girl didn't turn toward him.

Culhane kept running, looking to right and left, jumping overturned headstones, skidding on his heels, stopping.

Father Whitehead— his face was bloodied, his body twisted at a bizarre angle, lying against a partially upended gravestone.

JeAnn Bonaparte was watching him— staring.

"Fanny— where's—"

On the ground there was a dead man, a gravestone covering his face.

Fanny's purse lay on the ground beside a grave.

Culhane looked at JeAnn Bonaparte; in her nearly limp left hand she held Fanny's revolver.

Culhane closed the Bali-Song, took the gun. He opened the cylinder; all five rounds were fired.

He closed the cylinder with his right thumb. "Fanny— where is she?"

JeAnn Bonaparte was unmoving, just staring.

Culhane looked at Father Whitehead. The priest's chest rose and fell; he was alive.

Culhane stabbed the empty revolver into his belt.

"Fanny!" He twisted JeAnn Bonaparte toward him by her shoulders. "Fanny! Where is she?"

The Bonaparte girl just stared. Culhane backhanded her across the face and she fell to her knees in the dirt at his feet.

"Culhane!"

It was Candler— but Culhane didn't look back. He looked at JeAnn Bonaparte who was crying.

"Fanny!"

The girl seemed to be choking, doubling forward, her face almost to the dirt. She coughed. And she looked up. "Zombies— they— they took her."

Josh Culhane closed his eyes— against the tears, his left fist balling hard, tight on the butt of his pistol.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Mulrooney had been awake for ten minutes as she judged it, ten minutes before they realized it. Then the Zombie who had carried her slung her over his shoulder like a sack of dirty laundry— and she was dirty, barefoot again dress ripped, her face hurting her the taste of the graveyard still in her mouth, the smell of the Zombie's body nauseating her— set her down. He shoved her ahead of him along the road up out of the swamp along which they had been travelling ever since she had awakened.

There was nowhere to run. Swamp lay on all sides and the only way she could follow the path was to follow the Zombie ahead of her.

Her left arm was getting stiff and she moved her right hand to the left side of her dress, to hold it up where it had been torn away flexing her bare left arm to get feeling back into it.

She wanted to see her face. She was swelling. She really didn't want to see her face at all.

When she had come to, she had checked out her teeth with her tongue. One of the front ones on the bottom felt a little loose, but it didn't hurt. Nothing permanent. And Mulrooney found herself smiling as she thought of that. These people were going to kill her— after they did something worse to her.

Culhane would be back by now. He'd come looking for her. "Boy, will you guys be in trouble," she said aloud.

But the Zombies made no sounds beyond an occasional grunt.

She kept walking, following the one ahead of her, prodded once in a while— and not gently— by the one behind her.

She had counted four total.

One would have been enough. No gun. There weren't even any rocks around. She hoped Culhane found her purse in the graveyard and remembered to bring it when he rescued her.

Rescued her— she focused on that. She would hug him. She would kiss him a lot. She would have him get her to the hotel. She could take a shower, put on a nice, clean, spotless nightgown. Have a glass of rum maybe. And a cigarette— definitely a cigarette. Then she would go to bed with him. And the nightgown; she'd let him take it off her body.

The road was finally rising fully from the swamp the ground on both sides of the trail they followed seeming drier, more firm, hardening. Mulrooney wondered if it were hard enough to try to escape? She kept walking. How would Culhane find her? Simple, she reassured herself. The blood samples and junk he would have gotten at the mortuary would give JeAnn Bonaparte enough information that she could revive Momma Cinda. Momma Cinda would know where this Fidelito creep hid out, where this Fidelito did the disgusting things to people that made them Zombies.

Momma Cinda would tell Culhane.

Then Josh Culhane would come and get her.

She felt better— she told herself that.

The ground was rising steeply. Mulrooney having a hard time of it with one hand occupied holding up the

dress her feet feeling as though they were bleeding and raw.

The Zombie behind her shoved her and she fell onto her face. "Up yours!" She glared at the Zombie.

The Zombie picked her up, Mulrooney kicking at him, hammering at him with her balled fists, screaming obscenities at him— but she was over his shoulder again feeling his hand holding her behind the knees.

She hammered at his back. He started walking, climbing the grade, as if the force of her hands beating him were nothing at all.

She hit him, shrieked at him— her arms fell limply downward. She was crying and she hadn't felt so scared since she was a little girl and she'd seen the green face of the witch in "The Wizard of Oz" movie— but boy could that Judy Garland really sing...

\* \* \*

They had crossed a beach, the Zombies moving tirelessly, not people anymore.

The Zombie was sweating— all over her. And with the pressure of his shoulder in her abdomen and being carried upside down and swaying back and forth like that, Mulrooney felt light headed, dizzy, nauseated. She could throw up all over him— that would serve the guy right, she told herself.

But it would get into her hair, her hair hanging down over her face, partially obscuring her vision.

If they would only let her tie it back— with something— but the Zombies kept walking.

Up again, away from the sand and the ocean water that looked so clean, so cool, Up, rocks on either side of them, the rocks black. She was starting to really feel sick.

Just coffee and orange juice all day.

She wondered what time it was? She couldn't twist her head enough to look at the sun. She wondered if she would ever see the sky again?

She started to cry once more.

"Let" me go, you son of a bitch!"

The Zombie did nothing, said nothing— he kept walking. Mulrooney screamed at him until her throat hurt so badly she could scream no longer.

The Zombie who carried her stopped. She felt her weight being shifted. She was standing— no she wasn't. She fell, her knees giving out. Mulrooney's hands hit against the black rock that formed the floor of whatever she was in, wherever she was.

The returning blood circulation was making her dizzy.

Mulrooney rocked back onto her rear end. her legs spread wide. She could almost hear her mother telling her that it wasn't ladylike.

But she heard something else— that was really there.

"He wanted you."

She remembered the voice— it was Fidelito. From the swamp— last night?

"You will be cleaned. You will be given to him."

She looked at herself. She drew her legs together, with her right hand pulling at the hem of the ungodly awful looking dress— but it was important to her now. The top of the dress had fallen; she could see part of her left cup. She tugged the dress up, holding the hem down with her right hand, her legs tucked up close to her.

She stared at Fidelito. His eyes— they didn't look real.

"Who— ahh— who am I being— ahh—"

"The Lord Asmodeus," Fidelito whispered. His clothes were blood stained, his arms blood stained.

Inside herself— she ran the list of demons down through her mind. The demon from The Apocryphal Book of Tobit who had lusted after a human woman, of the First Hierarchy of Demons second only to Leviathan and Beelzebub

Beelzebub under Lucifer, a Seraphen, the Prince of Wanton.

Fanny Mulrooney screamed...

## Chapter Twenty-one

They had moved their operation to Whit Candler's house on the mainland. Father Whitehead was administered First Aid by JeAnn Bonaparte, given an adrenaline shot, then left behind with a note. The note detailed what had been done, hastily written as the ambulance had been heard in the distance. The old woman, his housekeeper, had finally been persuaded to put down her voodoo charm. She waited with him, caring for him.

Culhane and Candler had packed the unconscious Momma Cinda into the back of Fanny Mulrooney's yellow Mustang— not easily— and driven in convoy the red Ferrari in the lead.

On the way to Candler's house, they had stopped for JeAnn Bonaparte to get into her office and retrieve some additional equipment.

Candler and JeAnn Bonaparte helping him, Culhane had carried Momma Cinda into Candler's house.

Reviving Momma Cinda was the only hope of finding Fanny Mulrooney— alive.

Culhane stood by Whit Candler's king sized bed, staring down at the form of Momma Cinda— despite her overweight, she looked somehow frail. He had been watching JeAnn Bonaparte for more than an

hour since she had returned from dropping off the blood samples, among them a sample taken from Momma Cinda. JeAnn had been working over her mother's body unceasingly, yet nothing seemed to have an effect.

"I don't understand this— she's sleeping— but she's not asleep. I worked with patients who had been put on some sort of drug. It's like that— but it isn't. If I could find my mother's books—"

Whit Candler spoke. "Don't you think those blood samples should yield any results?"

"I don't know," she whispered, shaking her head— her hair was down, looked as though it needed combing. She hadn't changed from the mud stained white dress, "There are some drugs-some things that scientists and doctors know have certain effects but they can't analyze sufficiently to know why. And primitive things like this— they—"

"If those books will help— I'll go back to the island."

"Father Whitehead's housekeeper," Culhane said slowly. "She said Hanks was crazy with anger and we should avoid him. And Fanny—" Culhane closed his eyes for a moment. "Fanny said Hanks told her he had removed all of the books from the house."

"Then Hanks has them," Candler said. "I'll use some of the influence I can muster on St. Peter's Island and in Teach's Landing itself. I can put this Hanks fellow in a rather uncomfortable position, I believe."

"He can get you for breaking and entering, for those deaths in the mortuary."

"I can cover myself," Candler nodded, smiling, but his eyes not smiling at all.

"I won't let you go," JeAnn Bonaparte began rising from the bed, putting her arms around Candler, resting her head against his chest. "If I lost you—"

"I'll be fine darling— I will. After all— once this is all over— well," and he held her out at arms length, laughing, "After all these years of being a bachelor, well— getting married and not having a mother-in-law— well, it wouldn't seem right. And, besides— there's Miss Mulrooney to consider, Mr. Culhane needs to be able to question your mother, darling— Heaven knows what danger Miss Mulrooney may be in— even as we speak, darling."

"I'd say break out some extra ammo if you've got it," Culhane advised, "and take some with you. And leave some with me in case those Zombies haven't called it a day yet."

"That was insane," JeAnn Bonaparte murmured. "Miss Mulrooney just kept shooting at that man in the hallway—"

Culhane shook his head, sitting on the edge of an overstuffed chair Candler had pulled up for him near Momma Cinda and the bed. "During the Philippine Insurrection, the Moro Tribesmen— they would tie off their penises with wet rawhide. As the rawhide shrank, it caused excruciating pain— they got some sort of high off the pain. The .38 caliber revolvers U.S. forces were using weren't having any effect. The government had to get bunches of old Single Action Colts out of mothballs. Just to stop them. These Zombies— the same way. Three or four .45 slugs— nothing. Their minds are totally gone— they didn't know enough to fall down."

Culhane looked at Candler, Candler's face seemed lost in thought, then, "Mr. Culhane— I do have one other firearm here at the house. Perhaps more effective than these handguns of ours." Culhane had retrieved his Seecamp— which he'd stupidly left behind when going off to the mortuary— from Mulrooney's glove compartment. But he agreed, the .45 ACP and the little .32 backup gun left a great deal to be desired if there were another attack.

"What do you have?"

"A shotgun— rather old, but it does work."

Culhane only nodded— and he hoped it was a twelve gauge.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Mulrooney had been washed— hair and body— by three female Zombies. She had been given to wear what looked like a black monk's robe but with no waistline, the hood pulled up over her wet hair.

The robe bore over the left breast a carefully embroidered inverted pentagram— she knew the sign, the sign of Satan.

The three female Zombies led her from the waterfall at the far end of the grotto toward the portion of it where she had seen Fidelito. He waited there, standing, staring, as if unmoved at all since the time perhaps fifteen minutes earlier when she had seen him.

The three female Zombies stopped and Mulrooney stopped walking, too. Barefoot again, her feet still felt raw from before. And the rock, aside from being sharp, felt cold, deathly cold.

Fidelito spoke. "Are you a virgin?"

Mulrooney licked her lips— she needed lipstick. Her throat was dry. "No, Not me. Not even close," she told him. "You're shit out of luck— and so's your demon!"

Fidelito seemed to be carrying on some conversation within his head and did not speak for a moment. Then, "An exception will be made."

"Hey— I don't want any special treatment! Tell you what. I'll leave, and the first virgin I meet? I'll tell her about your little operation here and if she wants to come— I'll even tell her how to get here. How's that?"

She was talking to keep from going insane.

Fidelito was not listening, she knew— it was there, in the blankness of his face.

Fidelito began walking, toward her. He reached out his hands— Mulrooney started to edge away, but one of the three female Zombies pushed her toward him. His hands closed over her hands. She stared into his eyes. "The time has come," he told her.

"Ahh— look— ahh— you're gonna be in big trouble. My lover— the guy I'm not a virgin with? Right?"

He— ahh— he's gonna beat the crap out of you. He's big— tall— real strong! Good with a gun. Ohh boy, is he good! Same guy who beat the crap out of you in that ski-boat? Remember him?" On the inside of his right forearm, there was a long, thin gash. She had seen Culhane cut him.

And she saw more closely the blood she had seen earlier— both arms seemed to be painted in it. Goat blood or something, Mulrooney wanted to believe but didn't. Blood stains were around his mouth, on his chin and his cheeks, on his once white shirt and his khaki slacks. And he smelled of vomit. "Get away from me!" Mary Frances Mulrooney tried to shake her arms free of Fidelito's hands— she couldn't.

He started walking back in the direction from which he had come, his right hand holding her left forearm, his grip like a steel band from which she couldn't pull free. She half-stumbled, half-walked beside him. "You're hurting me!"

They stopped, at the very rear of the grotto, stones there which had evidently been rolled away from some sort of fissure in the rock itself. A dull light glowed from within the vent.

Fidelito started to walk again, toward the crack, dragging her with him. There were steps and he started down them, taking her with him. The treads were even, identical, cut it seemed from the living rock. She followed— there was no way to break free of him, yet.

"Look— if you're a Cuban national? The worst they can do to you is deport you, right? Go back and see all your pals with their beards and their big cigars, soak up some good old Cuban sunshine— huh?" She had to keep talking— to keep from thinking what lay at the base of the steps. "I'm a journalist. Tell ya what! Let me go and if they catch you. I'll help you get your memoirs published and you'll make a fortune. Hardbound first— then paperback. Then movies— or tv— a mini-series! That's it! A mini-series— I can see it now— then it goes into a syndication and you really make the money there and video and DVD— aww shit! Let me go! Please?" Mulrooney was starting to cry again and she didn't want to do that.

She couldn't help herself— her eyes were filling with tears. "Please, mister— let me go— please?"

They were nearly to the base of the steps, Mulrooney's body shaking with what she knew was fear unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Fidelito reached the base of the steps, Mulrooney dragged after him.

Mulrooney stared— a pile of gold ingots, jewels larger than she had ever seen, the wealth it represented unimaginably great. Atop it— she screamed. "You're not real?"

And there was a voice inside her head. She was free of Fidelito's grip. Her hands covered her ears, but the voice was unchanged, undiminished,

"Edward Teach bartered his soul that his wealth be guarded. Fidelito bartered his soul that his plans for destruction be accomplished. I do not want your soul, but your body. I shall ravish you beyond endurance, beyond ecstasy—" Mulrooney fell to her knees, screaming at the blackbearded visage atop the mound of treasure. She was screaming so that she wouldn't hear the voice, screaming. But, she still heard it.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Whitlock Candler stopped the Ferrari. His gun was in the glove compartment— but he wouldn't need it yet. Candler didn't shut off the motor just yet. He'd been skimming across the local AM and FM radio bands for any news on the small war at the mortuary and the death of Hardy Lovecraft. There had been none, but there was news of another sort. The tropical depression talked about so much in the last few days as having the potential to become a major hurricane had, indeed, become one. It was still headed for Miami, and coming fast.

Candler had some financial interests in the Keys and had no desire for a storm to wipe them out.

Candler shut off the radio and climbed out, slamming the door, pocketing the keys, walking across the yellow line at the curb and along the driveway toward the converted gas station which was St. Peter's Island Police Department Headquarters. He noticed a police car with the right side mirror smashed, the same car with several marks on the fenders which could have been from bullets— he was no expert in such matters.

He stopped at the venetian blind covered glass door, looking back toward the Ferrari a moment before turning the knob and entering.

It was stale smelling inside. He removed his sunglasses, aware of the sounds from the police radio, the man sitting before it glancing toward him as Candler closed the door. "Be with ya in a minute."

"Certainly," Candler smiled.

He put the sunglasses in the breast pocket of his suitcoat, thrusting his hands behind him, locking them one in the other like an Admiral, rocking on his heels a moment as the radio operator completed some sort of transmission.

Then the man looked up, stood up, leaning heavily against a wooden railing— Candler judged the railing as perhaps a century old and, aside from a few knicks and gouges, still in rather good shape. Perhaps a church altar rail once. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I'm Whitlock J. Candler the third. I'd like to see Chief Jimmy Howard Hanks on a matter of extreme urgency."

"Ahh— there was a big ruckus here last night— then some trouble this mornin' as well— he's, ah— kinda busy."

"But I had assumed he would be, sir. If you would be so kind as to inform Chief Hanks that I may be able to provide some rather interesting facts concerning these problems, I'm sure he'd be happy to see me. Or, will it be necessary for me to contact my friends on the Teach's Landing City Council?"

The police officer— his face as lined and sagging as a bloodhound's— nodded, saying, "I'll go tell the Chief. Why don't y'all grab a chair? Might be a few minutes."

"I prefer to stand sir— thank you," Candler smiled, watching as the man hit some switch on the radio set, looked back at him warily, then ambled off toward the rear of the building. The radio operator stopped before a frosted glass door, knocked once, then entered, apparently without waiting for reply.

Candler studied his surroundings. Early tacky, he put them down as, nothing there of interest to see, except for a rather intriguing picture frame. The frame held his interests, not the rather fakey looking copy of the Declaration of Independence which it held. But the frame was rather decent.

"Mr. Candler— Chief Hanks said he can spare y'all a minute."

"What— ohh— that's most generous of him." Candler smiled at the radio operator. As the operator opened the swinging gate in the railing, Candler confirmed his suspicion once an altar rail.

"Right back there— just go on in," the man appended.

Candler smiled again. "Most gracious— thank you," and walked toward the frosted glass fitted doorway. He knocked perfunctorily and opened the door as he heard a rich baritone call out, "Y'all come on in."

He looked through stepped through, closed the door.

A sign on the desk read, "Jimmy Howard Hanks, Chief." A sign beside the solitary window on the wall read. "Success Comes To Those Who Work For It." The man behind the desk was huge— even more huge as he stood up, extending his five pound ham-sized right hand. Tall. Built like someone from a barbarian epic. "Admirable sentiments there on your wall, sir."

"Nice of y'all to notice. I don't mean to be abrupt, but we've had a few problems come up recently which have demanded my interest. If y'all'd like to sit down and speak y'all's peace I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly, Chief— and I am most appreciative of your generosity in sparing me a moment of your valuable time, sir," Candler smiled, taking the wooden captain's chair opposite Hanks' desk. He studied Hanks' face a moment— well defined, craggy, the hair long, greying, but thick. The eyes— a brilliant blue— were penetrating and clear. This was definitely a man he could deal with, Candler decided in that instant. "I understand more concerning the nature of your recent difficulties than you might imagine, sir."

"How's that?" Hanks drawled, looking up from his blotter, his brow furrowed, a thick strand of hair falling across his forehead.

"You have had an apparent kidnapping related to a fire. The apparent victim was a Voodoo Momba who calls herself or is called by her followers, Momma Cinda. Her given name, which, unless birth records were pursued, you would not be aware of, was Cinderella Louise Bonaparte. She had a daughter— JeAnn Bonaparte. JeAnn Bonaparte is now a rather lovely, rather white looking young woman— a Doctor of Medicine, following in a family tradition, so to speak. Momma Cinda was kidnapped by a gentleman known as Arturo Velasquez, otherwise known by the sobriquet Fidelito. Rather amusing, really. There is some reason to suspect that this Fidelito is not only a Voodoo Bocor— a bad magic priest— but also a Cuban agent provocateur."

"Pro— what? Ahh— I've read the term. Never heard it pronounced before."

"Provocateur— yes. At the time of her kidnapping, somehow Momma Cinda was able to convey her plight to a young female journalist named M.F. Mulrooney. Miss Mulrooney quite naturally recruited the assistance of Josh Culhane— she's his mistress, apparently of long standing. This Culhane fellow claims only to be an adventure novelist, but may be some sort of U.S. intelligence agent. He's quite good with firearms and with his hands— and a knife for that matter. Culhane and Mulrooney recovered Momma Cinda after some altercation in Gunwater Swamp apparently— and presumably at great risk. The affair

seems to have involved this Fidelito person. JeAnn Bonaparte was contacted— she is my fiance—"

"But she's a—"

"But you'll learn why, sir— my sentiments exactly. But I'd call your attention to the motto on your wall— and sometimes hard work translates to doing those things which under normal circumstances one might find offensive. At any event, she was summoned to the rectory of St. Peter's Catholic Church. I went off with Mr. Culhane to the mortuary establishment of the late, I believe, Hardy Lovecraft. There, we encountered Zombies— or, call them what you will. Mindless seeming brutes of immense strength who were impossibly difficult to subdue. They murdered your police officer, Mr. Lovecraft and nearly Mr. Culhane and myself. But due to Mr. Culhane's considerable skills, we were able to survive. Meanwhile, Zombies attacked the rectory at St. Peter's, injuring Father Whitehead, kidnapping Miss Mulrooney. Two of them were killed— by Miss Mulrooney, I believe. She may also be something more than she claims. The origin of the mission to the mortuary was to take blood samples of the Zombies to be found there after the fight in Gunwater Swamp to which I believe you, sir, were privy." Candler lit a cigarette.

Candler continued. "At my home in Charleston, I currently have Momma Cinda, Mr. Culhane, and, of course, the lovely JeAnn. Mr. Culhane is armed with his .45 caliber automatic pistol and a knife, perhaps additional armament. Also, to protect the welfare of Momma Cinda and JeAnn, I loaned to Mr. Culhane a rather vintage, but still operable, twelve gauge shotgun which I acquired some years ago in a trade with an antique dealer. I have come here ostensibly to obtain from you Momma Cinda's books on Voodoo. Which you confiscated, I have been given to understand. JeAnn, at this very moment, should still be awaiting blood sample tests on both the Zombies found at the mortuary and Momma Cinda. The intent, with the blood samples, chemical samples Mr. Culhane took at the mortuary and the books relating to Voodoo is to enable JeAnn, herself skilled in Voodoo but not apparently sufficiently skilled to revive her mother. Her mother is comatose."

"Why are y'all telling me all this, Mr. Culhane. Y'all just implicated y'all's self in a break-in at the mortuary, and in a couple of deaths. Why?"

"You have a fascinating background, Chief— and this isn't a digression, I assure you. A hero in the Vietnam war, before that and after that— particularly afterward— the champion bar fighter of the Southeastern states. Fortunes were won on your victories as were fortunes lost by those who were stupid enough to gamble on you being defeated. You currently own the only bootleg liquor store on the island and periodically close yourself down to make favorable publicity for yourself. You have the mayor of Teach's Landing by the short hairs, so to speak. You control the entire island. And, for years now, you have been spending hours digging up various spots on the island looking for one thing, investigating old diaries, buying or selling every old map you could lay your hands on— for one thing."

Hanks smiled, his voice low— a hint of menace in it, Candler thought. "What reason— Mr. Candler?"

"You want what I want. But I can get it— and you can't. I can dispose of it— and you can't. I'm offering you the chance to split on it—"

"What?" Hanks interrupted, the menace clear this time in his tone.

"Blackbeard's Treasure. You theorized Momma Cinda had found it and been tapping into it for years for her many good-hearted benevolences among the island folk, whereas I know she has. If Momma Cinda is awakened, she can tell us two things of interest— the location of Blackbeard's treasure—"

"Wait a minute. Why the hell would she tell— us?"

"I have her dearest possession— her lovely daughter."

Hanks leaned back in his seat, his feet swinging up onto his desk— he wore cowboy boots that looked to be at least a size twelve, perhaps larger. "And what's this second interesting thing y'all mentioned?"

"Fidelito. And, if he is a Communist Cuban agent, all the better. You have a golden opportunity before you, Chief, both literally and figuratively. You're a smart man— I learned that, too. Here is your chance. Split Teach's treasure with me— you'd never be able to market it, would have to pay a fortune in taxes on it if you tried, perhaps lose it all to the State of South Carolina, since it's likely on public land anyway. Capture a Communist terrorist— killed of course while trying to resist arrest— on whose shoulders you can safely lay all the other crimes which have recently taken place here. And the death of Momma Cinda. Because, certainly we won't be able to rely on her silence."

"What about this daughter of hers?"

"Kill her— after we've used her."

"I, ah— I thought she was y'all's fiance?"

"She was a means to an end— never more— and that end is clearly in sight. And, with your able assistance easily obtainable."

"Y'all said this— what's his name?"

"Culhane?"

"Yes— this Culhane fella. Some sort of secret agent?"

Candler allowed himself to smile, extinguishing his cigarette in the Chief's spotless ashtray. "Men of his profession— or even if he's just the proverbial talented amateur— must die by violent means quite frequently. Perhaps he can be made a hero as well. A dead one."

"And Fidelito's kidnapped M.F. Mulrooney?"

"Yes— Fidelito strikes me as the sort of person who would murder a hostage rather than give her up. Doesn't he 'you?'"

"I reckon so, Mr. Candler— I reckon so." Hanks smiled...

\* \* \*

Josh Culhane sat beside the bed, JeAnn Bonaparte resting on the floor on the opposite side of the bed, curled up, her head lying against the mattress, near her mother's left hand, her own left hand touching the woman's arm.

He shifted the shotgun that was across his lap— vintage it was, but perfectly serviceable. It was a '97 Winchester pump, complete with bayonet lug and marked US, a relic of World War I. Candler had precisely two boxes of shotgun ammunition, at least as far as Candler had let on. Candler had chosen the

slug loads over Buckshot. At roughly seventy caliber, he hoped they might prove more effective against Zombies than his .45 had.

Culhane studied JeAnn's hand against her mother's arm. JeAnn was fair complected, more white looking than white, really— and against the milk chocolate brown of her mother's forearm, whiter looking still.

There was an impulse to condemn— a woman being so afraid of her real race as to lay claim to another. He had never considered, for himself or a character in his books, what that would be like. It seemed apparent she hadn't gone about smiling at people saying, "Hi— I'm white." but rather had lived the lie others had pre-supposed for her a sin of omission rather than commission, if indeed it were a sin at all.

He didn't envy her the self-evident nightmares— discovery, condemnation by both races, the fear of having children and what they would look like.

Culhane had long ago determined that much of what mankind valued was insane. And, for this reason had, avoided much of mankind in close relationships.

His brother— dead. His father and mother— dead.

Fanny— perhaps dead. He felt a tightness in his throat. He would find her, dead or alive. And if she were dead, even if it cost his own life, he would choke the life from her murderer.

Fanny was all he had left.

He remembered Candler's remark about writing a "serious" novel. He had frequently heard, to one degree or another, veiled criticisms of the violence which sometimes found its way between the covers of his books. But the violence— physical— was far less intense than the emotional violence man daily did to fellow man.

Sean Dodge found evil, but he also found good. Found duplicity, but also sincerity. Betrayal, but also honor. Perhaps Sean Dodge lived in an unreal world— but Culhane had chosen that world as his own. If others wished to hide he did not.

It was one of the things about Fanny that he valued most in her— she was real. She spoke her mind. She believed in something.

He wondered what JeAnn Bonaparte believed in— now.

The telephone rang.

Culhane started up from the chair and JeAnn Bonaparte raised her head from the bed. She stared looked at her mother for a moment. Culhane picked up the receiver; it was on the nightstand on the same side of the bed where his chair was. "Hello?"

The voice asked for Dr. Bonaparte, Culhane saying, "Just a second— hang on," then looking as JeAnn crossed to his side of the bed, her long fingered, otherwise smallish hands knotted into tiny fists which rubbed at her eyes. She nodded. "You awake?"

"Yes," and she took the receiver from him. Culhane edging away from the nightstand stretching for the shotgun propped into the chair.

"This is Dr. Bonaparte," JeAnn Bonaparte said into the receiver, "Oh— hi Helen... Yes... That's— what?.. I'd assumed it was an alkaloid as I said... But their's were different?.. Datura aurea?.. Where?.. Yes— I'm familiar with the genus.. Check that— I need to know the scopolamine antagonist... Yes— it's very important.. No— just hold onto them..." She looked away from the receiver. "They isolated the drug— they think."

"Scopolamine? The Nazis used that during World War II as a truth serum."

"It can also be used as an hallucinogen— or as powerful sedative. But the trouble is, we don't know what the minor active agents— Yes?" She spoke into the receiver again. "Phisostigmine Salicylate... I've got that— how many?... One to five dependent on body weight... Six milligrams in thirty— got it— Helen— I owe you— I really do... More than lunch... God bless you— and don't tell anybody... No— I'll call you about the two samples— bye," and she hung up.

She pushed past Culhane, to the antique chest at the base of the bed, her medical bag and a canvas tote bag there, her purse as well. She began plowing through the tote bag, "Eureka!"

"What the hell's—"

"I brought it— I brought everything I could think of that might work against an alkaloid and everything else I had that might work against some kind of drug overdose— and I brought the right thing." She held up the bottle. "This— Phisostigmine Salicylate— ha!"

The change in her was— he couldn't think of a better way of expressing it than with the trite expression 'like the difference between night and day.' But it was.

"What do I do to help?" Culhane told her.

"Run out to the nearest store you can find— leave me a gun if you feel you have to— and get me some Gatoraide."

"What?"

"I'll need to restore her electrolyte balance— before you do that, get me orange juice out of the refrigerator and a couple of glasses. Get me a large pan or something you can fill with cold water and some washcloths or guest towels— he keeps them in the wicker cabinets in the bathroom on each floor. He should probably have enough in this one. After you get the Gatoraide— no before— bring me up one of the other bags I left downstairs. The heavy one."

She looked at him and she smiled.

"And you're a knock-out, too," he informed her, running for the towels and the water. He thought you only needed those when you were delivering a baby...

\* \* \*

By the time Culhane had returned, using Fanny's yellow Mustang— it still smelled subtly of her perfume— JeAnn Bonaparte had hooked her mother into an I.V. He handed over the Gatoraide and reclaimed his SIG 245; all he had taken with him was the Seecamp and his knife, judging that the girl

would not have been able to handle the shotgun if needed beyond one or two shots.

He sat in the chair, beside the bed. "Saline solution, right?"

"Right."

"This Phiso—"

"Phisostigmine Salicylate."

"Right— how much— what are you doing exactly?"

"All right," JeAnn Bonaparte nodded, looking at him an instant, then adjusting the tube which led from the I.V. to the large syringe she held. "The bad thing is. I'm not a hundred percent certain this will work." she said taking one of the towels and starting to immerse it in water.

"I can do that," Culhane told her. He walked over to stand beside her; the bedside lamp and some books were on the floor, the nightstand on this side of the bed converted to a stand for the water basin. He immersed the towel, then started squeezing it. "Dry or damp?"

"Damp. The thing is, we don't know all the constituents— just the major constituent. Scopolamine is like atropine intoxication, in this massive an amount. If I'd only known earlier! I diluted it into saline solution— the Phisostigmine Salicylate. With her body weight and age and comparative good health— at least as far as I can tell— I'm giving the maximum dosage, five milliliters. I can repeat that every five minutes." And she glanced at the plain looking ladies Rolex on her left wrist. "Up to a total of six milligrams within a thirty minute period. Assuming no other complications and if we can get up her electrolytes, she could come around in ten or fifteen minutes. That's the earliest. Give me that Gatoraide. That's why the football plays use this stuff— rich in electrolytes. I started getting some juice down her with a squeeze bottle. As soon as she starts to come around—"

Culhane stared at Momma Cinda. "How long before she'll be conscious enough to—"

"To tell you where Miss Mulrooney is?"

Culhane licked his lips, nodded. "Yeah." He swallowed.

"I've started the electrolyte treatment, and once she comes around even a little I can force more liquids into her. We keep her cool with the damp towels— thank God it's not a hot day. As she starts coming out of it, we have to watch for any sort of convulsive disorder. But, just the natural effects of the comatose condition she's been in for so long— that'll make her drowsy, groggy— sort of like a drunk just sobering up?" She looked at him.

Culhane nodded that he understood.

He heard the sound of a car in the driveway. Dropping the towel into the basin, he crossed the room and snatched up the old Winchester pump shotgun. He ran to the window which overlooked the street, the Battery and Charleston harbor beyond. The houses were close together considering their size and the driveways between them narrow, and in the driveway between Candler's house and the rambling yellow painted structure across from it. Culhane could see Candler's red Ferrari. Candler was climbing out and going to the boot. Climbing out a little less easily was the giant Fanny had described, the giant who

belonged to the voice Culhane had heard in the swamp just before the police had raided the island. Jimmy Howard Hanks. No uniform, no gunbelt. Culhane couldn't see the face beneath the cream colored cowboy hat. But he knew the gesture— Hanks was pulling his brown short sleeved knit shirt down to cover the butt of a gun.

Culhane set the shotgun aside, out of sight. "I'll be back in a second." Culhane told JeAnn Bonaparte.

Candler was still plowing around in the trunk of the Ferrari as Culhane exited the house and walked along the driveway, joining Candler and the larger man.

"Ahh. Mr. Culhane!"

The other man looked at Culhane, his eyes unflinching beneath the brim of his hat. "I'm Jimmy Howard Hanks." He extended his hand, Culhane taking it. Hanks hand so large that it swallowed Culhane's inside it, the grip firm but not a crusher. "It's a pleasure to meet such a famous author."

"The pleasure's all mine," Culhane responded.

"Any change in JeAnn's mother?"

"Doctor Bonaparte thinks that she's identified the toxicology and is administering what's more or less an antidote."

"Excellent. I've got Momma Cinda's books and Chief Hanks is on our side in this thing, thank goodness."

"Wonderful news," Culhane responded.

Culhane took an armload of books from the Ferrari's trunk, as did Hanks, and the three men walked back up the driveway and up the steps.

"Nice house y'all's got heah, Candler."

"Thank you, Chief. Historic preservation is an obligation we owe to future generations, you know."

"Yes; y'all's on the money with that one hundred percent, Candler."

Culhane had been suspicious when he saw Hanks with Candler; their sugary dialogue only deepened those suspicions.

Once inside the house, they made their way to the bedroom where Momma Cinda was being tended by her daughter. Candler was the first to put down the books he carried, taking an obviously willing and relieved JeAnn Bonaparte into his arms. Culhane and Hanks placed their books beside the others.

"Darling— Mr. Culhane told me that your mother is starting to respond."

"Some sort of South American hallucinogenic— called Datura Aurea— it's mostly Scopolamine. So I'm using an antagonist for Scopolamine and getting her electrolyte level up— she's gone from the coma into some sort of trance—" And JeAnn looked away, her face etched with worry, Culhane thought.

"What do y'all mean— a trance?"

It was Hanks who spoke.

"Ohh, darling— this is Chief Hanks. He's thrown in with us, to help your mother and try to effect some rescue effort for poor Miss Mulrooney."

Culhane looked at Candler, then Hanks.

Hanks stepped forward, extending his hand but holding her hand as though he were about to kiss it rather than shake it. He said, "Mr. Candler tells me y'all are Momma Cinda theres daughter. Right happy to meet y'all ma'am. Like I was tellin' Mr. Candler— Momma Cinda and I, we haven't always seen eye to eye, but she's a fine person for fact."

JeAnn Bonaparte nodded, taking her hand back from him slowly— but obviously happy at the prospect of his co-operation. "Thank you— very much, Chief."

"You said a trance of some sort darling— the Chief asked about it— and I'm curious as well."

She sat on the edge of the bed, checking her watch, taking the syringe and inserting it in the I.V. tube, working the plunger of the syringe. "My mother— when I was a little girl— I remember because it scared me. Chief Marshbank came to my mother."

"Marshbank?" Candler asked.

"He was my predecessor," Hanks said emotionlessly, his voice low.

"Yes," JeAnn nodded absently. "There had been a murder on St. Peter's Island. He told my mother that he knew she had the power to do it, to put herself into a trance. Could she put herself into a trance and help find the killer? And I watched. She projected her mind into the mind of the killer. She knew the man— well. And he had a strong personality. She was able to link with his mind— somehow. And she was able to see what he saw. She helped Chief Marshbank."

"I've heard tell of some of the big city police departments using psychics," Hanks volunteered.

Culhane shrugged— he had never believed in it— never wanted to. Candler asked. "Well, JeAnn— if your mother's in a trance now— well— will this hinder her coming to?"

"No— I don't think so. See— she put herself into the trance that time. This— just I think— sort of happened. Her mind is coming awake, and it stopped one level below— or above— conciousness."

"Well, darling— whose mind is she— linking— yes— whose mind is she linking with?"

"Fidelito— I think— but somehow it isn't him. Don't ask me why, but I just know."

Momma Cinda's body went erect across the bed, her arms raising. JeAnn dropped to her knees beside her mother.

Hanks whispered. "Is she dyin'?"

"No— I don't think it's anything somatic." JeAnn whispered.

Culhane cleared his throat. "Then what the hell is it?"

Momma Cinda's chest rose and fell, rapidly, sweat gleaming on her milk chocolate skin, her eyelids fluttering. "Asmodeus— no!" And she sat bolt upright, eyes open. She screamed, fell back.

JeAnn shrieked, "I shouldn't have done this here! I need a trauma center, a crash cart! Damn it!" But while she vented, she was preparing a syringe.

"Adrenaline?" Culhane asked.

"Yeah." JeAnn Bonaparte answered nodding her head as she was about to administer the contents of the syringe.

Candler was beside her. Hanks waited calmly by the foot of the bed.

As the tip of the needle was about to penetrate Momma Cinda's flesh, JeAnn Bonaparte stayed her hand. "She's all right again." JeAnn Bonaparte put down the needle, adding. "I think."

Culhane watched as JeAnn checked vital signs, then sagged to a seated position on the edge of the bed. She looked around the room, nodded, then exhaled loudly.

"Asmodeus? Do we know him?" Where was Mulrooney when he really needed her? "Is he a Voodoo guy or something?"

JeAnn Bonaparte merely shook her head.

But Hanks— surprisingly— answered. "I read a great deal. Because of that, I'll frequently read books I really have no interest in. I read one once— it had to do with demons and devils. And that's what Asmodeus is— he's a demon."

"Shit," Culhane said through his teeth.

"She's— she's coming round— I can— Momma? Momma? Can you hear me? Momma? It's JeAnn— Momma?"

"JeAnn— Je—?"

Momma Cinda's head turned.

"Yes," JeAnn whispered then leaned her head against her mother's chest, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Culhane stepped to the far side of the bed— it was getting crowded there— and started to pour Gatoraide into a glass.

"Lie still Momma— rest—"

Momma Cinda's tongue sounded thick— and she still seemed incoherent. "M.F. Mulrooney— trouble— the demon— God preserve her. Dumballa preserve her. Pray to St. John the Baptist— pray to St. John the Baptist—"

"What's she talking about?" Candler asked.

"M.F.— Fanny Mulrooney's initials," Culhane supplied, holding the Gatoraide still— and noticing that his hand was shaking. He made a conscious mental effort to stop the shaking. It worked— a little.

"But I don't understand— was she aware of what was going on around her while she was unconscious?"

JeAnn looked at Candler. "In a drug induced state like that— her mind could have been moving up and down through various levels of consciousness. She could have overheard something— but I don't understand her talking about a demon—"

"Maybe from those Voodoo rituals of hers," Hanks supplied.

Culhane watched JeAnn's eyes flicker as she looked up at Hanks. "Voodoo has nothing to do with Satanism— nothing. Not a thing. No— it must be something else— maybe somebody— or in the trance."

Culhane bent over the bed. "Momma Cinda— tell me about Fanny— M.F. Mulrooney—"

"No!" JeAnn pushed against Culhane's chest. "She might—"

But Momma Cinda began to speak. "Asmodeus— the mind— the boat— no! No! Don't touch her mind! No!"

And Momma Cinda's eyes opened wide again.

Culhane looked at her— the eyes seemed almost clear. "Momma Cinda— can you tell me? What did you see?"

"The demon has her— Fidelito's soul is dead to life— Fidelito's mind— Asmodeus uses it— to control the boat."

"Boat?" Culhane didn't understand.

"Drink this," JeAnn told her mother taking the glass from Culhane's hand. He hadn't realized he'd still held it. Momma Cinda drank, choking a bit as JeAnn Bonaparte took the glass away.

Culhane asked again. "Boat? Momma Cinda— what boat?"

JeAnn looked at him angrily— then to her mother. "Rest, Momma— please—"

"No." Momma Cinda began. "We will all die—"

"None of y'all move!"

Culhane looked up— Hanks. A gleaming six-inch Colt Python .357 Magnum was in his right fist.

Instinct made Culhane reach for the SIG, even though logic told him that he wouldn't make it.

There was a blur of movement— Candler— but Candler's gun was already drawn— Culhane saw it, felt the hammering at his head.

The Gatoraide fell from his left hand. The gun fell across the bed in front of him and he reached for it, slamming down across the bed as the blackness washed over him...

## Chapter Twenty-four

"Where's Blackbeard's treasure, woman?" Hanks snarled.

"Whit— what are you—"

"Love you— be realistic, darling— you're very good in bed, but of course nigger women are supposed to be—"

"Bastard—"

"Where is Blackbeard's treasure— y'all tell me or the girl here dies!"

"Mary Frances Mulrooney!"

"The hell with her," Hanks responded.

"Fidelito is doing evil— His soul. He has bargained with—"

"Y'all tell me where the treasure is now, or I start rearranging this pretty face of hers!"

"You and Culhane are dead. Momma Cinda— but she can live—"

Culhane was swimming. He was reaching to the surface, but he couldn't touch it and his breath was burning out, burning his lungs. The water was very dark— but it wasn't cold and sometimes there were crazy colors in the water. He felt something sharp against his hip and his shoulder and theorized he had hit a rock. He tried clawing for the surface again.

"Cowards— hitting a man who's unconscious and can't defend himself!"

"JeAnn— darling— my darling little pretender— you're next."

"I'll take care of her—"

"No— give her mother one more chance— the treasure, Momma Cinda. You sent this daughter of yours to private schools all her life, kept a scrapbook on her—"

"Scrapbook— Whit!"

"I knew you were what you were— why do you think I made you trust me? Because I loved you? And

even if I hadn't known, after you told me— could you really, in your wildest imagination darling, suppose that I would—"

"My scrapbook— my scrapbook!"

"A little over a year ago. Momma Cinda— your house was broken into? Remember that? All over the island, I'd hear about what you did— giving money to this, to that— always more money. But where did it come from. And then— you were very foolish— that golden crucifix that so mysteriously appeared in the antiquities market. That crucifix wasn't anything stolen from the Indians in The New World or anything like that. It was the private property of Alvero Ibanezpedro Santiago Ortega, Captain General of the trade ship The Holy Infant. Blackbeard got it off the coast of Florida. So I knew. You found the treasure. An anonymous donor completely funded a litter transplant for a kid from one of the poorest families on the island. You have Blackbeard's treasure. And I want it. Now—"

"My scrapbook—"

"Your Voodoo crap wasn't of interest to me— you had nothing valuable— you had no maps, no hidden compartments— just the scrapbook and this pretty little girl who was white. And suddenly I realized she had to be yours. And she was my key— now!"

He was definitely not going to reach the surface in time— and it was harder to breath.

He heard a clicking sound. If he hadn't been in the water, he would have sworn it was a pistol being cocked. He started to laugh at himself; Mulrooney always said he had a one track mind about guns. Fanny— he could see her, in the water, beneath some boat? She was drowning. He tried to swim for her, but there wasn't any air in his lungs at all. And, the blackness surrounding him was getting so very cold.

"Either tell me— and tell me the truth— or so help me, I'll shoot your daughter JeAnn where she stands. Momma Cinda. Here and now! You and Culhane are going to die— but if you tell me where the treasure is located, after I get it— you have my word as a gentleman— I'll let JeAnn go."

"A liar— and you say you tell the truth?"

"You have no choice, madam— none. I'll count to five—"

"Candler—"

"Shut up, Chief— if I can't have it, nobody has it. One!"

"Momma— don't trust him!"

"Two."

"What about Mary Frances Mulrooney?"

"The hell with her! If Fidelito kills her, then at least she'll have her boyfriend here for company. Three!"

"Momma! Let him shoot me!"

"Candler!"

"Chief—"

Culhane told himself if he could get out of the water, he could save Fanny, and he could pick up his gun and shoot Candler and Hanks and then both of them would shut up. He reached upward— but the surface of the water was farther above him than before.

"Four!"

"Don't tell him. Momma!"

"Wait—"

"The truth, Momma Cinda— or your daughter dies. And you'll be dead, so there won't be any second chances."

"In the cave— beneath the grotto. Parson's Cove. The black rocks. At the back— of the grotto— opposite the waterfall. Big rocks there. Move them— take the rock steps down— but Fidelito is there. And the Demon who guards the treasure is there."

"One time when I was a little boy— my parents— they started telling me about Santa Claus. And I knew I shouldn't believe it. It was stupid. Illogical. For fools. Believing in demons is just the same. You and Mr. Culhane— I have something special planned. And as you're dying, Momma Cinda— just hope you'll die without your daughter's blood on your hands."

"Momma!"

Something cracked in the water and Culhane heard a scream— it wasn't Fanny, though. He wondered, who was it who had screamed?

"Chief— get Culhane out of here. There's a van in the garage. Load him in. Then come back and give me a hand here— we don't have much time."

"One thing Candler— if Momma Cinda lied and we don't find the treasure— well— y'all are dead too."

Culhane felt something hard hurting his chest and he was rising up— but he still couldn't reach the surface of the water. His air was nearly gone and he opened his mouth to shout for help—

"And hit Culhane again and shut him up!"

Culhane was drifting beneath the surface, and something happened and he felt himself sink— hard...

\* \* \*

Mary Frances Mulrooney felt hands exploring her body— but there were no hands touching her.

She heard his voice inside her head. He sat cross-legged atop the mound of gold and jewels. But, his lips— they did not move. "Your breasts are small beneath my hands, but the nipples harden well. Already, I am stirring you. Your body moved in rhythm to my thoughts." She tried to control her

abdomen— but it was moving, rising and falling, moving side to side, as if— she screamed. The voice persisted, her hands clawing at the rock beneath her, the robe thrown open when it had started, when the pressure against her breasts had begun— the pain. Her nipples were being compressed, twisted, torn at, fingers— but there were no fingers there— moving along the insides of her thighs.

Laughter— she heard him laugh inside her soul. "Leave me alone!"

A finger she could not see— it brushed against her lips and she could taste it, salty, dirty and foul.

The laughter again, and her body sagged downward, her hands moving to cover herself with the black Satanic robe, the fabric of the robe making her suck in her breath as it touched against her nipples. She hugged the robe to her body, lying there, her breathing coming in short gasps.

She didn't understand it— she felt it— but it wasn't there. She felt his hands— she closed her eyes. When he decided to Penetrate her— she started to cry. Inside herself— and she shouted the words now, screamed them to the demon, "I'd rather die!"

The laughter.

If he penetrated her, she wanted to die.

Fidelito's voice. Like someone making a recitation in school. Mulrooney lay against the black rocks, the lamplight making the gold burn like fire, Fidelito's face dripping sweat. His eyes seemed dead. "Trident C-4 Fleet Ballistic Missiles. Length: thirty-four feet. Diameter: seventy-four inches. Weight: sixty-five thousand pounds. Powered stages: three. Guidance systems: stellar and inertial. Range: four thousand nautical miles. Submarine launched— Ohio Class: five hundred sixty feet long. Beam: forty-two feet. Surface displacement: sixteen thousand six hundred tons. Missile compliment: twenty-four in twenty-four sealed tubes located amidships. Launch control: gas steam generator. Fire control system: Mark 98. Navigation system: two Mark 2 Model 7 SINS Electrostatically supported gyro monitor satellite missile guidance systems."

"What is he saying— answer me!" Mulrooney screamed the words at the piratical shape of the demon.

Fidelito stopped speaking, and again the voice in her mind. "Fidelito lusted for power. I lust for destruction. There will be death such as there has never been before."

And inside her, the demon laughed. Mulrooney hugged the robe about her. She realized that she was screaming...

\* \* \*

Josh Culhane had opened his eyes but been unable to focus them, so closed them again.

He heard Momma Cinda's voice. "Mr. Culhane— wake up."

"I'm awake." he told her. But he didn't know why— his last memory was hearing all that talking while he was drowning. So, he shouldn't be awake at all.

"You are not awake— now wake up."

"I'm awake— you sound like Fanny when—" He opened his eyes. "Fanny what the hell hap—"

"Hell?" And he heard Momma Cinda laugh, a bitter laugh.

Culhane shook his head. He realized why he couldn't see anything— there was nothing but darkness. "Where are we?"

He tried to move, but he couldn't move.

"What time is it, do you think?"

"I don't know what time it is—" He tried looking at his watch, but he couldn't. He realized his hands were bound behind him. "Where's Candler? Where's— ahh— shit I can't think."

"We are all going to die anyway."

"What are you—"

"I put myself into trance while you were unconscious. I linked again with Fidelito's mind."

"What? Where are we?"

"Mr. Candler explained."

Culhane tried moving— his ankles and wrists were bound, ropes or something encircling his chest and his thighs, binding him to something. And he heard a roar and a whine. "Where are we?"

"Mr. Candler owns an office building—"

"Good for him— what the hell's that noise?" Culhane had to shout so he could be heard.

And he felt movement beneath him.

"The elevator is moving," she told him, shouting, but her voice emotionless.

Above him— moving toward them— he could see slivers of light. He felt a rush of air against his face, but the air was foul smelling and damp. The movement stopped, the noise stopping, too.

"Why did you want to know what time it is?"

There was no need to shout anymore.

Momma Cinda answered him. "Because, when the office workers go home at five o'clock, we'll die. But everyone else will die soon after that."

Her voice was like her daughter's voice, less cultured sounding, but soft, musical, warm.

Culhane needed to isolate things. His head hurt him badly and he knew he wasn't thinking straight yet. "What did Candler say? Tell me. Every word."

"That you say you write stories of adventure. He would give you a fitting death, something that would challenge your abilities, stimulate your mind. Those are his words."

"Why an elevator? What did he say would happen?" Culhane was trying to think. How could you kill somebody with an elevator? He had never done that in any of his books. On the top of an elevator?

Momma Cinda spoke again. He judged that her head was near him, but he couldn't see her. "He said that at five o'clock the workers on the top floor will go home. They will summon—" But her voice was drowned out—the roar, then the whine of the elevator machinery, but no movement this time. Culhane heard something new—an elevator in the shaft beside them, cracks of yellow light above, the elevator moving past them, blotting the light from view. The roar stopped. The whine stopped.

"Tell me fast— just the important stuff."

"When this elevator is called to the top floor, the roof of the elevator is four inches from the ceiling of the shaft. The cable was vibrating beside them, but not above them. Momma Cinda spoke again. "I have linked with the mind of Fidelito— but it is not his mind anymore."

"Look— Fanny goes for that stuff—"

"You call her Fanny?" Momma Cinda asked simply.

"Yeah— now maybe I could see— but—"

"Your woman— my friend— the demon has violated her, but has not consummated the act with her. Perhaps, Dumballa will be merciful and she will die before he does this horrible thing to her."

"Consummate— what horrible thing? What are you—"

"Fidelito bargained with the demon of the cave— it is Asmodeus. I had suspected this since my prayers to St. John The Baptist safeguarded me from his power when I would visit the cave—"

"Beneath the grotto near the black rocks—ahh—"

"Then you were not all that unconscious— I thought that."

Culhane squinted his eyes shut against the headache. "Ahh— he's— he's got your daughter, JeAnn Candler has."

"He goes to the cave— now. But, if Fidelito's Zombies do not stop him, Asmodeus will. It is too late. We will all die. I only wanted to take what I needed to help. Blackbeard's evil was so great— and I did good with what I took."

Culhane shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

How did you get untied and get out of an elevator shaft? Culhane was feeling at the knots, and the elevator started to move, the noise of the winding mechanism, the moan of cable and metal almost deafening. Even if it had not been for soundproofing, they would never be heard once one of the elevators was in motion.

Culhane found a knot; his heart sank. He couldn't remember the name of the knot, but it almost always took two hands to undo. He laughed at himself— Charleston was, after all, a great seaport. Sailors knots should be common. The elevator stopped. Momma Cinda began to speak again. "Fidelito is telling Asmodeus about the submarine."

"Submarine?" Culhane tugged at the ropes, but the knots only seemed to tighten. Another good characteristic of a sailor's knot. And Culhane he felt an even sicker feeling in his stomach. He remembered Momma Cinda's words while she had been in what JeAnn called a 'trance'— she had spoken of a boat. "What kind of submarine?" Culhane asked her slowly.

"It has Trident missiles."

She was delirious from her ordeal, or from fright, or from the drug-induced condition she had been in— too long, he judged.

"Look— I'll figure a way of getting us out of this. Momma Cinda. Just rest easy."

"You do not believe me. You think I am a foolish old woman. You think this is all from my mind. It is from Fidelito's mind— and the demon controls it. And the demon now controls the submarine."

Culhane shook his head; he was trying to force himself to think. There was always a way out. He always found a way for Sean Dodge. The woman began to talk again and he let her— it was less distracting than trying to argue with her. "Fidelito has no control. The demon sees through his mind and is using Fidelito's mind— it burns with pain. Fidelito's brain. I felt that. The demon is controlling the sequencing computer, it is called. His mind is changing the circuitry."

"Sure—" Culhane couldn't help it. He was tired of Voodoo and Demons and Mombas.

"I saw large, grey painted boxes and circuitry inside them. His mind has altered these. There is a small rocket and when it is fired to make the steam which will expel the missile, the warheads will also detonate. The hatches will be closed. They have no radio. They have no control over their navigation system. They are coming— for us. All of us. And the storm which the demon summons to us will spread the death beyond imagining."

Culhane gave up— if he humored her maybe he could think. "Which team is on board?"

She didn't answer. Then after a moment's pause, she did. "The gold team."

The on duty and off-duty teams were designated blue and gold. Culhane licked his lips— they felt dry, cracked. "How many missiles?"

"Twenty-four."

So she was an avid reader or had a friend in the submarine service, he told himself. A talkative friend. "What does the abbreviation SINS stand for?"

"Ship's Inertial Navigation System— the demon controls this."

"What kind of warhead?"

"Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicles— three for each missile."

"Don't tell me any more." Culhane declared. But he changed his mind. "Why?"

"To destroy— that is all."

"That'd do more than destroy a submarine, or even Charleston. Before the Cold War with the Soviets ended, it was estimated there were maybe as many as two thousand nuclear warheads stored in the Charleston area. Most of them are probably still here. And, then there's the Savannah River Plant. If twenty-four missiles all went off in one spot at once you'd have enough heat to— to detonate all of them maybe. Two thousand warheads— maybe a half a megaton apiece. That's a thousand megatons. A billion tons of TNT in one small place. The— ahh— the whole area— the whole southeast— just one giant crater, maybe. The ocean would rush in. A lot of it would be vaporized and the vapor would be radioactive. You could— ahh— you could—"

"To destroy— that is all he lusts, the demon."

"You gotta be—" The elevator started to move and he shouted the last word to her, "Wrong!"

He had read some of the materials dealing with the scenario for nuclear winter. All those missiles. Fires. Smoke. Poisonous chemicals. He was shivering.

What had she said about a storm? "What storm?"

"There was a hurricane closing in on Miami, but the demon diverts it. It will strike simultaneously with the detonation of the missile warheads. The demon makes it so."

Culhane tugged at the ropes on his wrists. The elevator was rising again, toward the roof. The other elevators were starting to move. All of them— he wondered if it were five o'clock and the time to die?

But he wasn't going to let that happen.

Freeing his ankles was impossible.

As was lateral movement.

There was only the slightest chance what he hoped for would still be in his pocket. But he had nothing to lose by gambling. He was able to twist around just a little.

They had stripped away his jacket. Culhane could feel that his pistol and the Bali-Song were gone. And, as he moved, he could feel his right front pocket where he had carried the Seecamp. That Hanks certainly would have found Culhane's weapons was no surprise.

"Yes!" They hadn't taken his keys.

Culhane's body was bound to a cleat or something on the roof of the elevator.

"What are you doing, Mr. Culhane?"

"If we're gonna die together maybe, just call me Josh," he grunted, the ropes gouging at him. "I'm trying to

figure a way of getting to my keys. There's a little knife on the ring and I can use it to cut us free." Culhane hoped.

The keys were in the front pocket of his pants. Momma Cinda was on his left side. "Momma Cinda? Can you move at all?"

"Not much, Mr. Culhane— Josh."

"My keys are in my left front pocket. Do what you can." By arching his back— it was possible to do so only slightly— Culhane could move his bound wrists closer to his left hip. His fingers were not completely numb yet and he tried grabbing one of his belt loops, in the hope of twisting the pants leftward and somehow being able to dip his fingers into the pocket.

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to twist my pants around enough to grab the keys and—"

"Let me try. Josh," Momma Cinda suggested. "Try to get your thigh under me as far as you can."

"Good idea," Culhane murmured. He edged his rear end as far to the left as he could, then twisted his left foot against the ropes around his ankles. "Oww!"

"What is it?"

"A cramp. Hang in there." Culhane was edging his knee outward. "Ohh— excuse me."

"Keep pushing with your leg. Josh."

Culhane's left thigh was under the right cheek of Momma Cinda's rear end, and he felt her fingers edging along his leg, toward his pocket.

"See if you can push the keys upward in the pocket. Even if they catch on the pocket liner, you can still tear them free."

"Yes." she murmured.

The elevator began to move again, upward.

The elevator stopped. Other elevators were moving on both sides of them— Culhane could hear them.

The elevator started again.

The elevator stopped.

"See if you can slide downward, Josh— just a little."

Culhane wriggled his body a little left and tried to push his torso downward, flexing his knees.

The pocket— he could feel Momma Cinda's fingers near the top of his left trouser pocket. He twisted his neck downward and to try to see, but could not, even though his eyes had become accustomed to the

poor to non-existent light.

The elevator started again; it was going upward, a floor at a time.

Momma Cinda's fingers— two of them— were digging in his pocket.

The elevator stopped. Momma Cinda said, "I've got them. Now what?"

"Hold onto them for dear life and try to twist around so our hands can touch and I can get the keyring from you."

The elevator was starting to move again.

His fingers closed around one of the keys, then another. Then the little Executive Edge Junior. Its 420 stainless blade wasn't more than an inch long, but it locked open and was seriously sharp.

The elevator stopped. Culhane with no idea how many floors remained before they would be crushed to death.

Culhane's mind raced. "Momma Cinda— hold the ring or one of the keys, hold it nice and tightly. Watch it that I don't open a vein in your wrist."

"I'm holding as tightly as I can. Josh."

There was still enough circulation in his fingers that he felt the little thumbnail slot. He rotated the blade partially open, pinching the knife hard between his thumb and first finger, then pressing hard with his thumb and arcing the blade fully open. "I'm going to feel around for the rope I can cut at the best angle, so forgive me in advance if I touch something I shouldn't"

"I trust your intentions, Mr. Culhane— Josh."

"Hold still!" It was the last thing he could say, because the elevator started moving upward again and the noise drowned out all speech.

The elevator stopped. Culhane thought he could make out the top of the shaft not far above them, the top of the shaft where they would be crushed to death.

"Mr. Culhane! Josh!"

"Hold the good thought— pray— whatever." and Culhane pushed the little Executive Edge knife's blade against one of the ropes, drew it back, pushed again, sawing with it.

The elevator started again. Culhane continued moving the blade back and forth, his crossed wrists screaming at him with the pain, the fingers of his right hand all but numb.

The elevator stopped.

Still. Culhane had not sawn through the rope.

The cable vibrated, the elevator beginning to move again.

The elevator started upward again, bringing them inexorably toward what would be an excruciatingly painful death. Their bodies would provide a fraction of a second's resistance to the crushing effect of the elevator roof against the ceiling of the shaft, and that micro-second would seem an eternity.

The elevator stopped again. Maybe one or two more floors and that would be it.

"Hang in there. Momma Cinda," Culhane called. "Hang in there!"

The elevator began to move again—in the shadow above as he looked up, he could just make out the last visible band of light through the elevator doors. The top floor was one above them as the elevator stopped.

He almost dropped the knife.

One strand of the rope was sawn through. a second partially. Culhane kept moving the blade. He was through the second strand, one to go. If the rope binding his wrists were down to one strand, there might have been a chance to snap it. Momma Cinda would not be strong enough.

The elevator cable vibrated.

The car started to move, but stopped abruptly.

"Maybe it's out of order!" Culhane told her. It was a good thought, albeit unlikely, and Momma Cinda sounded as though she were crying anyway.

The last strand, cut through.

"Try to pull your hands free; twist your wrists around and shake out of the ropes. Hurry!"

The cable vibrated again.

"I'm free, Josh!"

"Cut me free, and fast! Hurry!" Culhane angled toward her as best he could, felt her hands at his wrists. "Hurry, please."

"I've got one strand cut. Almost a second one."

"Move your hands away!" Culhane tried snapping the ropes, could not. "Cut through that second one. Quick!"

"In just a— it's done cut!"

"Watch out!" Culhane flexed, expanding his chest, tearing his wrists free of the rope.

His arms ached like bad teeth—but he moved his hands. "Gimme the keyring! Watchit! Watch out for the knife!" The rope across his torso—he cut it. He sat up, looked above them. He could see the interior of the shaft's ceiling, perhaps twenty feet overhead. Untying the knots would be faster than cutting the ropes. He struggled the knot free from his ankles, Momma Cinda working to free her ankles as well.

Culhane looked up, rolling onto his hands and knees. He leaned over Momma Cinda. "Watch out!"

"Save yourself, Mr. Culhane— maybe you can save JeAnn and save Mary Frances. Before the submarine comes— you could take a plane maybe—"

Culhane had the ropes free of her ankles."

"I won't be able to walk Josh. My old bones is stiff and—"

The elevator started moving upward.

Twelve feet. Eleven maybe. Culhane forced Momma Cinda into a sitting position.

Eight feet— their only chance was the trap door into the elevator roof.

"Hurry." Culhane gasped. "Hurry!" But he knew that she couldn't hear him.

Culhane dragged Momma Cinda to her knees. Half by feel in the semi-darkness, he found the outline of the trap door. He tugged at it— it didn't budge. Culhane grasped the trap door with both hands. He ripped the hatch upward and swung it back.

Momma Cinda would be a tight fit— he crabbed her.

"Feet first— hurry!" But she couldn't hear him. he knew. The top of the shaft was less than four feet above them. Culhane crammed Momma Cinda into the opening, screams from beneath them— occupants of the elevator, he realized. "Pull her in— hurry!" But the people inside the elevator wouldn't be able to him either. Culhane shoved Momma Cinda through the opening. Her breasts were jammed. "No offense, ma'am," Culhane said, a lifetime of respect for women kicking in despite the circumstances. His mom would have been proud. Culhane's hands grabbed Momma Cinda's breasts, pushed them past the lip of the trap door opening. If she fell, she fell.

Culhane let her go.

He glanced up once— in the broad beam of pale white light from inside the elevator, he could see the top of the shaft with horrifying clarity. Beside the hatch, Culhane saw a 'dot of white. He reached for it, then dove through the opening head first, falling, catching onto a man's shoulders, dropping to his knees— hard— on the floor of the elevator. A woman screamed— Momma Cinda lay on the floor in the corner. The elevator stopped, the doors opened and a man in the corridor asked. "Going down?"

## **Chapter Twenty-five**

Most of the guys in the Charleston PD that Culhane encountered at the station after the initial explanation about why he and Momma Cinda had dropped down through an escape hatch into a crowded elevator seemed to accept the fact better after he confirmed that he was in fact THE Josh Culhane who chronicled the adventures of Sean Dodge.

He signed four books and, in one case, asked to not only sign his own name but "Sean Dodge," Culhane broke his usual self-imposed rule and did it.

He had signed the books while sitting at a vacant desk using the telephone— on hold for Martin Janus, on hold for fifteen minutes by the face of the Rolex. Finally the receiver got Picked up. "Mr. Culhane— Josh— this is Marty Janus again," the voice told him.

"Well?"

"There are Federal agents on the way to pick you and this—"

"Momma Cinda?"

"Yes, this woman Momma Cinda— to pick you both up. That is all I can say. Goodbye." The phone clicked dead.

Culhane set the telephone receiver down.

The television set in the far corner of the office was tuned to The Weather Channel. The report it broadcast from the National Hurricane Center confirmed what Culhane had seen through the windows of the police car in which he and Momma Cinda had been taken to police headquarters. High winds and near torrential rains lashed Charleston. Hurricane Elfego had made a radical, almost ninety degree turn away from Miami and was racing toward Charleston Harbor at a speed of nearly one hundred fifty nautical miles per hour.

On the desk in a brown bag was a clean shirt. Levis, underwear and necessary items like shampoo, toothpaste, dental floss and his razor, all retrieved for him from the hotel. If he were going to be incinerated, he wanted to go clean. He left the desk, telling the detective sergeant who had been shepherding him that he was ready for the shower now...

\* \* \*

As Culhane finished dressing in the locker room, a single police officer the only other person, changing from civies into his uniform, the room suddenly got crowded at its far end. Three men entered, neatly but not flashily tailored suits, the suitcoats left open, one of the men wearing sunglasses. The one with the sunglasses came forward. Behind the other two, Culhane could see the Detective Sergeant, Hawkins.

The man with the sunglasses did the I.D. case flip— it read Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Joshua David Culhane?"

Culhane finished closing his shirt. "Yes?"

"I believe you were told to expect us. There isn't much time, if you'd accompany me, sir?"

Culhane shrugged, stuffing the rest of his dirty clothes into the brown bag, putting his razor and the other items on top. He stuffed the brown bag under his arm. "Ready when you are," and he followed after the man out of the locker room, up the stairs and through a corridor. At the end of the corridor, Momma Cinda waited. She had been able to clean up, but there had been no change of clothes for her, her things still grease stained from the elevator shaft. A rather pretty dark haired woman— the hair short— waited with her. As Culhane drew closer, he decided that the dark-haired woman was a female Fed: blue suit,

only with a skirt instead of pants, sunglasses— he imagined the eyes beneath them were blue or green of hazel, because the colors would go with her complexion.

They all stopped in the corridor for a moment, the sunglassesed male FBI agent conferring with Sergeant Hawkins. Culhane said to the woman. "FBI? It's rare that they're progressive enough to use female field agents, except on TV."

The woman's lips drew out and upraised into a smile. She had nice teeth. "They aren't— ONI is," and she reached an I.D. case from inside her purse. The purse wasn't too dissimilar from the one which he'd gotten for Fanny, designed to carry a gun. She flipped open the I.D. case and Culhane glanced at something about United States Naval Intelligence before the case flipped closed.

"How long have you known Mr. Janus, Mr. Culhane?" the woman asked— she was an alto.

"My brother Jeff— Jeff's dead now— he introduced me to Mr. Janus several years ago. I just got back from Latin America a short while ago, helping him with a little personnel problem."

The woman nodded, closing her purse.

"All right," the FBI agent with the sunglasses began, "time's wasting." He shoved past Culhane and started for the street. Culhane walked beside Momma Cinda, saying nothing, but reaching out, taking the woman's arm to help her. She looked very tired, tired to the point of falling down. Her hair was neatly combed and drawn back in a bun at the nape of her neck, but the blue dress and its large white open collar were a mass of wrinkles and stains. Her shoes were mud caked and torn.

The female ONI agent made a small, collapsible umbrella appear from her purse, glanced through the glass doors toward the rain and windswept street beyond and put it away.

"Putting that umbrella away must mean you're not interested in doing your impression of 'Mary Poppins,' huh?" Culhane thought it was a very Sean Dodge-esque remark.

The woman took off her sunglasses and put them into her purse. Her eyes were pansy blue. "I saw a cartoon panel in an old magazine where she was flying by and some guys on the street were saying that they could look under her skirt." Then, she smiled.

"Right," Culhane grunted. Maybe she thought he was flirting with her?

"Bring up the cars," the sunglassesed man ordered, one of the other two taking a Nokia phone from under his coat and touchtoning a number.

In less than a minute, two black Suburbans with dark tinted glass pulled up to the curb.

Rain-coated drivers stepped out, the raincoats open despite the wind-driven rain. The raincoats were the kind with no pocket linings on the right side, Culhane knew, allowing the gunhand to access the submachinegun underneath.

"You that worried Fidelito and his Zombies will try something here?" Culhane asked the sunglassesed man.

The FBI agent stopped and turned around. "Isn't it that character you used to write about— the guy with the two Detonics 45s— who always said. 'It pays to plan ahead?'"

Culhane just shook his head. "That was another writer."

They made a dash through the rain, one of the FBI agents throwing a raincoat over Momma Cinda's shoulders, the ONI agent taking it like a man and getting soaked for her trouble. Culhane, too, was soaked to the skin as he flung himself inside the Suburban and onto the middle seat, right on her heels. Momma Cinda disappeared into the second Suburban with the other two FBI agents.

Both Suburbans were rolling into the sparse traffic in seconds, windshield wipers at full speed.

The sunglassed man sat in the front seat opposite the driver, Culhane sharing the middle seat with the woman. The man with the sunglasses took them off— Culhane liked him better with them on. "All right Mr. Culhane— we're on our way to Mr. Candler's house— we have a search warrant. The local police already have the neighborhood cordoned off, so no one matching this Candler's or Chief Hanks' description could get in or out."

"Hope they left my gun there."

"What the hell are you doing with a gun? What are you doing with this Voodoo priestess—

She's a Momba," Culhane corrected cheerfully.

"What is this concerning some submarine?" The formerly sunglassed man leaned over the front seat back, staring at Culhane.

"Don't you guys talk to one another?" Culhane asked, looking at the FBI man, then at the pretty ONI agent beside him. She had the appearance of a drowned cat at the moment, but a pretty one. "I mean, why the hell do you think she's here?" Culhane smiled, jerking his thumb toward the ONI agent.

"Special Agent Forrester knows we have a submarine that is apparently out of control and headed for Charleston harbor," the woman supplied. "But what none of us knows is how the CIA found out about it and said you had privileged information concerning it."

"And a solution to the problem— maybe." Culhane added. "Martin Janus was a friend of my brother. I've done him a couple of favors, as I mentioned to you already. He seemed like the logical person to call to get through to the Navy. Looks like it worked."

She consulted a leather notebook from her purse. "The information relayed to me, Mr. Culhane, indicated that Cinderella Evangeline Bonaparte, a.k.a. Momma Cinda, divulged to you a great deal of technical data regarding Ohio Class submarines and Trident C-4 missiles, while the two of you were— bound to the top of an elevator and about to be crushed to death? That sounds a bit melodramatic—"

"I verified the circumstances regarding the elevator with—" and the formerly sunglassed FBI man— Forrester?— checked his notebook, similar to the one the woman from ONI had. "—with Detective Sergeant Hawkins. It seems to check out. What's this whitlock Candler—"

"Whitlock J. Candler, the third," Culhane supplied.

Forrester scribbled in his notebook with a silver Cross pen. "The third— what does he have to do with this? And also this Jimmy Howard Hanks, police chief of St. Peter's Island. And someone named Arturo

Velasquez, a.k.a. Fidelito. And you mentioned Zombies. The last time I heard anything about Zombies was in an old black and white Martin and Lewis movie."

"That was actually a remake of an earlier Bob Hope film. Where are we going? After Candler's house?"

The woman beside Culhane spoke. "We'll be meeting Mrs. Bonaparte at the Cooper River Research Station. There are a lot of questions that need answering."

"How out of control is this submarine?" Culhane asked her.

She licked her lips, then nodded. "I don't suppose it matters. To the best of my knowledge, it is completely out of contact, on the surface and making flank speed for Charleston Harbor." She consulted a diminutive digital watch on her left wrist. "It would reach Charleston harbor in less than two hours. Just about the same time Hurricane Elfego is going to get here. There is no way to confirm the other data Mrs. Bonaparte alleged to you to have knowledge of."

"You've tried everything—I mean— sent some Tomcats out to overfly? Checked—"

She interrupted him. "We have no additional data."

"Am I correct in assuming." Culhane began, "that if she's right— Momma Cinda, I mean— and those twenty-four missiles all go at once inside their tubes, there would be enough heat and/or explosive power to activate the two thousand or so nuclear warheads stored in the Charleston area?"

"I can't answer that—I couldn't answer it even if I knew. I'm not a scientist. But I pray to God it wouldn't."

That struck Culhane as the most sensible thing to do at the moment— so he decided to try it himself...

\* \* \*

The gun the ONI agent took from her purse was a SIG 228, what Culhane considered to be one of the three best 9mms made, the other two the slightly larger SIG 226 and the KAHR Arms MK9. The gun Forrester took from a strong side carry beneath his coat was also a SIG. The driver slid his right hand through the pocket opening of his raincoat as he stepped outside.

Forrester and the driver, whose name Culhane hadn't caught, took the front, Culhane accompanying the ONI agent to the rear of the house. Two SWAT-gearred Charleston police officers accompanied Forrester, two more with Culhane and the woman, the SWAT guys with their HK MP-5 submachineguns decked out with lasers, flashlights and suppressors.

The ONI agent ran through the rain along the driveway that separated Candler's house from its nearest neighbor, her high heels clicking on the pavement, her purse slung from her left shoulder, the SIG extended in both her tiny fists in the classic 'Miami Vice' water-witching hold.

At the rear of the house, she stopped, flattening herself against the wall by the back stairs, Culhane edging up beside her. "Stay back. Mr. Culhane— there might be shooting."

"Gee—" Culhane just looked away and shook his head.

"All right— keep behind me— but not too close. If there is gunfire, stay down. The local police are going in first, so you'll be all right."

This was carrying the inverse of chauvinism too far. Culhane thought. He reached down to the ground beside him; there was a piece of two by four, about four feet long, lying there, and it looked not to be rotted yet. He picked it up. "You stay behind me," and Culhane took the stairs three at a time, hearing the click of her heels behind him, the two SWAT guys behind her. Culhane reached the back porch. The back door was half glass and Culhane shouted, "Swiss Navy— you're under arrest!" as he swung the two by four through the glass, the glass shattering.

Culhane flung the two by four section through the opening, reached through and found the lock. He twisted it, then the knob, kicking the door inward and stepping back.

Nothing happened.

The ONI agent was beside him. "That was a bonehead play, Mr. Culhane."

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Margaret Case— Lieutenant Margaret Case."

"Okay Maggie— you've got the gun— let's go for it," and nodded defferentially to her.

She smiled— then shook her head as if in disgust. She started for the door, flanking it on the left, Culhane flanking it on the right. The two SWAT officers exchanged meaningful glances and criss-crossed as they stormed through the door.

Maggie still held her pistol in both fists, ready. Culhane behind her as she ran through the opening. She dropped into a crouch, her skirt to her thighs, behind the kitchen island that dominated the center of the room and housed the six burner stainless steel range. Culhane ducked beside the refrigerator.

The two SWAT officers, were already clearing the hallway when Culhane heard a crash from the front of the house. The noise probably originated from the two Feds and two SWAT officers who'd come in at the front of the house. But, just in case, Culhane broke into a dead run toward the sound's origin, a large, heavy Chinese cleaver plucked off the wall and clenched in his right fist. The ONI agent, Margaret Case, was behind him.

He reached the front hall, the second FBI agent visible behind a couch. Forester at the base of the stairs leading to the second floor and the bedrooms.

"What the hell was that about the Swiss Navy, for God's sake— and that glass breaking?"

Culhane started to answer Forester but Margaret Case interrupted. "Just Mr. Culhane being macho— let's go," and she started up the stairs, slowly. Forrester beside her, the second FBI agent falling in at their rear, taking the stairs sideways, his gun pointed down. Two of the SWAT officers led the way, the others securing the main floor. Culhane moved along beside the second FBI agent, nearer to the wall.

They reached the height of the stairs, Margaret Case and one SWAT officer taking the left, Forester and the other SWAT officer crossing the hall to the right. The second FBI agent— the driver of the Suburban— still covered behind them with his submachinegun.

"FBI, Mr. Candler— come out slowly with your hands empty and raised over your head!" It was Forester's voice.

Culhane looked at Forester. Forester was looking down the hallway.

"There's nobody here," Culhane whispered, then realized there wasn't any reason to whisper. He stepped into the hall, Margaret Case starting to caution him. Culhane just shaking his head. He walked to the bedroom door, looked inside. The bed still showed the signs of Momma Cinda having been there. Culhane's leather sport coat lay on the floor beside a chair. Culhane's eyes drifted toward the dresser— his SIG, the two spare magazines for it, his Seccamp, his knife, his cellphone.

Culhane started to reach for his belongings, but Forester pushed past him. "Evidence."

"Evidence?"

"If you can prove they're yours, you'll get them back— at least from us. The Charleston police might be a different matter."

Culhane straight armed Forester in the chest, slamming him against the wall, Forrester's gun coming up. Culhane just stared at him. "Look— there's almost seventeen thousand tons of nuclear holocaust heading this way, and what looks like the granddaddy of all hurricanes coming with it. The woman I love is a prisoner of a Cuban agent who's responsible for this somehow— and the guy's also some cockamamie devil worshipper. Momma Cinda's daughter is the prisoner of Hanks and Candler— and you ask me to worry about some damned fool gun laws? Grow up," and Culhane reached for the SIG.' He press-checked the chamber by edging the slide back a little— the chamber was still loaded, the magazine fully loaded as well. He stuffed the pistol into his trouser band, then he looked at Forester.

Forester just glared at him. The second FBI agent was still in the hall.

Margaret Case said, "I think Mr. Culhane has a good point, really."

Culhane looked at the woman and smiled...

\* \* \*

Culhane left his weapons with the Shore Patrol guards and got a receipt for them, then accompanied Forester, the second FBI agent (whose name Culhane still didn't know) and Lieutenant Margaret Case inside. They boarded a pair of golf cart type electric vehicles, Culhane clipping his visitor's badge to his jacket lapel, a Shore Patrol guard chauffeuring him and Margaret Case along a long, wide concrete corridor. Culhane glanced back once— Forrester and the second FBI agent complete with visitors badges were being driven right behind them.

Margaret Case began to talk. "We'll be meeting with— ahh—"

He looked at her, the hum of the electric car increasing steadily as the vehicle sped along one corridor, slowed momentarily, then turned into another.

"Admiral Case," she said, not looking at him.

"Daddy?"

"Daddy," she nodded. "He's— ahh— assistant director of Naval Intelligence. He's been put in charge of the— ahh— the situation."

Culhane only nodded, trying to think about the ride, about the submarine, about being someone who was both quite competent and intelligent but always got nepotism jokes cracked about her behind her back. But, Culhane could only think about Fanny Mulrooney. Forester had said every effort was being made to track down Candler and Hanks and if Momma Cinda had given them an actual location, they would be intercepted when they arrived there with JeAnn Bonaparte. And that was probably where Mary Frances Mulrooney had been taken— there should be information coming soon. Forester had said all that— Culhane knew that, believed that, but took no comfort from any of it. How long would it take to assemble a force of Federal agents and state police in sufficient strength to brace Fidelito and his Zombies and his men armed with automatic weapons?

And the submarine— if Momma Cinda were right, if what little information he had gleaned from Margaret Case were right, there was no chance. Culhane had already decided— if there were a selective evacuation of Charleston, all there would be time for, and he were offered a chance to go, he would refuse it.

A little more than an hour remained, which was time enough to escape the Federal agents and the Navy, time enough to at least try to rescue Fanny.

The electric car stopped, the Shore Patrol driver stepping out, offering his arm to Margaret Case— she touched at it gingerly as she exited the vehicle. He stood at attention as Culhane stepped down. Culhane following Margaret Case toward a set of double swinging doors, with scuff bumpers— like something that would be seen at the entrance to a surgical theater.

She pushed through the doors, Culhane after her.

Culhane's eyes were immediately drawn to the far end of the laboratory. There was a knot of men in white laboratory jackets and a massive fellow in a tweed sportcoat, the man as tall and strongly built as Chief Hanks. All eyes, it seemed, were glued to a lab table separate from the others. The tweed-clad man turned around, waving toward them. "Mr. Culhane— Margaret— hurry— this is just at the critical stage I understand. And, it's fascinating to see." His voice boomed like a succession of thunderclaps.

Culhane quickened his pace. Margaret Case walked beside him and they exchanged a quick glance.

"Here— let Mr. Culhane and Lieutenant Case have a look." The white lab coated men parted, the tweed jacketed man— his hair was silver white and full, but cut short, his jawline strong and resolute, his eyes blue like his daughter's— rested a massive hand on Culhane's shoulder. The mass of white coated men parted and Culhane saw Momma Cinda, still in her grease stained and tattered blue dress with the white collar. She was barefoot now, her shoes reclining at odd angles to her feet on the floor half under the base of the lab table.

There was a dead rooster on the top of the lab table.

"Hello, Mr. Culhane— I'm almost ready."

"With what?"

"A Gris-Gris for the you to wear when you fight Asmodeus— you'll need Holy Water from a Catholic church and salt to get near enough to him. And my snake is being picked up— I just hope he wasn't hurt that night on the island in Gunwater Swamp. And then the most important Gris-Gris for all of the rest of us— the one you'll have to put on the top of the submarine."

"It's called the Sail madame, among other things," a well modulated slightly midwestern accented voice said good-naturedly. "Mr. Culhane will have to put the Gris-Gris on the sail of the U.S.S. Susan B. Anthony."

Culhane looked at Momma Cinda, then at Admiral Case. "Gris-Gris?"

"It means 'Grey-Grey'— but it really—"

He just stared at Admiral Case. "I'm putting something with rooster blood—" Culhane looked back at the table. On it were various bits and pieces of plants and roots and he thought he smelled a dead fish, but he wasn't certain. "I'm putting something on the submarine?"

Admiral Case smiled. "Sir— I'm a great fan of your novels. And I know Sean Dodge would try this. Can I expect less— should I expect less from Sean Dodge's chronicler? Be advised, sir, that we have tried every means at our disposal to contact or stop the Anthony, short of blowing her out of the water. But SSBN 721 is dead on target and there's nothing we can do to stop her without killing all hands aboard. So, we can't afford not to try." Admiral Case glanced at a vintage Accutron wristwatch, black faced with what at a glance Culhane decided was stopwatch capability. "In exactly fifty-three minutes, she'll be in Charleston harbor. Even trying to roadblock her wouldn't do any good. The Anthony is too close as it is. If those missiles go off— and we can't gamble that they won't— every warhead in the Charleston area might go up with them. The devastation would be incalculable. And, with Hurricane Elfego due to strike at essentially the same moment, there—"

"About a billion tons of TNT all at once," Culhane almost whispered, "and wind and water power to carry the radiation up and down the coast and God knows how far inland."

Admiral Case nodded gravely. "Damned decent analysis, young man. Momma Cinda rejected the idea of a Navy SEAL trying this— she said it had to be you, someone whose courage was a certainty. She wouldn't try it without you."

"You mean a whole chunk of the world is just about to blow up— vaporize— and a hurricane's going to add to the devastation and the United States Navy is going to try Voodoo?"

"The United States Navy doesn't have time to try anything else, Mr. Culhane. I've been given carte blanche in this directly from the Chief of Naval Operations. We can't evacuate the city and its environs. We can't remove the warheads. We can't guarantee that we can stop the submarine even with airstrikes— I see it that we don't have a hell of a lot of options left. After all, Momma Cinda— such a delightful lady— told us of the danger when there was no way in God's world she could have known about it except through some psychic abilities. And she tells us the submarine is being controlled psychically and the only way to break that control is to place aboard the Anthony a Gris-Gris—"

"What the hell is a—"

Momma Cinda answered. "You would call it a charm, Mr. Culhane. I call it something that will block the

thoughts of the Demon Asmodeus long enough so that the submarine can get out of his power and go below the water. I shall begin calling on the Loa Agore Royo."

"We have the rubber raft, the two white sheep and the champagne ready for the sacrifice," the Admiral interrupted.

"W-what?" Culhane stammered.

Momma Cinda continued her explanation. "Agore Royo has much in common with Saint Ulrich. Agore Royo helps govern the sea and is the guardian of seafarers and their ships— and once the concentration of Asmodeus is broken, the submarine can go under the sea and there the Loa Agore Royo will guard it while you go to destroy Asmodeus."

Culhane realized he was shaking his head. "I wanna stop the submarine— fine. I gotta save Fanny— but with Voodoo?"

"And the Holy Water and the salt— we're getting that," Admiral Case reassured him. "We sent in a contingent of Marines along the beach toward the site of Fidelito's cave. Sweeps of the area indicate no electronic signals of any kind— it's nothing electronic. If the disruption of the Anthony is traceable to that cave, Mr. Culhane, then it's beyond what our instruments can measure. On an off chance that Momma Cinda's information might have some basis in fact, one of the helicopters we used to overfly the grotto and the cave was fitted with an electronic scanner that was jury-rigged to an Electroencephalograph. The EEG started recording brain waves unlike anything the medical man we sent along with it had ever seen or heard of— the machine burned out.

"Whatever's destroying that submarine, driving it here, perhaps controlling the missile launch tubes, the fire control system— whatever it is. If it's originating from that cave, it looks like it's alive."

Culhane shook his head again. "Wonderful— when does the Japanese Army come out with their toy tanks? Maybe we should call on Godzilla to save us— come on!"

"You, according to Momma Cinda, are the one chance we've got, Mr. Culhane. Chances are you're gonna die. But if this can stop the submarine, then at least we'll have time to find your Miss Mulrooney. Otherwise— if Momma Cinda's right— well, we're all dead, including M.F. Mulrooney."

Culhane closed his eyes for an instant. When he opened his eyes, Admiral Case, Margaret Case, Momma Cinda and the dead rooster were all still there...

\* \* \*

"Machinery spaces— let's hear from you," Wilton Wojciejowski said into his headset.

"What's the word, Wilton?"

"I'm getting nothing at all Captain— whatever it is has got our communications now too."

"Shit," Harlan Breeze muttered. "Shit!" Harlan Breeze shouted. He took his exec's headset and shouted into it. "Shit! Did anybody hear that— this is the Captain speaking. Acknowledge!" He threw the headset onto the chart table.

The U.S.S. Susan B. Anthony's Chief of Ship stepped forward. "Captain— begging the Captain's pardon— but I'll hike back to the machinery spaces, sir."

Breeze looked past O'Brien. "What the hell is happening here?" But he didn't wait for an answer. He looked at his exec— "Wilton— you got the con. Not that there's a damn thing you can do with it, but you got her."

"Aye, Captain."

He nodded to O'Brien, starting aft, calling to the helmsman. "Arnold— see what the hell you can do."

"Aye, aye, Captain." The gyrocompass was spinning like something out of a Cracker Jack box held next to a magnet. He looked across the overhead— men in light blue workshirts were working against the green of the overhead to free the electronic locking system of the hatch leading above to the sail. If they were submerged— and he couldn't tell from any of his instruments, it would be impossible to open the hatch. If they were on the surface, once the electronics were disarmed, it could be opened outward.

It had to be sabotage— but so complete that his mind staggered considering it. And, with the hatch open, if they were being propelled toward something, he could order the craft into a dive with the hatch open and scuttle her.

The thought had crossed his mind because the first of the irregularities after the radio had taken on the most ungodly static he had ever heard in twenty years under water, was the complete craziness of the sequencing computer. He had the sick feeling that his missiles— all two dozen of them— were no longer under his control.

There was the faint possibility that it was some sort of exercise, to see how a nuclear submarine crew would react when everything conceivable went wrong. If that were the case and he attempted to scuttle the craft, hopefully somebody would notice it before he did it.

But he had no choice— the Anthony was too close to the Southeastern coastline to do anything else. If the missiles were to fire simultaneously—

Harlan Breeze shivered at the thought.

He walked among them missile tubes, rising like trees on either side of the way. O'Brien said, "Captain?"

Commander Breeze didn't look back. "You wanna know if I'm gonna scuttle her, Jim?"

"It was sort of on my mind sir— aye."

"What do you think, Jim?"

"Feels like the surface to me, sir— bumpy enough."

Breeze could hear the hum of the aft hydraulic power room ahead and he raised his voice slightly to be heard. "If you were the captain— not the Chief Torpedoman's Mate— what the hell would you do, Jim?"

"Scuttle her, sir— take off all hands we didn't need for the operation and dive with the hatches open and the torpedo tube outer doors open— right to the bottom."

Breeze smiled—he liked O'Brien. They crossed over the frames for the water tight door leading into the reactor room. The Reactor Officer, Bob Justin, started toward them. "What the hell is goin' on, Captain—I can't control—"

"A damned thing," Breeze supplied. "Just keep an eye on her and I'll send a man back from the machinery spaces— if you've got a problem, send him forward. The boat's got no communications— everything's out."

Breeze always imagined a hum from the reactors as he walked over the grating— there was no hum, but he imagined it anyway. He kept walking.

He stepped over the door frame and entered the aft hydraulic power unit, stepping aside, letting O'Brien pass him.

O'Brien started calling out to the section chief who was half draped over the systems panels for the main machinery space. "Tex— anything?"

"Not a thing, Jim— hittin' switches don't do diddly squat—" and Tex Hofstader looked up. Breeze shaking his head as Hofstader started to notify his crew that Breeze was on deck.

"Relax— all right. Tex— send a man up to assist the reactor officer as runner. All communications are out."

"Piersen— on the double!"

"Right, Chief," and Piersen started forward.

"All right— you've tried everything?"

"All the controls are overridden Captain— not true readings. Not a thing, sir."

Breeze rocked on his heels. Tex kept talking. "I opened some of the boxes— electrical arcs are bridging the circuitry. I would have figured they'd burn it up— but they didn't. I can't isolate the source of the electrical current, Captain— and I can't cut it, re-bridge it or anything. I tried drawing it off— it's like the current has a mind of its own— like it can protect itself. It's like all the circuitry was reprogrammed to some other function and I can't tell what it is."

Breeze licked his lips. "The targeting computer's the same way, Tex," and Breeze clapped Hofstader on the left shoulder, then let his hand drop. "Every electronic device on this vessel— anything with electrical current. If we'd been topside with the hatches open. I'd have been prayin' for high seas. I can't get a readout on anything. General consensus seems to be we're on the surface— but how the hell we got there I don't know."

"It's gotta be completely screwy, Captain. Those boxes weren't tempered with from the outside; they weren't tampered with on the inside— that's the crazy thing."

Breeze looked at Hofstader, then to Jim O'Brien. O'Brien had been with him for three years. And, O'Brien, like most of the Anthony's crew, had a family. He studied O'Brien's grey eyes. "Jim— now think. Anything out of the ordinary that took place before this began? Anything?"

O'Brien shook his head, running both hands through his thinning grey hair, his high forehead beading perspiration.

Hofstader, his lean frame following the curve of the bulkhead, drawled, "About ten minutes before this shit began. Captain— one of my guys. Whitelaw?"

Breeze nodded.

"He started gettin' headaches— real bad— then he screamed and he fell down. We got him to sick bay and then all this started."

Breeze was already in motion, starting forward, "Keep at those circuit boxes— O'Brien— come on!"

"Aye, Captain!"

He told himself it couldn't be what it seemed to be— but instead of walking. Breeze started to run...

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The body of the dead blonde-haired girl was blue veined and stiff and the skin was a horrible, unnatural white— and chalky looking. Mulrooney lay on the cave floor beside it, the dress borrowed from JeAnn Bonaparte which had been so ugly something she longed for now, the black Satanic robe open all the way down the front.

Mulrooney's wrists were bound behind her, her right ankle tied, a tether leading from it to a massive chest brimming over with gold ingots and jewels, the chest so heavy that tugging against it only served to tighten the rope around her ankle. She had crawled as far from the altar as she could. And an altar was what it was.

A breeze blew down from the chimney of rock up which the stone steps led, the breeze cool against her naked breasts, the flesh of her abdomen.

Some of the female Zombies had been called down by Fidelito, and they had tied her as though she were not a living thing, as though she did not exist— tied her, left her, but exposed her when the voice of the demon had rung through Fidelito's throat, blood oozing from the pores of his forehead, his cheeks, running in tiny rivulets from his nostrils and the orifices of his ears.

And Mulrooney— she wasn't a screamer— had screamed, watching as one by one the three female Zombies had been ravished without being touched, their bodies pulsating to the rhythm of the demon's breathing she had heard inside her own head, their breasts gouged and torn and clawed away, their loins pumped until blood flowed and the bodies barely twitched.

Mulrooney lay there, on the black rock floor, the body of the dead blonde girl beside her, the three dead— truly dead this time— female Zombies scattered before the altar, their bodies dismembered. Arms, legs, heads, torsos— like fragments piled for sacrifice, only their part of the sacrifice was over.

Her breathing was too rapid, Mulrooney told herself— she would hyperventillate. She had forced herself through it all not to faint, to hold consciousness— it was her only defense, however meager.

She blamed herself— a life spent in the pursuit of the bizarre, of the unknown. It had brought her to this. She should have gotten Culhane to marry her and make her pregnant— that was at least the hopeful order of things. And, she should have stayed home and cooked and changed diapers. She wouldn't have been here. Wouldn't have been here now. With the demon.

Her breasts ached, her nipples raw from the disembodied touch of the demon.

She wondered if she were going insane? She had thought of that— rejected it— thought of it. That it was a nightmare and she was living through it and that perhaps she would roll over and find herself in Culhane's arms. But she hadn't. And she felt sick inside herself that she would never awaken from this nightmare because it was at once nightmare and reality.

Mulrooney was crying, but there were no tears.

No tears left.

The voice— the lust of the demon was inside her, crowding her own thoughts away, dominating her. His laughter. His breathing.

His touch was upon her for an instant— her body twitched beneath it and she screamed, "Kill me!"

The demon only laughed.

Her body sagged against the stone.

The touch returned— the nipple of her left breast was being kneaded, twisted, torn at Something she couldn't see— it brushed against the inside of her left thigh, her body wriggling against the tether at her ankle, twisting away, her body lifted, arched at the small of the back. A grip— not a hand— held her face.

She felt breath on her body.

Fidelito was screaming.

Mulrooney's head was forced back, the breath against her neck.

Something unspeakably rough touched at her throat. A stench— more foul than the stench of the fecal matter that lay oozed between the spread legs of the dead blonde haired girl— the stench of the demon smothered Fanny Mulrooney...

\* \* \*

It was a red bag— the cloth seemed smooth, but Josh Culhane could not tell of what type it was. And, somehow, it felt warm to his touch as Momma Cinda placed the bag in his hand. "This is your Gris-Gris, Josh— it is very powerful. A woman wears a Gris-Gris, suspended between her breasts. But a man— a man must carry his Gris-Gris in his pocket. In his right pocket only. While it is there, you will be protected from the mind of the demon Asmodeus. It will not protect you from his physical force. For this you must use other means, Josh."

Culhane looked at Admiral Case and his daughter, then into Momma Cinda's face— she seemed tired,

but her eyes were alight with something Culhane rarely saw. It was interest, it was caring, it was aliveness. "I'm listening, Momma Cinda," he told her softly, earnestly.

She nodded. "There is a second Gris-Gris— it must be placed— here," and she gestured to the four-color photograph of an Ohio class submarine which had been suspended on the wall near the lab table. He read the number on the sail— he knew the number. It was the number of the U.S.S. Susan B. Anthony. Her right index finger touched fleetingly at the Anthony's bridge fin.

"You have not asked me. Josh— but I have found that the first question someone always asks a person who is a Voodooist is about voodoo dolls. But, the dolls in themselves have no special magic. The doll is a representation of the object of mental and spiritual energies. A photograph can do the same— a focal point for concentration. I have made a special Gris-Gris that must be placed here. It will break the concentration of the demon Asmodeus. It will allow the ship the return to normal functions. The submarine must then dive, to further escape the psychic energy of the demon. I will induce the Loa Agore Royo who guards the sea to assist in this. And it will be done. But while the submarine is on top of the water, Josh, it is in neither world. It is because of this that the demon could so easily conquer it. He uses the mind of Fidelito, to focus into the mind of one other who is aboard this vessel. You must place the Gris-Gris aboard.

"The demon will still have power," Momma Cinda went on, "but much of his hold on the ship will be lost then. But he will have enough power that he can focus all his mental energy through this one aboard the ship and cause the ship to be destroyed. So, there is a third Gris-Gris, as powerful as the one I have given you. It must be placed in this man's pocket— his right pocket. You must do this quickly."

Culhane weighed the little red bag in his hand— then he took the Secamp with its Pocket Natural holster from his right pocket and placed the Gris-Gris there. He replaced the gun, but in his left front pocket.

"I asked this man to telephone Father Whitehead— from his sick bed, Father Whitehead told me what to give you in order to arm you against the physical harm of the, demon when you at last confront him. How to exorcise the demon from his cave."

Admiral Case cleared his throat. "Yes— ahh— Father Whitehead prescribed shotgun shells filled with salt as a weapon, and then more salt to use— like making a circle— to put around where the demon is— if there is a demon, of course. And then Holy Water."

Culhane shook his head.

Momma Cinda spoke. "Father Whitehead called his friend Father Elgin and one of the nice sailors went to Father Elgin's church and was given the Holy Water you'll need, Josh."

Admiral Case jerked his head to the left. One of the white coated men who had just entered the room placed a red and white box of shotgun shells on the lab table. And, for the first time, Culhane noticed a Plastic, flask shaped bottle. "What kind of shotgun would you feel comfortable with, Mr. Culhane?" Beside the bottle was a heavy cloth bag— Culhane imagined it was the salt.

"Remington 870 with a Pachmayr kit on it. I'm not going to need long range capability and I'm not hotrock with a shotgun anyway."

"The Remington we've got," Admiral Case smiled.

Culhane stared at the shotshells, the flask of Holy Water, the bag of salt. The Gris-Gris seemed to feel warm in the pocket of his Levis. "All right— how do I get aboard and if all that works, what's the plan for me getting past Fidelito's men so I can reach this Asmodeus?"

Admiral Case cleared his throat, then looked at his daughter. Margaret Case spoke. "We requested from a group of thirty-one Navy SEALs for volunteers for an exceedingly hazardous mission. All thirty-one volunteered. Six were picked. All of them will have the latest equipment. They'll back you up one hundred percent, Mr. Culhane."

Culhane leaned against a lab stool, then finally sat. He looked at his watch. A little less than hour remained until the submarine would impact Charleston harbor. The hurricane would arrive at the same time. And, it couldn't be coincidence, although nobody said otherwise.

Fanny.

The logical assumption was that she was dead; but, Culhane told himself he would have felt that inside him somehow. Instead of despair, there was what in one of his books he would have labelled 'determined rage'. "If this is all worked out— well, then let's do it," he said quietly. Momma cinda leaned toward him and very quickly— like someone a third her age— kissed him on the cheek.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Whit Candler edged forward toward her— JeAnn Bonaparte recoiled. "What's the matter, darling? Nervous?"

She wanted to scream at him, but the adhesive tape covering her mouth had reduced her to a creature capable only of grunts.

Whitlock J. Candler III smiled, patting her cheek. "Now— I know this is going to be a little uncomfortable, JeAnn, waiting here all tied up and everything. But, unfortunately," and he smiled again, "I don't think it would be wise of me at this time to trust you to stay here on your own." Candler glanced at his wristwatch, then smiled at her again. "By now, your mother and Mr. Culhane are dead their bodies have been discovered and the police will be wondering who put them in that elevator shaft. Eventually, that will lead to me. But, with no witnesses there'll be nothing the police will really be able to do, and they'll be unable to find me at any event. Once the Chief and I are free here, we'll dispose of you, then I'll disappear. The paperwork shouldn't be too difficult— change my identity. Live in luxury in Europe for the rest of my life. With Captain Teach's treasure. I suppose I'd actually have enough to live in luxury for several lifetimes. What an intriguing thought, huh?"

She forgot about the adhesive tape a moment, tried to talk— it was only a meaningless series of pitiful sounding grunts that she made instead. She shook her head— toward Chief Hanks who stood several yards away from Mary Frances Mulrooney's yellow Mustang.

"The Chief?" Candler asked, smiling still. "We'll split the treasure—" He leaned down to where she lay trussed at wrists, ankles, elbows and knees. Candler grinned— and for once his bright blue eyes did smile. "But the Chief might prove a nuisance— mightn't he? You've thought of that? Well— so have I,

darling. No— after we get the treasure secured and loaded out— which should take some time really— well. I'll kill him. Now," and he grabbed up the blue and red plaid auto robe that had been on the rear seat before she had been wedged there and he draped it over her, covering her from toes to chin, tucking the sides of it around her. "Wouldn't want you to catch cold, darling." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "You are even more beautiful when you're afraid. Your eyes— somehow they have an added light."

He leaned back, pushing down the lock button, then slamming the Mustang's door.

JeAnn Bonaparte closed her eyes, tears filling them. She was already imagining herself suffocating inside this car. Either that, or the storm surge would wash over the road and she would be crushed or drowned or both. She was powerless to free herself and she was going to die...

\* \* \*

Jimmy Howard Hanks walked slowly, cautiously, along the gravel and dirt and rocks which formed the crude path which ran toward the beach below. In his right fist, the weapon slung cross body, was the pistol grip of the old SPAS-12 shotgun, eight rounds loaded, one round chambered. He kept the no-longer-imported shotgun for emergencies; this fit the scenario.

He had said nothing to Candler, nothing at all since he— Hanks— had left the little yellow Ford and Candler had gone back to speak to the girl.

Hanks hadn't realized he had wanted Momma Cinda's treasure that much— enough to kill Momma Cinda, enough to kill this Culhane guy enough to be ready to kill Doctor JeAnn Bonaparte. He had killed before, but not like this. It was a side of his own character which he had not known existed before today.

He would have to return to St. Peters island, despite his new wealth. Have to live as he had lived at least for a few years. Hanks glanced behind him— Candler, his .45 automatic in hand, was keeping up, Candler, Candler would be a problem. Candler would likely leave the country, likely never be caught. But, if Candler were caught— Hanks looked at Candler again, Candler giving a thumbs up signal. Hanks returned it. They were nearly to the beach.

Hanks kept thinking. If he elected to kill Candler, then once Candler had taken care of Doctor Bonaparte, there would be no one left to implicate him— Hanks. No one left to testify to complicity in two murders, a definite third to come and how many more deaths with this Fidelito and his crowd. Because, if Candler ever were caught, Candler would talk. And, if Candler were dead, that would be impossible. There would be no connection between respected police official Jimmy Howard Hanks and a string of unsolved murders.

He had already wiped his fingerprints from Candler's house, worn gloves when he tied up Culhane and Momma Cinda. There was little other incriminating evidence to clear away.

He tried thinking back. Candler had come to the police station— but Candler had left along with Momma Cinda's books. Hanks had left shortly afterward, proclaiming he was going fishing in order to puzzle out the case. No one had seen him meet Candler along the sideroad which paralleled the Intercoastal waterway. Perhaps someone had seen him entering Candler's house— but certainly not clearly enough for positive identification which could stand up in court.

Fingerprints in Candler's red sports car, fingerprints in the yellow Mustang. Easily fixed. But, the fingerprints on Culhane's guns and his knife were only Candler's. Hanks smiled.

They reached the bottom of the steeply sloping path almost simultaneously, Candler just behind him.

The perfect scenario, indeed.

Going fishing had only been a ruse— it was such a sensitive matter he wasn't about to trust even his own men. At great personal risk, he drove into the city to intercept Candler, suspecting foul play. When he reached Candler's home, Candler was gone, but there were several weapons in the house— but there was a problem with that one, Hanks realized. Getting the transportation sorted out to Charleston and back to the island. How would he explain that?

Hanks determined inside himself to keep running possible scenarios; because, if there were some way to kill Candler here and now, or make it appear that Candler had been killed by Fidelito's men (which would even be better), then he could leave the treasure exactly where it was, do as Momma Cinda had done— bleed it out slowly; but not quite so slowly, he smiled.

"I haven't seen any signs of them, Chief," Candler murmured.

"Y'all just keep an eye peeled, Candler— 'cause maybe we don't see them, but I'll lay even money they see us."

"I defer to your experience in these matters," Candler acknowledged.

Hanks just glanced back at him.

They were walking not along the beach, but as far back from the surf as the terrain allowed.

There were two safeties on the SPAS .12 shotgun, and Hanks had been carrying the weapon since chamber loading it with one safety off. He edged the second safety— at the front of the trigger guard, reminiscent of the M-1 Garand— into the off position as well.

The rain was heavy, the wind howling. There was still enough time before the storm surge to take care of the business at hand and escape to safety inland. And, Hurricane Elfego would obliterate any damning evidence which might be left behind along the beach or at the grotto.

The storm would keep for a while yet. But, Hanks could sense it, that he was being watched, "Candler, y'all keep an eye out behind us. I got a feelin'."

With the Python butt forward behind his left hipbone, he could get to it with either hand.

Both weapons could come into play if needed.

The grotto would be just ahead. Hanks could faintly see the black rocks about which Momma Cinda had spoken.

The attack from Fidelito's people would come.

Hanks kept walking, viewing the runway like structure of black rock more clearly, seeing that it lead inland, into some sort of cave. "Candler— we're gonna be hittin' that grotto in a minute— if they're here, they'll strike— y'all hear?"

"Of course, Chief, but I strongly believe that we are ready for them, sir, armed and ready."

Hanks just glanced back at Candler, saying nothing.

The terrain dropped. Candler came up beside Hanks as Hanks clamored down toward the rocks, using only his left hand to balance with, the right fist still on the shotgun, tight.

Hanks crossed from the sand onto the black rock runway, moving more slowly now. "Y'all be ready," he whispered, hunching slightly over the shotgun, tensing his body like a coiled spring—he was ready to fight. He edged forward, his eyes flickering side to side. The feeling gripping Hanks was the same feeling he'd had in Viet Nam when he'd done LRP duty.

Hanks stopped, raising his left hand, signalling Candler to do the same. Candler's body bumping into Hanks' left shoulder. Hanks grunted. "Asshole." but didn't move. He had heard something—the scrape of metal against rock. A flash of movement at his left and Hanks wheeled, the riot shotgun swinging toward the movement. A face, a body—a pair of hands with a submachinegun. Hanks fired the shotgun, then again, the submachinegun spraying into the black rock near Hanks' feet. Hanks spun right, firing again as a body appeared there. Chunks of the black rock seemed to spray outward, Hanks shouting to Candler, "Run for it—the grotto!"

Hanks threw himself into the run, the shotgun rock steady at full extension of its tensioned sling his left hand finding the butt of his revolver, tearing it from the waistband of his trousers, twisting the rear sight free of the knit shirt.

He doubled actioned the 357 Magnum—again and again and again. One of the Zombies was coming at him from the rocks, hurtling his body toward him. It had taken four shots to put the machete wielding fanatic down. He reached the grotto, turned around and looked back, Candler—running, firing.

Zombies—clubs, machetes, bayonets—they were everywhere, Candler firing out his pistol, trying to reload, a club swinging down across Candler's body, again and again.

Hanks fired out his revolver, two headshots to another of the Zombies.

He swung the SPAS-12 shotgun on line, firing as another of the Zombies rushed him. The Zombie's body fell back—but Hanks felt something tearing at his right arm. He looked down. Another of the Zombies had thrown himself across the muzzle of the shotgun, dragging it down with his body weight. Hanks fired, the body falling back, a gaping hole in the man's lower abdomen and crotch.

A club—Hanks saw it as a blur—and his right arm screamed with Pain, the Shotgun's Pistol grim slipping away from him. "Damn son of a bitch," Hanks snarled, his left hand snaking out, the six-inch pipe of the stainless Python slamming down across the Zombie's face as the club swung again. Hank's right shoulder took the impact, his right arm no longer hurting, but numb, Hanks' left hand hammered the Python down again, along the center of the Zombie's high forehead, blood spurting outward, Hanks turning his face away.

His legs were swept from under him, Hanks' body crashing downward.

He looked up, his left hand dropping the Python to block a kick to his face. His left caught the foot, twisting, hurtling the Zombie back. His right arm was useless to him. Hanks was up to his knees, his left

arching upward, tipping one of the Zombies at the base of the chin, the Zombie's head snapping back—"Die, asshole," he hissed. Hanks was to his feet. A Zombie swung a club toward him. Hanks sidestepping back, grabbing the Zombie at the forearm, ramming the arm down, drawing his left knee up, impacting the Zombie's elbow. There was a grunt of pain from the Zombie, the club clattering down to the rocks. Hanks dropped the Zombie like a piece of trash, wheeling left, straight-arming one of the Zombies in the face, then grabbing another by the neck, squeezing at the Adam's apple to crush the larynx, raising the Zombie from the ground, tossing him down dead.

Hanks saw Candler— Candler started to shout— a machete. A blur of grey steel and Candler's head split like an overripe melon.

Hanks threw himself into a run, a Zombie going for him, Hanks slapping the man away backhanded.

Another Zombie tackled him; Hanks stumbled but didn't fall, kicking the man away. It was like football in high school when he'd been the Captain, the star quarterback.

A club— the club rammed into Hank's abdomen and Hanks doubled forward and fell. He rolled onto his back, his left foot snapping up into a face, knocking the owner of the face away. With his left hand. Hanks drew the little .25 automatic from his boot top. He snagged the rear sight against his belt, ramming the pistol downward, working the slide to chamber a round.

He fired— again and again and again and again, his left finger twitching until there was nothing, not even the fakey clicking sound from movies. Hanks balled his left fist over the pistol, rising to his knees, his breath short with the pain in his stomach. He punched his left fist outward, crushing a nose, half-gouging an eye from its socket.

Hanks started to his feet, to make a last ditch run. And something hit his head— blackness and nausea swept over him and he fell forward, deeper into the blackness...

JeAnn Bonaparte told herself she had been asleep— or fainted. The heat inside the totally sealed car, beneath the blanket, her mouth taped shut, had been unbearable. But, when a cool gust of air washed across her face, she opened her eyes.

A hand— it was dark toned. It ripped the adhesive tape from her mouth and she simultaneously sucked in her breath and shrieked. The hand— it belonged to a Zombie. The intellectless eyes, the tatters, the— she screamed. Three of them, all men. With them another man, but not a Zombie. Yet somehow his eyes dead too. The man held some kind of a gun in his hands, like the guns shown on television when terrorists were killing people.

The man with the gun reached down to her, knotting his fist into the front of her dress, dragging her out of the back seat of the car. "My ankles," she began to protest.

But it was too late— she fell to her knees at his feet along the gravel shoulder of the dirt road.

The man only stared at her as she knelt there.

## **Chapter Twenty-seven**

Josh Culhane stood beside the grey steel of the secured turret for the 76mm deck gun, one of the Navy SEAL Unit. Commander Harvey Eddleston beside him on the right the second officer of the U.S.S. Capricorn on Culhane's left. "The Captain thought you'd get a better perspective from here Mr. Culhane." the man shouted over the roaring wind and pounding water. "Patrol Hydrofoils are somethin' to see sir."

Culhane nodded.

The Capricorn started away from the marina, the seas rolling and rough and high waves crashing everywhere around it. They were heading toward the Anthony, but Hurricane Elfego was heading straight for them. The idea, Culhane hoped, was not to all meet out at sea. Culhane balanced himself on the deck as best he could his feet wide apart, his left hand holding tighter against the gun turret. Beyond the mouth of the small harbor, the height intensity and speed of the waves would have been perfect— and insanely dangerous— for very serious surfing. And, the ride promised to get rougher.

The young first officer laughed. "I'm sorry sir— I was just watching your reaction. It's like that every time," the man smiled. "And the high seas just make it more of a roller coaster ride."

Culhane looked at him, then at Commander Eddleston Eddleston was laughing as well. "This is a top secret little boat—"

"Sir, we don't like calling her a—"

"I know— that's why I said it," Eddleston laughed. "If anything can catch the Anthony on the surface, this baby can. How's top speed of ninety-three knots grab you, Mr. Culhane?"

Culhane just looked at Eddleston. "Over a hundred miles an hour?"

Eddleston nodded again and grinned.

The Capricorn's first officer chimed in. "The SEALs love PHM— get 'em places fast, sir."

"And get us out of places even faster," Eddleston commented, not smiling at all.

Culhane shivered— not with the cold salt spray which washed over the prow or the biting wind, but with fear for Fanny Mulrooney, fear that all of this Voodoo stuff was just a manifestation of insanity and there was no way at all to stop the Anthony on its crash course with Charleston harbor short of what might prove a vain attempt to blow it out of the water.

Like Commander Eddleston and the five other SEALs, Culhane wore black BDUs and combat boots and at his hip in a military flap holster of a type he hadn't seen was a pistol. The holster was obviously built for the considerably larger HK SOCOM pistols, a variation of the USP. If Culhane had been the handgun fanatic Fanny Mulrooney sometimes— laughably— accused him of being, he would have jumped at the chance to carry the high tech Pistol with frame rails for accommodating lasers and flashlights and a muzzle designed to accept a highly effective suppressor. Under the circumstances, he preferred a gun with which he had greater familiarity and had stuck to his own pistol, the SIG 245.

Shivering, Culhane started to say something about the Capricorn's speed to Eddleston, but as he opened his mouth there was a roar, like a surge of power. Culhane felt a lifting motion, gradual but definite. He

looked over the side, the profile of the sea rougher behind them aft, but no visible wake cut by the Capricorn's prow.

Eddleston was shouting even louder over the noise of both the storm and the vessel. "Most of the rest of the world thinks we only have a half dozen of these— Part of Operation 60 started by Admiral Zumwalt Well, they built a seventh one, just a little faster. This is Part of that secrecy pledge you signed for Admiral Case Mr. Culhane. We can't have Sean Dodge running around in one of these in your next book. Let's get to the CIC and get a firm estimate on interception of the Anthony and the latest reading on Hurricane Elfego."

Culhane followed Eddleston aft, the first officer behind him. Culhane's eyes drifted upward. The pilot house— he had viewed it for a moment from the marina level, what he had seen looking more like the control panels of a multi-engine jet aircraft than a naval vessel.

Eddleston turned in at a water tight door beneath the pilot house, Culhane following as Eddleston stared aft. As the watertight door was shut, the noise of the storm and the propulsion system vanished, Eddleston took a ladder leading down from the pilot house and into what Culhane, following him, recognized as the CIC— Combat Information Center.

A wiry looking older man swivelled in his chair and stood up, a weathered sailor's face creasing into a grin as he extended his right hand. "Mr. Culhane— I'm a big fan of yours. And I'm also the Captain." Culhane took the hand the grip firm.

Commander Eddleston said rather formally, "Mr. Culhane may I present Commander Harrison Jones."

Culhane started to open his mouth, but Commander Jones smiled, "And please, no jokes about having a brother named Indiana Ford, huh?"

Culhane shrugged and grinned.

Commander Jones turned away as he released Culhane's hand, gesturing broadly toward electronic situation displays on the far bulkhead, past an array of radar, sonar and guidance equipment, communications consoles, blue workshirted crewmen manning each station. "The Anthony is that yellow rectangle in the upper right quadrant, just inside the circle. We knew her position and were able to pick up radar contact once we cleared the Marina. We're the dark blue asterisk— as you can see Mr. Culhane. Harvey— we're on an intercept course with her. And the red circle is the eyewall of Hurricane Elfego. Elfego's on an intercept course with Charleston. We've plotted the two courses. They'll intersect just as if it was planned, right smack in the harbor."

Culhane rolled back the cuff of his BDU, looking at the black face of his Rolex. Less than forty minutes remained until projected time of impact.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Culhane," Harvey Eddleston interjected. "Will we make it? Well—"

Jones cut in. "Follow me, gentlemen— we'll get a better perspective on things from the pilot house. All this electronic crap is well and good, but a pair of binoculars is even better." Jones started forward, Culhane following after him, Eddleston falling in.

"Captain's off the Bridge," the first officer noted.

Jones called back, "Tommy— take her."

"Aye, sir," the first officer chimed back.

Jones started up the ladder to the pilot house, Culhane waiting a moment to keep clear of Jones' feet, then trailing after.

The air around their vessel as grey and green, the cloud cover along the horizon nearly black. The vessel pitched and rolled, attacking the enormous walls of water crashing one after the other against the bow. Glass— not the ordinary kind. Culhane hoped— scribed a full one hundred eighty degrees of arc on the pilot house. Under normal conditions, Culhane the Capricorn running so smoothly that brain surgery could have been performed on her deck. Even under the severe weather conditions through which they moved, with a little effort one could stand without holding onto something— at least for a few seconds at a time.

Commander Jones settled himself into a leather padded seat just aft of the control panel operators, Eddleston flanking him on the left, Culhane taking up a position on the right. "In about ten minutes gentlemen," and Jones tapped the black faced watch at his left wrist— it looked like a Heuer, "we should have the Anthony in visual range. I understand, Mr. Culhane, that you are supposed to place aboard the Anthony some sort of electronic device that will interrupt whatever signal it is that is jamming the Anthony's controls." Jones looked UP expectantly.

Culhane glanced at Eddleston— Eddleston looked away.

"Well, sir," Culhane began. "Ahh— not really an electronic device— but, on the same principal."

"Right," Jones nodded. "We get you as close as possible and then you're going to jump for it to try to reach the Anthony's deck— correct?"

"I wish there were a better plan, but yeah— yes, sir, that's correct."

Jones nodded. "There are two basic types of hydrofoil designs, surface piercing and submerged— if this were a surface piercing ship, you could conceivably get yourself onto the starboard side foil. We don't want that wide a profile, however. If the Anthony's running a true course. I'll risk getting the Capricorn almost touching the hull of the Anthony."

Culhane noticed aft several men working near the Harpoon missile array. They were rigging a framework of some sort. He looked down at Jones seated beside where Culhane stood. "You noticed the little surprise, Mr. Culhane. Well— we're gonna try to swing you out over the missile tubes just behind the Anthony's sail. Got a seat being rigged below even now. We can swing you out lower you and you can get yourself free and make Your sprint for the sail. That deck'll be slippery as an ice pond in a windstorm. If you get washed over the Anthony's starboard side, you'll probably get drowned in her wake, but you might have a chance. If you get washed over to port, you'll get crushed between the Anthony's hull and the Capricorn. I don't envy you. I knew Sean Dodge did this stuff, but I had no idea you did, too," and Jones grinned.

Culhane nodded, saying, "Well, neither did I."

Culhane took a cigarette from the pocket of his BDU and lit it. Jones said, "Now, let's talk about how we keep you from getting electrocuted from the static charge on the Anthony's skin, shall we."

"Ohh, sure, let's," Culhane agreed...

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Comparatively few Category 5 hurricanes ever made landfall on the U.S. coast and Hurricane Elfego was about to add its name to that relatively exclusive list: and, according to the readouts Culhane was handed just before suiting up, if the Saffir-Simpson scale incorporated a Category 6. Elfego might have the added honor of being the first on that list. A Category 5 could have sustained winds of one hundred fifty-five miles per hour at the high end. There were some indications that Hurricane Elfego's winds might, indeed, be stronger, more tornado-like.

Where was the El Nino effect when it was really needed. Culhane thought. He was no expert at meteorology, although he was getting a first hand education in its extremes, but he knew that during El Nino years wind shear effect was heightened, angling cyclonic air currents over a larger area, thus depleting their energy and reducing the likelihood of killer storms such as Elfego in the Atlantic.

Exporting more than three and one-half billion tons of air in a single hour, a mature hurricane could drive enormous tonnages of water ahead of its eyewall, and Elfego was, again, exceptional in this regard. The first wireless report by a ship at sea of a hurricane was in 1909. In modern times, myriad sources of information were available, ranging from satellite imaging to hurricane hunter aircraft to the observations of any hapless souls in their path. Reports on Elfego indicated that it was generating wave heights of unprecedented proportions. In this latter regard, Culhane needed little outside input. Despite the Capricorn's power and speed, its agility and the skills of the crew who manned it, the towering walls of water which flooded over her inspired sheer terror. At times, as the ship mounted an enormous swell, it seemed certain that the vessel would topple over end over end.

If the storm were supernaturally charged, in essence programmed by the demon Asmodeus of whom Momma Cinda had spoken, the circumstance was ironic in the extreme. Fairly recently, Culhane had indulged in a conversation about gunfighting lawmen of the wild west with his old friend Jan Libourel, that ever erudite editor of GUN WORLD Magazine. Culhane had mentioned Elfego Baca. The Mexican-American marshal's name, Jan had recounted, had to have derived from that of the Christian Martyr, St. Elphege, a courageous and pious Archbishop of Canterbury in 1006. St. Elphege suffered and died at the hands of invading Danes in 1013. He was often depicted with an axe— carrying it as a symbol of protection and commemorating his life's ending from an axe's blow.

Culhane was of no particular Christian denomination, but was raised for a time as a Catholic. Before exiting the small cabin in which he had changed into a specially insulated wetsuit which would provide some protection against electrical shock, he made the Sign of the Cross. And. Culhane decided to add a prayer that St. Elphege might intercede for the success of his efforts against— what might be?— a demon.

Culhane made the Sign of the Cross again and went to meet his fate...

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes remained before the submarine would enter Charleston harbor.

Culhane had been helped up into the hastily fabricated webbing-rigged seat, belted himself in and shouted down that he was "Ready!" Realizing that his voice probably hadn't been heard, he made a thumbs up and gripped both fists to the webbing straps which led up to the plastic covered steel cable. He gave one last glance up into the workings of the winch.

He was starting to move.

The insulated wetsuit didn't have a righthand pocket in which Culhane could keep the red-bagged Gris-Gris given to him by Momma Cinda for his protection. But, there was a pouch suspended from the right side of his equipment belt and that would have to do at the moment.

The Capricorn came about, coming alongside the Anthony's portside hull, the Anthony moving at full flank speed but pitifully slow compared to the hydrofoil. The Capricorn sprang into the Anthony's wake, the submarine's comparative enormity seeming all the greater mere feet away from it.

Despite its superior speed, the Capricorn was thrown back from the Anthony's wake. Again, the Capricorn made the jump, back and forth, bouncing, buffeted, the up and down motion nauseating. Waves crashed over Culhane's body, all-but ripping him from the seat. Mountain's of water crashed across the Capricorn's superstructure, the surface vessel's course out of instead of into the waves suicidal.

The Anthony was a sleek, gleaming black phallic shape cutting half through the cascading water, half below it. The stylized target design of the Anthony's chopper pad forward of her sail was a darker black beneath the white of the bullseye. A whistling sound assailed Culhane's ears, louder somehow than the roar of the Capricorn's engines, louder even than the crashing of the waves: the sail fins cutting air at full flank speed.

Culhane was glad his hands were gloved, other than just for the insulation the gloves would provide—had they not been gloved, he could have seen his knuckles turning white as he gripped the rigging.

Culhane glanced down to his leftside. The camouflage patterned map case was sodden with spray. The Gris-Gris for the submarine was packaged separately from that for the hapless man aboard the vessel who was under the control of the demon, the latter in a waterproof pouch. He hoped the Gris-Gris for the submarine had been made seawater proof.

He glanced down to his right hip. Sealed in a plastic bag inside the holster was his SIG. If the first Gris-Gris somehow worked— and Culhane had mixed emotions concerning its potential efficacy— then the Anthony would receive the broadcast signal from the Capricorn and open her hatches. If there were any doubt about Culhane being let aboard and finding the man who was the focal lens for the demon's mind, the .45 might be the only answer to questions there would otherwise be no time to address.

Culhane swung free now, except for the guidelines held fast by crewpersons of the Capricorn, volunteers who themselves were lashed to the deck. The Capricorn was brushed back by the wake of the superior tonnage vessel. Culhane's stomach lurching as he held on.

Culhane could make out the outlines of the missile hatches, waves shattering over them. If Momma Cinda were right, millions of people would die. The radioactive cloud would cross the Atlantic, settle in the British Isles, in Europe. Such a massive detonation— the twenty-four missiles with their multiple warheads, the two thousand some warheads stored near Charleston. The Russians might think something

had gone wrong, launch those missiles of their deteriorating arsenal whose warheads hadn't been stolen for sale on the international arms market. The world could end.

He wondered if his private world had ended already? Culhane told himself that Fanny still lived, there was hope.

He would have married her, kept her safe— but safety wasn't what Fanny Mulrooney had ever wanted.

Culhane's improvised seat swung precariously over the confluence of the wakes from the two speeding vessels.

The tons of water cascading over him. The whistling of the Anthony's sail fins. The receiver in Culhane's left ear came alive, "Watch out, Mr. Culhane!"

Culhane's swinging seat lurched maddeningly. He twisted around and focused on the deck of the Capricorn. One of the guide ropes had snapped. Culhane's fists balled tighter on the harness straps. The Anthony's missile deck was almost directly below him.

Another glance stolen toward the Capricorn and he realized they were reeling him in. Culhane released his left fist's death grip, signalling that he wanted none of that.

Still they were reeling him back. There would be no time to try it again.

He was still over the missile deck now, but far from its center.

Culhane looked above him— the cable holding him was slacking each time the men of the Capricorn tugged back.

The Bali-Song knife was stowed, but a Black Ka-Bar in a Kydex sheath was secured to Culhane's gear belt. It was a good knife with a keen edge and he'd only have the chance to use it once. Culhane hacked laterally with the Black Ka-Bar, cutting the right side of the webbing, his body drooping, twisting, spinning. His lips drawn back from his teeth, the cords in his neck going taught, he sliced the last remaining safety strap, holding onto it for an instant as he sheathed the knife, then letting himself fall.

Culhane's hands went out, reaching to control his fall, the missile deck flying toward him. Culhane hit it in a shoulder roll, sliding, the momentum of the Anthony carrying him, back, his arms and legs spread-eagling to slow him. He looked to the Anthony's portside— the Capricorn was pulling away, its foils bouncing over the Anthony's wake.

Culhane was still sliding aft, then lurched forward, the Anthony hitting a swell. His body ached and he couldn't tell if anything were broken; but there would be bruises aplenty.

Culhane tore the Black Ka-Bar from its Kydex sheath as he slid over one of the missile hatches, stabbed the knife downward, its point imbedding between the hatch and the hatch frame. Culhane held to the knife, both fists locked to its hilt as the motion of the Anthony flung him violently forward.

The deck was slipperier than ice could ever be, and colder.

Wedging his booted feet, Culhane held to the Black Ka-Bar with his right fist, his left fist letting go. Instantly, his right arm felt as if it were being jerked from the socket as Culhane was pitched aft. But, he

still held the knife and the knife was still dug deep into the gasket within the hatch frame.

Culhane ripped open the flap of the map case, feeling the two Gris-Gris's there, feeling too the Ninja-style climbing claws he had borrowed from the SEAL Team's miscellaneous gear. They were the real thing, not mail order wannabe junk.

He pulled both from the map case, the submarine lurching beneath him, Culhane flipped onto his back, feeling his lips drawing back in a rictus of pain— his arm, his spine.

Culhane gripped the climbing claws. They were his only chance. He bit into the web band of one of the claws, hammering the second claw into the deck grid, thrusting his left hand through it, twisting to fit, then snapping his left hand away, rolling, hammering his left fist down— the claw held. Culhane released the Ka-Bar and his body pitched away again— but the claw held to the deck. Culhane took the second claw from his teeth, into his right hand, hammering it down into the grid. He wriggled his right hand into the band and flexed, feeling his lips draw back with a smile. If a demon were doing this, then— he shouted it. "Fuck you!"

Culhane started dragging himself forward, reaching out to the missile hatch with his right hand, grasping the Ka-Bar, jamming it into the sheath.

There was a ladder leading up to the sail, visible aft of the portside stabilizing fin.

Culhane angled his body toward it, crawling. He dragged himself forward. Right claw, left, right, left— right— he reached with his clawed left fist and held the bottom rung of the ladder.

The Anthony pitched wildly, violently. As he dragged himself toward the ladder, he eyed the face of the Rolex— through the smudge of saltspray he could see the minute hand clearly enough. Eight minutes before Charleston Harbor, eight minutes before Hurricane Elfego intersected them, eight minutes before nuclear devastation unlike any the world had ever known.

Culhane shook his head, the wind and the waves lashing at him, mountains of water tumbling over the Anthony's hull, slamming against the sail's superstructure.

Culhane dragged his body nearer the ladder, climbing, the tempest tearing him away from the ladder, willpower holding him to it. Climbing— the notch in the rail— he reached through, the stabilizing fin below him, twisting, hauling himself through the notch. Waves crashed over him as he raised to his knees, tore at him as he dug into the map case for the first Gris-Gris.

Affixed to it, the batteries encased in plastic, was an electrically magnetized circle of steel. Culhane pried open the case, locking the battery leads to the terminals, closing the case as the next wave crashed over the rail over rail, over his body. He smashed the steel circle— now magnetized— against the surface beneath his knees. It locked tight.

Culhane breathed, waited. After what seemed an eternity. Culhane felt something moving along his spine.

Culhane stripped away the climbing claws and sagged forward, on hands and knees, braced against the rail, waiting— for the hatch to open if the Gris-Gris had worked.

He looked above him— a radio antenna mast was raising, a periscope was raising, then the search periscope, shorter than the attack scope.

He lay there, breathing.

The hatch beside Culhane was flung open and a face appeared, mouthing words Culhane could not hear over the din of the storm.

The face vanished and two sets of hands reached up, dragging Culhane toward the hatch, down into the sail, torrents of water surrounding him, his breath gone.

Culhane fell against a bulkhead, squinted as he glanced up toward the hatchway, two slicker-clad seamen forcing it shut. "Hatch secured, sir."

A white haired man, bareheaded, a .45 automatic in his right fist, his uniform shirt soaked to the skin, demanded. "Who the hell are you, mister?" He wore the rank of Commander and Culhane had been shown his picture. He was Harlan Breeze, the Captain of the Anthony.

"Josh Culhane— adventure novelist." Culhane grinned. "Just doing a little research. A man aboard your vessel— anyone— with something wrong with him, acting strangely? Like he was possessed or—"

"Seaman Whitelaw—"

"Gotta get to him— let me pass— I saved your damn sub— let me—"

"Go!" Commander Breeze shouted. "Take this man to Whitelaw in Sickbay— accommodate him— on the double— move!" Culhane lurched to his feet.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"What the hell did you do to fix things?"

Culhane caught Commander Breeze's eyes. The Gris-Gris had worked, or else it was the strangest coincidence in human history.

"Tell you in a minute, sir, but I attached something to the sail and we're shit out of luck if anybody removes it. You got orders to dive and fast, right? Relayed by the Captain of that Capricorn? Do it sir."

"Secure for crash dive— take her down fast! And get this man to Whitelaw in Sickbay on the double!"

"Prepare for negative buoyancy. Maximum angle on the bow planes. Give me All Ahead two-thirds. Skip the Bubble."

Culhane stopped listening, clambered downward, the commands echoing and re-echoing around him as the Anthony's crew went into action. Culhane followed one of the two seamen who'd hauled him inside, the man just ahead of him. "Want dry clothes, sir?"

"Whitelaw in Sickbay fast as you can." Culhane gasped.

"Aye, sir," the seaman nodded, tossing off his slicker to another man, running, taking a ladder down like a fireman, sliding along the vertical supports. Culhane did the same, loosing his grip for an instant, impacting the deckplates. To his knees, then to his feet. Culhane ran after the seaman, along a narrow

companionway,. grey doors ranked one after the other. Claxons sounded. They were into the dive, the deck below Culhane's feet already starting to pitch. Culhane thought he could hear the hum of the reactor.

The seaman stopped, knocking on the doorway.

Culhane lurched past him— he could feel it inside him. If he didn't reach Whitelaw in time, the demon might still be able to act. Culhane hurtled his weight against the door as he twisted the handle under his left fist.

The door heaved to. Culhane vaulting through it, running, empty bunks ranked there— one bunk at the far end.

"Whitelaw!"

The man was screaming, a medical technician looking up— "What the blue—"

Blood streamed from the pores in the man's cheeks, the body twisting violently, screams issuing from the man's lips, the words incoherent, increasing in pace and volume. Culhane shoved the medical technician aside. The Gris-Gris— he ripped it from the map pouch and out of the plastic bag, threw back the blanket only half covering Whitelaw. The reactor hum was louder seeming, maybe louder than it should be.

Whitelaw man wore a hospital gown— no pants.

Culhane held the Gris-Gris. "Pants— gotta put it in his right pants pocket. Or like that."

"You're fuckin' crazy, sir," the med-tech stammered.

Culhane sidestepped as the med-tech reached for him, ready to drop the man if he had to, no time to explain.

"Gimme your belt sailor."

"The Captain said to accommodate him, Milt. He's the one that got us back under power."

The med-tech started pulling off his belt. Culhane drew his Ka-Bar and cut two slits in the plastic bag, one on either end. Taking the belt from the med-tech. Culhane slipped it through the slits, like slots in a belt holster.

"Help me get this belt around his waist, and we keep this pouch on the right side where a pocket would be. Hurry!" The "it's kinda like a pocket" thing had worked for Culhane so far, with his Gris-Gris worn in a pouch on his belt; there was no reason it wouldn't work for this profusely bleeding, wildly screaming man who was coming off like someone auditioning for a horror movie.

The hum grew louder, louder. Were the turbines straining against a force which couldn't be seen, couldn't be stopped by technology?

"Sir?"

Culhane looked to the door. It was the seaman who had led him to sick bay. "Don't ask. Just help us get this belt around your man Whitelaw's waist."

The seaman skidded to his knees beside the bed. While the med-tech held onto Whitelaw, Culhane and the seaman started to get the belt around Whitelaw's waist.

"Why are we doing this, sir?"

"The Gris-Gris," Culhane answered the seaman. "Gotta be on him like it's in a right pocket. A woman wears it around her neck between her breasts— man has to have it in his right pocket."

Whitelaw twisted away from them and animal sounds, but somehow curse-like, in a language Culhane couldn't guess at, streamed from Whitelaw's blistered lips.

"The demon— he knows what we're doing! Whitelaw's brain is like a transmitter."

"Demon— sir?"

"Just help me, dammit!"

Whitelaw's fists hammered up and his feet kicked. He sat upright, blood streaming from his nose, his mouth, his lips drawn back, his teeth bared like an animal, his eyes black as pitch and not human anymore. Whitelaw hammered at Culhane, his mouth snapping at him.

Culhane dodged, shouted to the med-tech. "Sit on him, sailor— now! You hear me?!"

The med-tech tackled Whitelaw, knocking him flat to the bed again, throwing himself over Whitelaw's head and chest. Culhane and the seaman started to get the belt around Whitelaw's waist.

The hum of the turbines grew louder.

The Anthony lurched violently.

Culhane reached across Whitelaw, still trying to get the belt into position.

Whitelaw screamed obscenities, vomit flowing from his mouth. Culhane drew in his breath. Whitelaw twisted away from the pouched Gris-Gris and the med-tech was launched from the bunk to the floor. Culhane fell back.

Whitelaw sprang from the bed, his body crouched like an animal about to strike. He picked up a bed pan, hurtled it toward Culhane. Culhane dodged, the contents of the bed pan spilling across the floor. As Whitelaw's body tensed, Culhane threw himself against the man. The Anthony rolled violently beneath Culhane's feet.

The hum of the turbines was almost deafening.

"The reactor," Culhane hissed as his body impacted Whitelaw, knocking the screaming, hissing, bleeding man against the bulkhead. "You want the reactor to overload, motherfucker!" Culhane's right knee smashed up into the possessed man's abdomen and Whitelaw doubled over.

Culhane threw his body weight across Whitelaw's back, hammered Whitelaw to the deck. The belt with the Gris-Gris, Culhane started cinching it around Whitelaw's waist.

Whitelaw writhed and twisted, his fingers dropping for Culhane's face, clawing toward Culhane's eyes. Curses or sounds— Culhane didn't know which— shrieked from Whitelaw's lips. Culhane got his right knee on the back of Whitelaw's neck. The seaman threw himself across Whitelaw's legs.

The med-tech staggered to his feet.

"Take the belt! Get it on him, the pouch on the right side!" Culhane ordered, leveraging his full body weight across Whitelaw's back.

Whitelaw struggled, hands beating at the deck, fingernails gouging into the floorcovering.

"Got it!" The med-tech leaped back, arms thrown into the air, like a calf-roper when the knot was tied.

The hum of the reactor or what Culhane had imagined to be the reactor or the turbines— whatever the hum had been, it instantly stopped.

The belt was closed, the plastic bag pouch around to the approximate position of a right pocket.

If Culhane had been writing this in a book— and he wouldn't have done that because no one would have believed it— he would have made the med-tech and the seaman on the lean side, like Culhane himself was, and Whitelaw grossly potbellied, and they would have had to somehow get Whitelaw into the pants.

But, Whitelaw was about average build, and the humming was gone and Whitelaw no longer fought them, had stopped shouting. The bloodflow from the veins in his face was slowing.

The lurching of the Anthony— it had stopped as well.

Culhane fell back on his haunches.

"Holy shit!" It was the seaman.

Culhane looked up, to the seaman, standing there, jaw dropped and dumbfounded looking. To the door— the white haired Commander, still clutching his .45 automatic.

To his own hands— Culhane's hands were shaking.

## **Chapter Twenty-nine**

The Anthony, because of Hurricane Elfego, could not surface. And, on the surface, the Anthony might still somehow be susceptible to the will of the demon which had nearly destroyed it. There was only one way for Culhane to reunite with the SEAL Team, and the prospect of the technique by which that might be achieved cheered him not at all.

Culhane already begun to change into an ordinary wetsuit and boots. He glanced at his Rolex as he

zipped closed the top of the suit. If the Anthony hadn't stopped, or if the hum— it had been the reactor— had continued— Culhane would have been nothing but vaporized atoms floating somewhere with millions of other atoms, billions, part of a radioactive cloud, ready to claim more lives.

After the fight, after the Captain of the Anthony, Commander Breeze, had asked in his inimitable way. "What the hell is happening here, mister?" Culhane had excused himself and found the Sickbay head and thrown up. Then he had sat down on one of the bunks and answered questions, but gotten answers, too. The instrumentation was now in perfect order, the targeting computer, the sequencing system, communications, the machining spaces, all of it perfect, as it should be, as though nothing had happened.

Culhane was not about to become a Voodooist— but he very much wanted to give Momma Cinda a big kiss and tell her he believed in her. Honestly. Whatever the method, her use of the power of good had triumphed over the power of evil— so far, anyway.

Culhane leaned against the rail overlooking the control room, Commander Breeze working his periscope handles up, ordering, "Full angle on the diving planes, Jim."

"Aye, sir."

"Take her down to two hundred and fifty feet and make best speed for those coordinates. We'll lay off two hundred yards from shore if its deep enough— check the charts but check for depth as you go in anyway— there's a lot of coastal erosion and I don't want us getting hung up."

"Aye, sir," the first officer said into his headset microphone, "The Captain has given the word, the bleed was good, prepare for negative buoyancy— dive! dive! dive!"

A seated, red-haired young seaman pulled a metal pin from his control lever. The seaman announced as though he were reading a page from the telephone book, "Bow planes to full angle." A second seaman in an identical seeming chair with nearly identical seeming controls echoed the first seaman's words, but this time the stern planes. The diving alarm sounded again— it had brought Culhane forward to the bridge.

The first officer announced. "Watch the fathometer— don't let us get any closer than fifty feet from the bottom— keep me posted."

"Aye, sir," a technician called back.

The Captain reached the rail, standing beside Culhane, saying, "Shall we?" He took Culhane by the shoulder and started aft, saving. "Several years ago. I did a single tour on one of the Royal Navy Polaris submarines. And I found that the Royal Navy has a charming custom— they keep rum stores aboard. Well, the best we have are some brand X bottles of medicinal whiskey. Maybe, if we get together sometime after all this, I'll get you and myself whacked properly. I owe you, sir. I'll even start recommending your books."

"Thanks a lot, Captain," Culhane nodded, following along the companion way, down a ladder and into another companionway.

He followed Commander Breeze into a large room, tables arranged with planned irregularity, music playing over a speaker system. It was Clint Eastwood and Merle Haggard singing "Barroom Buddies"— under the circumstances, an appropriate song. Culhane mused.

Culhane seated himself. Commander Breeze brought over two coffee cups and took the pint bottle of whiskey from his hip pocket.

Commander Breeze passed over the bottle. Culhane twisted it open, breaking the seal, poured himself a shot and waited while Commander Breeze did the same "Mr. Culhane, I can't say I understand this stuff with Voodoo talismans and demons and Cuban saboteurs— but all our hopes and prayers go with you and the SEAL Team you'll be working with. Any time you need somebody's arm broken, just call on somebody from the Anthony. God bless," and he raised his glass and downed the half-ounce or so. Culhane did the same.

"'Medicinal' was the right word for this stuff," Culhane added hoarsely...

\* \* \*

The Anthony was equipped with an escape pod, but that would have brought him straight to the surface and the eyewall of Hurricane Elfego was still up there. Charleston still existed, so far, as best the equipment aboard the Anthony could discern. Hurricane Elfego having stalled, and quite abruptly so, advancing at a snail's pace. The outer islands were being hit, but at its new rate. Elfego would strike Charleston proper within about an hour. And, at the pace at which it now moved, the devastation would be total, the sustained winds of well over one hundred fifty miles per hour meandering over the city. Some almost pitiful evacuation efforts were underway, but there was no time for anything but traffic gridlock of almost Biblical proportions. And, there was nowhere to go. However far inland evacuees might reasonably be able to get, Elfego would relentlessly follow with its one-two punch. The leading edge of the eyewall would be first. Then the calm within the eye, then the eye would pass and the hurricane would strike with full force again, while meanwhile the leading edge spawned dozens of tornadoes and incalculable flooding washed over the land.

Nuclear disaster had presumably been diverted; natural disaster with unnatural force behind it was another matter.

Asmodeus, even if the demon hadn't had Fanny, had to be defeated.

With the escape pod a non-possibility and surfacing the Anthony an unacceptable risk, the alternative was frighteningly obvious. Culhane had seen it done in movies, written about it in books, but it was the first time he had ever done it, and quite possibly the last thing he would ever do— exiting a submarine through the torpedo tubes, laden with a tank for his air supply, and a chest pack with his individual weapons and additional gear.

The technique was simple enough, to be sure. The submarine brought itself to within a swimmable distance to shore and up to a depth where decompression from nitrogen bubbles would not be necessary. One of the forward torpedo tubes was carefully tested for drip, then the inner door opened preparatory to the man who was to be launched instead of a torpedo entering the tube.

Culhane had entered the tube, the fit okay but definitely claustrophobic. The inner door was closed and secured behind him. The outer door was opened, but only after the tube was allowed to flood, the water pressure from the outer door just being flung open of sufficient strength to easily kill someone inside the tube. Once the tube was flooded, and the outer door opened, Culhane swam his way out.

Culhane treaded water for a moment, the rush of air from the torpedo outlet still buzzing his ears, his eyes scanning from within the mask for orientation. He locked onto the submarine, checked his illuminated

direction finder and started to swim for it. He was approximately five hundred yards off the coast, and would stay submerged for the duration of the swim, convenient under the circumstances as a means by which to avoid the mercilessly churning surface. Presumably, he would be met by Commander Harvey Eddleston and the rest of the SEAL Team from the Capricorn. Their last communication had indicated insanely rough seas, but that the eyewall had not yet reached their destination.

Culhane followed his direction finder's course through the murky grey of the water, some sediment churned from the bottom by the roiling waves on the surface. Culhane's periodic glances toward the surface showing the water there quite a bit clearer with an almost ghostly translucence.

There would be a full moon tonight, and Culhane absently wondered if it would ever be visible through a break in cloud cover. His arms tucked to his sides, Culhane flipped forward, toward the hoped-for coastal rendezvous.

He looked back once, the hull of the Anthony no longer visible, an involuntary paroxysm of primal panic skittering along his spine and momentary cold seizing his guts. He kept swimming, trying to shake off the fear.

Culhane focused his concentration on the SEAL Team that would— he told himself there no question of the matter— be waiting for him. He had heard SEALs described once as guys who practiced weight lifting, practiced swimming, practiced running and practiced shooting. Along with the British SAS, they were said to be the best commandoes in the world.

Aerial reconnaissance, just confirmed by the Anthony's sonar, had pinpointed an entrance to the treasure cave from what now, at insanely high tide levels, was below the surface. It was toward this compass bearing which Culhane swam. If he missed these coordinates, he would have to surface, probably blow the rendezvous with Eddleston and his men and, assuming the storm surging waves and high winds didn't get him, enter the grotto by the front door.

Wholly by accident— she would have called it fate— Momma Cinda had discovered the underwater entrance to the cave when she was but a girl, only sometime later uncovering the means by which to enter the grotto from the surface, its entryway masked by the black rocks about which she'd spoken. Erosion from the myriad hurricanes since could have sealed the entrance, but she insisted that it had not, since the tides still rose and fell below the cave where Blackbeard's treasure was hidden.

Comparatively. Culhane would have an easy swim of it. What she had done with lung power, he would do with scuba gear. The difference was like that between scaling a building from the outside with Ninja claws as opposed to taking the express elevator to the top. He hoped.

Before leaving the Capricorn, Culhane had been advised by Eddleston to swim easily, not to tire himself. The mission wasn't the swimming, but rather the penetration, the destruction and the rescue of Fanny Mulrooney if she were still alive— his stomach had churned at the words and did so again now at the thought. And then the escape. Two of the SEAL Team personnel would have brought with them minimum essential gear for Fanny and JeAnn Bonaparte to use in the escape—if.

Ahead, barely visible even in the diffused beam of the powerful flashlight Culhane carried, lay the entrance to the cave.

And, as Culhane neared it, he saw Eddleston. Eddleston, holding a smaller light, used hand and arm signals preset aboard the Capricorn. Culhane swam toward him, followed him into the cave mouth. Just

inside, the other SEAL Team personnel waited. Eddleston swam past them and took point. Eddleston the only light once the other Team members shut off their lights and one of the Team signalled for Culhane to do the same. Culhane turned off the light.

Culhane stayed in the center of their small formation, swimming easily still— Eddleston's advice about not trying to set an Olympic record had been very sound.

In the beam from Eddleston's Tekna light, Culhane could see little reflection from the sides or top or bottom of the cave— the rock was black, as Momma Cinda had described.

Eddleston slowed, turned gracefully in the water, made a signal behind him, one Culhane didn't recognize. Culhane glanced back, two of the men breaking off to cover the cave entrance. Culhane looked to Eddleston. Eddleston was swimming on again, but switched off the light.

There was a different light, a greenish cast to it, like a small beacon in Eddleston's hand. A chemical light stick, Culhane realized.

They continued on. Culhane no longer able to 'take it easy' as Eddleston had advised. Keeping up with these men, each of them with the physique of a leanside body builder, wasn't easy at all...

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Andre Thornberry raised his right hand, the M-16A2 clenched tight in his fist at the front handguard. Without looking, he knew the two dozen Marines behind him had stopped. The simple act of movement against the force of the wind and the driving rain was physically exhausting, mentally frustrating. Light was poor to dismal, night upon them and the skudding cloud cover dense as concrete. It would be nearly impossible to have visual recognition of enemy activity, even with night vision equipment, and totally impossible to hear.

He looked to his Sergeant, made a gesture which posed the question. "Ready, Harry?"

His Sergeant responded in kind, a gesture translatable as. "Yes, sir."

Thornberry nodded, then Harry began passing the signal to move out, starting down the Path toward the beach below, the black rocks about which the Voodoo woman has spoken discernable only as darker patches of night.

Thornberry didn't look back. Harry Patersen and one fireteam would already be following the higher ground to overlook the entrance to what the woman had called "The Grotto." The Voodoo, the demon— all of that. Thornberry had no truck with. These were terrorists and there was a Cuban agent with some mindless crackheads the old woman had called Zombies— those he'd fight. So far, there had been no sign of the men named Hanks and Candler, or of the woman's daughter he'd been told looked white. All that he'd encountered out of the ordinary— if he didn't count the mountains of water crashing over the beach and the windgusts strong enough to bowl a man over— was a yellow Ford Mustang with the driver's side door open.

Thornberry and the rest of his men kept moving...

\* \* \*

Eddleston's green beacon slowed, stooped, then vanished. Ahead, a yellow glow filled the underwater cave, the diffused light making Eddleston and the four remaining Team members visible as well. Eddleston signalled.

Culhane and the others moved ahead. At times, from within the yellow glow, there was a blackness which shrouded part of the water. Culhane had no idea what caused the effect.

The rock beneath them began shoaling rapidly. The darkness within in the yellow light grew, then receded.

Culhane jerked slightly as he felt Eddleston touch at his arm— two taps. Culhane passed it on. then swam ahead, following Eddleston.

Eddleston was breaking the surface. Culhane beside him, slowly too, looking from side to side, back, then ahead. They had surfaced into something like a natural well, a rounded tunnel ahead of them, the origination of the yellow glow at the end of the tunnel.

Culhane started out of the well with Eddleston, stripping away his regulator, shifting out of the tank harness, leaving his boots, his wet suit hood in place.

As the other SEALs emerged from the water, emerging with them were various gear pods. Eddleston was already unlimbering a gun from a long case, of a type Sean Dodge used regularly in Culhane's books, but Culhane had only fired on a few occasions in real life, a Heckler & Koch MP-5SD A-3. A little larger seeming than an uzi with its stock telescoped, only three or four inches of the suppressor were noticeable, the suppressor inset to the vented and drilled out barrel. It was supposedly the most accurate and controllable weapons of its type. Culhane's limited actual experience with submachineguns served to confirm that, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was about to have more first hand data input.

No slings, Culhane had noted— these were the sorts of details which filled Sean Dodge's adventures. The experiences of this night would wind up in those pages as well, if he lived that long. He'd write the characters and the action; let Fanny write about Voodoo and— He shivered. Thinking about Fanny and what he might find here chilled Culhane's soul.

Culhane was handed a similar MP-5, a jungle-clipped pair of magazines, and a compartmentalized musette bag style black fabric case with spares. Culhane racked the bolt, made certain the chamber was empty, checked safety function, pulled the trigger on the empty chamber, then inserted one of the clipped-together thirty-round magazines. He racked the bolt and set the safety, the H-K one of the few weapons of its type which fired from a closed bolt.

The other men were out of the water, skinning out of tanks and regulators and masks, buckling on gear— shoulder holsters with black, chunky-looking H-K P-9 9mms or SIGs, web equipment belts with SOCOM pistols holstered. One of the Team unlimbered a Mossberg 500 military configuration shotgun. Culhane was handed his 870 with the pistol grip and the bag containing the special shotshells, the salt and the Holy Water. He doubted that any of the Team, with the possible exception of Eddleston, knew the bag's curious contents.

Culhane loaded the shotgun, keeping the chamber empty, set it down, then buckled on the web belt with his SIG and the Black Ka-Bar, discarding the chest pack. Culhane's shotgun was the only weapon with a sling, and this merely lashed on, no buckles to be silenced. Culhane slung the shotgun across his back, butt up.

Under the top of the wetsuit, taped against his skin, was the Bali-Song; removing the tape would rip hair from his abdomen and hurt. The knife had already given him a pressure welt from the dive.

But it was good insurance.

Eddleston was starting to move, the two men who had stayed behind near the cave entrance emerging from the water, ripping their subguns from the protective cases before doffing their breathing gear.

At that exact moment, from the far end of the tunnel. Culhane heard a single word screamed. "Culhane!"

The voice was Fanny Mulrooney's.

Culhane started to run— Eddleston and two of the other SEALs grabbed him. Eddleston shaking him. Eddleston hissing. "No! "

Culhane licked his lips— he was sweating under the wet suit, under its toque— but it wasn't heat.

Culhane nodded.

Demon or not, he'd kill it. He followed Eddleston, edging along the tunnel wall, two of the SEALs padding ahead, their subguns at the ready. Culhane licked his lips again. He glanced to the black waterproof map case zipped shut at his left side. The Holy Water, more of the salt-loaded shotshells.

Culhane edged forward. Eddleston holding his 9mm submachinegun in his left fist, keeping it away from the wall, ready to fire down the tunnel. Culhane clutched his own submachinegun in both fists, his right first finger just outside the trigger guard.

Culhane reminded himself that once they entered the grotto, he and the SEAL Team had different priorities. The SEAL Team's mission was to neutralize Fidelito and his Zombies, then save Fanny and any other innocent if possible. Aside from Eddleston, perhaps, Culhane doubted any of the others expected to find a demon. Culhane's primary mission was to save Fanny and kill— or whatever you did to stop— the demon.

He glanced to the left flanking wall, one of the Team with a laser-sighted Barnett Commando crossbow, the brass portions of the bow sandblasted or otherwise dulled in finish, a hunting broadhead nocked and ready behind the cocked prod.

Culhane froze. From above, there was the sound of an explosion, probably a grenade. The Marine contingent was attacking the main entrance.

Culhane glanced at his watch. "Punctual." Culhane murmured.

From the end of the tunnel, he could hear a woman's voice, whimpering.

Culhane felt the tendons in his neck brace.

The crossbowman edged ahead, along the center of the tunnel, passing the two point men who had gone ahead, the two point men falling in slightly behind him, flanking him from each side of the tunnel, right and left. Assault rifle fire, dull, almost impossible to hear, emanated from above.

A battle was raging over them, between the Marines and Fidelito's fanatically homicidal Zombies.

Culhane couldn't help but ask himself what he would find at the end of the tunnel, in the cave itself? Would he find what Momma Cinda had told him he'd find, sitting atop a mound of centuries old stolen gold ingots and gems.

Asmodeus.

The crossbowman was in place— but as Culhane watched him, the crossbowman seemed to draw back and not as if to fire. Culhane stayed behind Eddleston, his fists locked on the H-K submachinegun.

Eddleston shifted his submachinegun drew the SOCOM pistol from its hip holster, a gun in each hand now as they neared the end of the tunnel.

Eddleston stopped. Culhane moving past him, dropping into a crouch.

The interior of the cave was lit in the yellow glow of battery operated lamps. At the far end of the cave, perhaps a hundred yards from their position, the lamplight reflecting from a mound of gleaming yellow-gold ingots and sparkling jewels— as Momma Cinda had described it from the visions in her mind— there was a figure.

A hat was atop the head, a tri-cornered pirate's hat, broadbrimmed, high, evenly ballanced over a furrowed brow of the thickest, blackest hair Culhane had ever seen, but nothing by comparison to the flowing hair and the full beard which fell nearly to its waist, the beard and the bristling mustache and the hair on the head matted, smoking. Its legs were squatted, like something that one would expect to find under a toadstool in a fairy tale. At the massive waist was a wide belt and a buckle of immense proportions, and in the belt were pistols, thrust there one right behind the other, so many of them they corseted the waist, the flesh and fabric bunched up over the silver capped butts.

Blackbeard.

Blackbeard extended his right hand— seated around him, kneeling, lying prostate— men rose, as if entranced, submachineguns, machetes, clubs in their hands.

One of the Team handed Culhane a monocular. Culhane focused on the man kneeling immediately before Blackbeard, blood oozing from his nostrils, his ears, his eye sockets, his mouth. It was Fidelito. And Fidelito's blood dripping orifice opened, "Kill!"

It was not a human voice— was it the voice of the demon? Culhane shivered.

Beside a woman whose body was stripped of its clothing, the deathwhite flesh blue veined with lividomy, blood encrusted about the neck and breasts, lay a second body: Fanny Mulrooney. A black robe was shredded around her, beneath her. Her body writhed— erotically, but in agony. And she screamed, "Culhane!"

Culhane glanced to Eddleston.

Eddleston shouted. "Now!"

The Zombies charged, flailing their machetes and clubs, those few men with submachineguns firing. Eddleston and his Team took cover beside broad black rocks beyond the outlet of the tunnel, opening fire. The crossbowman loosed his bolt, the front runner of the Zombie pack taking the bolt in his throat. But the Zombie kept coming.

One of Eddleston's men shouted, "You can't kill these fuckers, sir!"

"Keep trying!" Eddleston ordered.

Culhane sprayed a half-dozen three-shot bursts of submachinegun fire into the leading line of attackers, then broke into a dead run for Fanny Mulrooney. A grenade exploded somewhere close, the cavern walls and floor vibrating around him, his ears ringing. He stumbled.

Culhane pushed himself to his feet.

The enemy personnel with submachineguns— fewer than a half-dozen— were not Zombies, merely in thrall to the demon. Culhane fired a three-round burst into the chest of one of these men and he went down just as dead as he should have. These had been, for lack of a better term. Fidelito's "henchmen," who helped him keep the Zombies enslaved, becoming slaves themselves to the demon.

Fanny was screaming, shrieking, her body lurching, vaulting upward, twisting, like someone possessed.

"Like Seaman Whitelaw." Culhane hissed through clenched teeth.

Near the far side of the mounded pirate riches, at the right hand of the grotesque figure squatted there, lay JeAnn Bonaparte, ropes binding her arms and legs.

Momma Cinda's daughter was completely motionless, dead or fainted away.

One of the Zombies flung himself toward Culhane, machete hacking downward. Culhane emptied the H-K into the Zombie's chest, but only to buy time. It wouldn't kill him, merely slowed him down.

Culhane drew the SIC Pistol from the oversized holster at his side, firing one round almost point blank, the bullet impacting between the eyes at the height of the nose, lead and shattered bone before it splintering through the Zombie's brain. Culhane's experiences in the fight at the mortuary had taught him that, the absence of higher brain functions notwithstanding, the brain was still required for the Zombie to function and this unfortunate's brain had just ceased to function at all. The Zombie fell over dead.

Culhane shifted the second jungle-clipped magazine into place in the submachinegun.

Culhane ran on, "Fanny! I'm coming!"

And inside his head, he heard a laugh, not human— and his head filled with pain. Culhane fell to his knees, sagging forward, the voice inside his head commanding him to "Die!"

Culhane rolled onto his back.

Through the pain which so suddenly consumed him— or perhaps because of it— Culhane realized that the demon and the pirate were somehow the same. Asmodeus and Blackbeard were one.

Culhane fought the pain, writhed across the floor until he had the submachinegun on line with the creature atop the mound of treasure. Culhane managed to fire, saw the bullets from his burst impact the figure's massive chest.

Culhane was afraid.

Nothing happened.

Culhane managed to stand, lurching forward, toward Fanny Mulrooney. The shrieking inside his head had changed to laughter, grew louder, louder, crowding out thinking, will. Culhane focused his mind on the Gris-Gris in the pouch at his right side, the pouch just like a pocket.

The Gris-Gris was in his "right pocket" where it would protect him from physical harm initiated by the demon. He focused his mind on this as he half-ran, half-stumbled toward Fanny Mulrooney. The laughter grew louder inside his head. He shouted at the laughter in his mind. "You can't win, damn you! "

Running.

Culhane fell to his knees beside Fanny Mulrooney. There was no Gris-Gris for her, her eyes wide, as if the eyes themselves would burst outward from the sockets, her bloodied lips drawn back from her teeth, bruises and welts on her breasts and thighs and neck and cheeks, her body pulsing wildly with spontaneous movement, like someone caught in the grip of a seizure.

Culhane, on his knees beside her, wheeled toward the demon, shouted at it. "You're fuckin' dead!"

The submachinegun set aside. Culhane staggered to his feet, the shotgun off his back and in his hand.

Culhane snapped the pump one-handed, chambering the first salt-loaded 12-gauge shell, the laughter in his head subsiding.

Culhane fired, straight at the demon's face. Tromboning the action. Culhane fired again.

The figure recoiled with the double impacts. Culhane shook his head, the laughter gone, but his vision playing tricks on him— it had to be. Blackbeard's body was shimmering, deforming, waves of light surrounding it. Blackbeard dissolving.

Culhane fired again, the waves of light solidifying.

Culhane fell to his knees, retching uncontrollably, closing his eyes, falling forward, his face upturning, his eyes opening.

The figure of Blackbeard was gone, and in its place was the figure of the demon, Asmodeus, Prince of Wantons.

The demon raised what was, perhaps, its face toward the grotto's ceiling, bat-like arms which spanned from cavern wall to cavern wall flexing, flesh sinuous, mercurial, green shimmering, surrounded in a corona of blood red. Its torso, shapeless, somehow had form in scaly twisted mass foul with stench. A head— human, serpentine, bovine, all these and none of these, yet massively proportioned held within it enormous pools of blackness and, pulsating within these, flame, yellow hot.

Culhane's hands dropped the shotgun, swept up vainly to cover his ears. A voice unlike anything imaginable to the human mind reverberated among the rocks, off the cavern walls, from the open sore at the lower portion of the head which was its mouth. "You defy me!"

His body was being hammered at, as though fists pummeled it, feet kicked it, Culhane's forearms blocking his face, his hands clamped tighter over his ears.

He gasped for breath, the stench, foul beyond filth or decay, enveloped him like a shroud.

The gunfire had stopped—he could see Eddleston's men standing motionless.

Fidelito's Zombies, his gunmen—they stood, stock still, however without will, frozen within the grasp of terror.

The demon hulked over Culhane. Culhane willed his hands to move from his ears, to grasp the shotgun from the cold blackness of the cavern floor, his body reeling against the blows which hammered at him. Culhane fell back, rolled belly down, then crawled forward, Culhane's fingernails gouging against the rock, clawing him onward.

Eddleston—Culhane looked at the SEAL Team Commander as Eddleston raised his submachinegun in his right fist, his pistol in his left, both arms at full extension. The weapons fired. A plume of red orange flame engulfed the SEAL commander, Culhane's eyes following to its source. The mouth of the demon vomited flame.

Fanny Mulrooney screamed.

Culhane reached for the pump shotgun, raised it, worked the action and fired into the demon's mouth.

The outpouring of flame stopped. Culhane was thrown back across the cavern floor.

Culhane pumped the shotgun, fired again, for the demon's eyes. He opened the bag at his side, grabbing more of the salt-filled shotgun shells, feeding them into the shotgun's magazine tube, pumping, stabbing the shotgun out to full extension in his fists, firing.

The demon's right eye turned to flame.

Culhane somehow got to his knees, the hammering at his body harder, his chest, his kidneys, his groin consumed with pain beyond endurance. Tears streamed from his eyes, vomit welled up within his throat.

Culhane staggered to his feet. Somehow, from deep within the core of his being, he had commanded his legs and feet to move and he was walking, his body pressed, leaning, wedged against a force stronger than the winds of the hurricane which by now surrounded the grotto. He pumped the shotgun. He fired. He pumped again, fired again.

More shells into the magazine tube, fed with fingers thick, trembling. And Culhane's left hand felt the flask shaped plastic container of Holy Water from the church pastored by Father Whitehead's friend.

Culhane fired the shotgun, the demon's form shimmering, fading—impossibly strengthening.

The voice roared within Culhane's mind, his body slamming back, nearly collapsing from its force.

"No! Do not defy me!"

The Holy Water— it knew he had it. Culhane realized.

Culhane twisted off the cap from the plastic flask, letting it fall. His left thumb he held over the flask top to keep the contents from spilling. Culhane staggered, fell at the base of the mound of gleaming gold ingots and shimmering jewels, crawled on knees and elbows toward the demon's body.

The ingots, the jewels— they were being sucked up, swirling about the demon, about Culhane pelting, striking Culhane's face and hands and body, as if the demon's form itself was the vortex of a storm.

Culhane's breath came hard, lungs aching, throat all-but closed, pain— viselike— gripping his heart.

Culhane crawled up the mound, the Holy Water in his left hand, the shotgun in his right.

An ingot of gold impacted the left side of Culhane's head, blinding him with pain for an instant, the floaters still in his eyes as he dragged himself upward, the demon's thundering voice commanding, "No!"

Culhane stumbled, fell prostrate. Culhane raised his head, looked up. He would see the thing forever in his nightmares. He looked back— Fanny Mulrooney's body twisted, writhed in agony.

The SEAL Team members were fighting their way toward him, their bodies hammered by the force of the demon's will.

Culhane drew his left arm back to full extension and hurtled the flask of Holy Water upward, toward the demon's face. On his knees, Culhane's left hand pumped the shotgun and Culhane stabbed its muzzle toward the demon's slaving maw, toward the bottle of Holy Water.

"Be gone, unclean spirit, in the name of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!"

Culhane pulled the trigger— the bottle of Holy Water disintegrated, and Culhane watched it, as if in slow motion, a drop of the Holy Water touching at the back of his own right hand, the Holy Water spraying across the face of the demon.

The demon's flesh smoldered, as if the Holy Water were acid.

The demon's body contorted.

Culhane collapsed, falling back, down the mountain of treasure, rolling over wealth unimaginable. Flame vomited from the demon's mouth, the body swelling, contracting— the shimmering again.

The demon's cry of anguish and hate, older than the black stone dislodging around the creature, rang through Culhane, the rocks uplifted, pelting against the grotto walls, the cavern trembling, shaking, pulsating, the demon's body pouring into itself, rising.

Culhane threw his body over the naked body of JeAnn Bonaparte, a rushing sound engulfing them, like wind, but stronger than anything Culhane had ever heard, deafening. He rolled back her left eyelid. She was alive. Culhane caught her up in his arms, running.

Fanny.

To his right, the SEAL Team members were cutting their way through the minions of Fidelito.

Culhane stopped dead, the wind tearing at him, ripping at his wetsuit, twisting his facial muscles with its pressure, whipping JeAnn Bonaparte's black hair across his eyes.

Fidelito— his eyes were wide, his head cocked back with unheard laughter, in his right hand a knife, the point of the knife to Fanny Mulrooney's throat.

Fanny Mulrooney.

Culhane dropped to his knees, rested the unconscious JeAnn Bonaparte before him.

His right hand moved to the hip holster, drawing the SIG.

Culhane borrowed the word and the sentiment from the demon. "Die!"

Culhane pointed the pistol and fired, the bridge of Fidelito's nose exploding, the arm holding the knife gone limp. Fidelito's body collapsed.

Culhane forced himself to his feet, lurched the few remaining steps toward Fanny, her hair caught in the wind that consumed the cavern, chunks of the cavern ceiling collapsing, thudding to the ground around them.

Culhane dropped to his right knee. "Fanny? Fanny! Answer me!"

Her eyes— they were red rimmed, but the grey-green of them had always mesmerized him. Culhane stared at them now, her eyelids fluttering.

Fanny's eyes seemed to focus. She whispered hoarsely. "Hi."

Culhane hugged her body to him, pulled her to her feet. Fanny Mulrooney's naked flesh collapsing against him. "Can you walk?"

"I dunno— but I think I should run."

"Stay here; don't fall down. Okay?"

"Okay. Josh."

Culhane went back for JeAnn Bonaparte, glancing once more toward the mound of gold and jewels. The demon's body was a funnel-shaped apparition, no longer physical, somehow, energy only, green and red, the odor stronger, more vile.

Culhane was freezing cold. He touched JeAnn's body to get the ropes which bound her. Her skin was goosefleshed.

Culhane slashed the ropes away with the Ka-Bar, slung the girl over his shoulder. As best he could, he sort of ran, more like a fast commando walk, Mulrooney staggering beside him. They wouldn't hear him,

but Culhane shouted to the SEAL Team, "Get outta here!"

Culhane looked behind them. The funnel shape was more definite, the gold ingots, the jewels, the rocks littering the cavern floor vanishing within it. A whirlwind. JeAnn Bonaparte's hair pelted again at Culhane's eyes. Culhane looked at Fanny Mulrooney— despite everything, she was beyond beautiful.

The cyclonic force that was Asmodeus sucked at them, pulling them a step back for every two steps forward. One of the SEAL Team members fell, being drawn into the demon.

Culhane started to reach for the man, but the crossbowman and one of the others grabbed him. dragged him with them.

The SEALs were running, into the tunnel. Culhane after them, one of the SEALs dropping back, taking JeAnn from Culhane's arms. Culhane outstretched his right hand, grabbing Fanny Mulrooney's naked shoulders, propelling her forward, running.

The tunnel outlet— Culhane and Mulrooney reached it.

Culhane looked back only once. Fanny looked back as well. The whirlwind was rising, ripping away the grotto ceiling, the walls of the treasure cavern imploding into it.

Culhane prayed the Marines above them had gotten out.

He dragged Mulrooney away, into the tunnel, running, tugging her ahead.

The pool in the well of black rock— there were waves there now, lapping into the tunnel, the tunnel floor awash.

One of the SEAL Team was buckling JeAnn Bonaparte into a tank and regulator, another pulling a mask over her face.

The crossbowman shouted to Culhane— Culhane couldn't hear the words.

Culhane helped Fanny into the other spare tank, the regulator, the mask. Commander Eddleston's tank would be left behind, but Culhane grabbed up the Tekna dive light.

Waves were rushing out of the well of rock, sucked into the whirlwind which was devouring the cavern, the tunnel walls beginning to crack, thrusting toward the cyclone.

The crossbowman and two others of the SEAL Team had JeAnn, getting her into the water, disappearing below the surface. Culhane signalled to the other SEALs to go ahead. They dropped into the water, disappearing just as a wave crashed upward and into the tunnel.

Culhane grabbed Fanny around the waist, hurtling her into the water, then jumping in after her, holding onto her. forcing her below the surface, dragging Fanny downward. The weight belt wasn't enough to counteract her buoyancy. Culhane's left fist locked on her right wrist and he pulled her along, the flashlight in his right hand, the flashlights of the SEALs barely visible ahead.

Fish— a profusion of species of all sizes and descriptions— swam against the current sucking them into the cavern by the whirlwind. Culhane had only swum a few yards against the current's force and was

already near exhaustion.

Culhane strained against it, arm and shoulder and back muscles starting to stiffen with pain.

Mulrooney's body was being torn away from him by the force of the surging water, but he held fast to her wrist in a death grip.

The cave entrance—the open sea, waves of heroic proportion cascading into the cavern.

Culhane fought the waves, as if they were human enemies trying to destroy him and the woman whose wrist he would not let go. Two SEALs reached out to them, grabbing Mulrooney. Culhane waved them ahead with the light.

The current battered Culhane. but with Fanny no longer in tow, the effort was a little less. Culhane forced himself out of the path of the freight-training waves, shaking his head to clear it. swimming along a rock wall. The SEALs were ahead of him. Fanny and JeAnn with them.

The shimmering of moonlight— Culhane reached for it, reached. His head broke the-surface of the water, the white sand against the black rock of the grotto brilliant.

Perhaps they were within the eye of the Hurricane.

The sand was shoaling under him and, on his knees, Culhane started to drag himself from the breakers crashing around him. The wind was still high, the storm surge high as well. But, the Hurricane had passed. If they had been inside the Hurricane's eye, the winds would have been almost dead calm. Whatever the fate of Hurricane Elfego. it was gone from this beach, from this sky.

On his feet, Culhane staggered at last onto the sand. Fanny Mulrooney, violently shivering, her body wrapped in a Space Blanket, came into his arms, huddled against him.

Culhane tore away his face mask, holding it in the fingers of his right hand.

"Josh!" Mulrooney was screaming at him.

"Hold me," he shouted to her, her arms going tight around him.

Both of them looked toward the highest outcropping of the black escarpment. The rock above the grotto was warping, drawn downward, then bulging upward. A whirlwind of green and red light burst skyward into the moonlight, the cracking sound of it like that of a thousand gunshots.

And then, silence except for the rushing of the high surf and the keening of the wind and Fanny's breathing beside his face.

## **Chapter Thirty**

Mary Frances Mulrooney leaned her head back, shaking her hair out, across the back of the couch. She could never remember the name of the cut on the CD that was playing, but they both liked it and Josh had it set to repeat. It was long, slow, a sexy sounding saxophone wailing through it.

Culhane crossed the room, sitting down opposite her as she looked across her body at him. "All those men— seeing me naked like that," she whispered.

He handed her a glass of Myers's dark rum— in one of his Doc Holliday glasses. "Rather have the whole bottle and a straw?"

Mulrooney laughed. "I was thinkin' about it."

He stood up, crossed to her side of the couch, then dropped to his knees in front of her. She leaned forward, Culhane's hands touching at her face, holding her face there. "Don't let go of me," she whispered.

"Never, promise ya," he smiled, kissing her lightly on the lips. She leaned farther forward, sliding down from the couch, nestling into his arms as he leaned back, her head against his chest. He wore no shirt. The hair there tickled her. "Anyway," she heard him say. "the SEAL Team guys were too busy to notice."

"That I was naked? Thanks a lot. Josh!"

"It was the guys on the Capricorn who picked us up— they were the ones who couldn't take their eyes off you. Notice how long it took one of 'em to come up with something more than that blanket? Huh? Think that was an accident? Hah!"

"I love you."

"I know that. I love you too."

"Too bad they made me sign those papers— you made me sign those papers!" She sat up, on her haunches, staring at him. "Why did you make me sign that secrecy stuff? You realize what a book that would have made?"

He looked at her, smiled— he had pretty eyes, she'd always thought. Brown eyes like a loveable puppy. "Would you really have wanted to relive that enough to put it on paper?"

She didn't answer him.

Momma Cinda and JeAnn— she thought of that, seeing them hold each other, love each other like a mother and daughter should love each other. On the Capricorn. JeAnn had told her that she was going to open a clinic on St. Peter's Island— Father Whitehead could maybe help find some property for it. She would keep her practice, but run the clinic, supervise it.

Culhane had told JeAnn about the Gris-Gris for the submarine, about the one he had carried through it all when he had fought the demon— how Momma Cinda had been the one who really saved the day.

Admiral Case had met them at the marina— that's what Culhane had called it. She'd thought it was just a boat dock. He had already begun proceedings for recommending Commander Eddleston of the SEAL Team for posthumous awarding of the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Marines— the ones that hadn't survived. There would be commendations for all of them.

"You wanna dance?"

"Dance?"

"Yeah— you know— you shuffle your feet around and don't go anywhere?" Mulrooney clarified.

"Dance— right." and he stood up, helped her up— she untwisted her nightgown from around her legs. It was good to be home in the house on Lake Lanier. The CD cut started over again. "Doin' okay?" Culhane whispered in her ear.

"Fine— now— I think. You wanna make love?"

"I thought you wanted to dance?"

"Let's dance for a minute, then we'll make love."

"Okay." Culhane agreed with her. He had been very nice— he hadn't even asked about the marks on her body. Her breasts still hurt. But the thing hadn't— she shivered. Culhane held her more tightly as they shuffled their feet. Fred and Ginger had nothing to worry about, she realized.

"You think they'll ever find Candler and Hanks— I mean, JeAnn said she saw them both, dead. But—"

"The grotto's gone. the cave's gone. the demon's gone— no. I don't think they'll find anything. You're lucky your car wasn't parked any closer."

"It's insured— boy— I can see tryin' to explain that to the insurance agent— hah!"

"You through dancing?" Culhane asked her.

"Yeah— I'm through dancing."

She let him tilt her chin up— and she didn't close her eyes. She wanted to see him. Josh lowered his face and she felt the pressure of his mouth against hers.