

Ghosts

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

It goes like this:

Fifteen layers between him and the client. His people mostly, from the front that gets the order to the hacker who checks it out. Not everyone who wants to hire a hitman should be to find him. That's why there's redundancy upon redundancy -- for every hacker, there's another who double and triple-checks. After all, he's not going to risk his life, his freedom, on the word of some nobody with a computer, a nobody he's never met.

The order comes through the system -- or system_s_ if he wants to be more accurate -- and if all the information matches, he considers the job. The timetable is necessarily flexible: anyone who wants a quickie goes somewhere else. Quickies get a man in trouble. Check the evening news. Any time a pro gets caught, it's someone who specializes in quickies. Sure, they get top dollar, but they also take maximum risk.

He tries to eliminate risk. He's Aries with Virgo Rising, Moon in Libra. Born for his job, at least according to his chart. Perceived as detail-oriented, almost fussy, a pain-staking perfectionist, he is at heart a warrior, brave, impetuous and independent. His true self, his emotional self, is a judge, coldly calculating, always striving for balance.

He has a superstitious side as well, and isn't sure where it comes from. In the past, he tried to bury it, but he finally gave in ten years ago and his business improved.

That was when he discovered Glenna. She had a New Age bookstore in Sedona, Arizona, and an uncanny knack of seeing his future. The first time he entered her store, intrigued by a book in the window, she'd said from her table in the back, "Should I be afraid for myself, old friend?"

The question had both startled and intrigued him, and when he answered no, she smiled and said, "My chart was uncertain. It told me that today would introduce me to Death."

He hadn't heard of a chart, knew nothing about astrology except for the goofy write-ups in the newspapers, write-ups which never seemed to be about him. But she had encouraged him to have his chart done and after careful consideration, he'd given her his birthdate, time, and location. She promised to have a reading for him in three days.

It was that reading which changed his life, and added one more layer between him and a job.

Now he compares his client's chart, the chart of his intended victim, and his own chart, searching for the optimum day, the appropriate venue, and of course, any hint of failure. If he's not compatible with a client, he passes the work to someone else. If his read of the victim's chart makes the victim seem personally powerful, dominant over him, or just plain lucky, he passes on that job as well.

He has learned, through trial and error, that he is not right for every job, nor is every job right for him. His perfectionism serves him well, and protects him from his impetuous nature.

He has achieved balance which, for him, makes everything right with the world.

* * * *

The balance starts to crumble on the fourth of May. He is in Los Angeles, using the name Carlisle because it intrigues him. He uses it as a first name because he has learned that people cannot remember

an unusual first name. They remember what it sounds like -- "I think it was Carl." "No, honey. He called himself Lyle." -- not what it is. By the time the police are talking to them, he's long gone, vanished like smoke in a strong wind.

He has his network of astrologers, mostly because he believes in back-ups, but he never has the network handle all three things -- the client's chart, his chart, and the victim's chart. Only Glenna gets all three. She is his double-check, partly because she is so very accurate, and partly because he trusts her as much as he can trust anyone.

She has never worried about who he is or what he does. When she realized what he did for a living, she did not call the police as some would have nor did she suddenly fear him. Her manner toward him did not seem to change.

The afternoon he came for his reading, she greeted him with a smile. "My chart had been right," she said. "I did meet Death yesterday, just not in the way I thought."

It had been his first lesson about horoscopes and charts. When they were done by a true professional, like Glenna, they were incredibly accurate, although, at times, useless. Sometimes the language was too cryptic, too given to misinterpretation.

He learned, through trial and error, to plan his jobs based solely on things he understood -- good days, bad days, luck, and the possibility of a future.

The victim's charts were always the easiest to read. If they did not predict a major calamity within a year of the reading, then he did not take the job. He usually appeared in a person's chart as a defining event or a crisis or as Glenna would say, "A possible ending."

The first time she saw one of those in a victim's chart, she made him swear he would not tell the victim.

"I can't promise that," he had said. "But I can promise that I will not give that person false hope."

She had shaken her head at him, but had said nothing. That was when he had asked her why his work didn't bother her.

"I never said that." She folded her hands gravely over the victim's chart. "I vowed, when I went into this business, that I would not judge."

He did not tell her -- indeed, he has never told her -- that she made his work easier. He feels that is too much information. She probably knows it anyway, since she seems to know everything. But he does not want to take the risk of losing her. She is one of the few sure things in his life.

But he has never been long on trust, which is why he finds himself in a shop that smells of hairspray and plastic, just off Hollywood Boulevard, in the low-rent section of town. The shop has a giant hand in the window -- the place is best known for its palm reader who is, in his opinion, a charlatan.

He comes for the astrologer, a pot-smoking eighteen-year-old who calls herself Elli May. She does a weekly or monthly chart for him whenever he comes to Los Angeles. The first time she saw his natal chart, she asked him if he was a cop or a private detective. She clearly lacked the life experience that Glenna had.

"I do work in enforcement," he had said, and left it at that. From that point on, Elli May never questioned him. She also stopped offering him joints.

Her charts are deceptively simple. She uses a computer program which her younger sister designed. She

has not customized a chart for him because he hasn't asked her to. He wants to seem as normal as possible, given that he's a hit man visiting a teenage astrologer to find out the best date for his next job.

The shop's hairspray and plastic smell comes from the room deodorizer she uses to cover up the sickly sweet stench of pot. She hasn't yet learned the value of incense. The palm reader should know -- she's old enough to be the girl's grandmother -- but she doesn't seem to care. Or maybe she recognizes what the girl does not: that the only law he follows is the one he makes up himself.

"Hey ya," Elli May says when she sees him. She pops a stick of Juicy Fruit and chomps, mouth open. "Didn't think I'd see you today."

Instantly his guard is up. She knew she would see him today. They have an appointment.

"Why's that?" he asks, heading toward her tiny velvet covered table in the back.

Elli May shrugs. She's not a very good liar either. "I'm not really ready for you today, Mr. Carlson."

Here he's Carlson, on the street he's Carlisle. An easy mistake, he'll tell someone if they ever ask. The names sound alike and he's never bothered to correct her -- no sense letting the girl know she's wrong.

He slips into the chair, stretching his long legs and resting his hands on his stomach, pretending at an ease he no longer feels. "I think you're ready. I think the chart shows something you don't want to mention."

She flushes a blotchy red. "I don't -- "

"You may as well tell me," he says. "You gotta get used to telling clients good news as well as bad."

The palm reader harrumphs behind him, then gets up and grabs her purse. "Want some coffee or something?" she asks Elli May.

"No," Elli May says, her eyes big and pleading. He can read them, probably better than the palm reader can read palms: _Stay. Please stay. He's a scary man and I have bad news._

"Be back soon," the palm reader says, and heads out. The door bangs behind her.

Elli May looks at him, and swallows, then coughs. He'd bet all the money in his wallet that she has just swallowed her gum.

"It can't be that bad, kid," he says, mostly because he wants out of here, but not without knowing what she knows. "Let's get it over with and you can get back to your smoke."

She squints at him, measuring him in an entirely different way. This is their last time together and she has just begun to understand that he knows it too.

As she slides around the table, she slips a hand in the pocket of her jeans and pulls out another piece of gum. She doesn't offer him any. She takes the stick from the foil, and shoves the gum in her mouth.

Then she sits down, pulls open a drawer, and his chart comes out. It looks like all the others -- a wheel with meaningless notations in the outer rim, more symbols between the spokes, and numbers in the inner rim. The numbers are attached by lines that all seem to bunch up in one area. Glenna once told him that this part of his natal chart shows all his strengths. He supposes it also shows his weaknesses.

Elli May sets the chart in front of him.

"Doll," he says because he knows it'll annoy her, "you've already read my natal chart. I asked you for this

week."

She wears rings on all of her fingers, including her thumbs, big cheap rings that hid her skin. She toys with one of them now, as if considering what to do next, then she reaches in the drawer and pulls out another chart.

Elli May calls this an action table, and in it are little boxes for inane things like "The Best Time to Take a Vacation" and "The Best Time to Obtain a Loan."

He slides his hand under the new sheet and grabs the natal chart. He sets it on top of the action table and taps it. "Look at all that focus on the Eighth House. What is that again?"

"Finances," she mutters.

"And secrets, mysteries, power, death, and transformation, right?"

She nods.

"Don't fuck with me," he says in a very flat voice. "You give me what I asked for and I'll remember you're just a kid who's learning her job."

Her eyes widen. She folds those ringed hands together. "I, um, threw it away."

"I'm sure you did," he says. "But you remember it."

She bites her chapped lower lip. "Mr. Carlson, please, my aunt -- " Apparently that was the palm reader " -- she says not to tell everything. It's not smart."

"Usually it's not," he says. "But I'm not your average customer. Did you know that President Reagan, he had an astrologer?"

The girl swallows again, but as she does, she pushes the gum into her cheek where it becomes a bulging, unattractive lump. She's too young to remember Reagan. She was born during his second term. He's just a name from a dusty textbook to her.

"I'll bet that astrologer told him he was gonna get elected the first time. But you think the astrologer tells him that something cataclysmic is gonna happen on March 30, 1981? Probably not. Afraid, you know, that he'll get upset at the reading. So he don't know he's in any danger, any more than usual. That day, he gets out of his car, and wham! shot through the lung by a kid barely outta college. Lives, no thanks to his astrologer. And I'm sure that chart disappeared like nobody's business, and the astrologer says 'No one can anticipate such random events, Mr. President.'"

The girl's blotchy flush gets deeper. He knows he's got her. He had her with the word "cataclysmic," but he went on because she was young and needed to hear the point. Not for him. He's not coming here again -- he doesn't like working this hard, not with one of his people -- but maybe for someone else.

Occasionally, he can be altruistic, although it always surprises him. He thinks it may come from his Rising Sign. Virgos are known to be helpful at times.

She reaches into the drawer a third time, and pulls out a computer-generated sheet filled with squiggles and symbols he does not understand. The week's dates are running along the side, May 4-11. That's the only part he recognizes.

He hides his surprise; he was so convinced she had destroyed this that he almost doesn't believe it's

before him.

"Okay," he says, leaning forward. "Explain it to me."

"It's called a termination event." Her voice is shaking. "But it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to die. It means that something significant in your life will end, change, terminate, you know."

"Significant how?" he asks. He knows these charts can pick out various aspects -- relationships, home life, business. He needs specifics.

"It threads through everything," she says. "Work, relationships, finances. I've never seen anything like it."

Of course not. She's a baby. She's never seen anything like anything.

"It started this morning, or maybe even a couple of days ago. You didn't have me run that, so I don't know."

And wasn't bright enough to check. He's glad he's not one of the careless types, the kind who uses his power easily. He can just imagine pulling his gun from its shoulder holster beneath his suit jacket, ending this session with a bullet. But he won't, no matter how annoyed he is. He's more of a planner than that.

Besides, he has a hunch this isn't the kind of termination event she's talking about.

"It builds until the sixth, when everything comes to a head, and then, I don't know. The chart flips, and to be honest with you, sir, I haven't seen anything like this."

"Like what?"

"Nothing."

At first he thinks she's being evasive, then he realizes that she means literally nothing.

"How can that be?" he asks.

She shrugs. "I tried calling the guy who trained me, but he's at some retreat in Michigan until the 15th."

He sighs, slaps a fifty on the table, and takes all three charts, even though they're not worth that much.

"Anything else?" he asks as he stands.

"Yeah," she says, standing too, and pointing at the top sheet. "Right now, your energy is at odds with itself. A lot of things will be revealed, secrets will be uncovered. There's so much darkness here that it scares me."

"I suppose it would," he says.

"No." She straightens her shoulders, apparently thinking it makes her look stronger and taller. It actually makes her look scared. "You don't understand. All these things, they're very bad. I've never seen such a horrible chart. If I were you, I'd go to bed and not leave for a week."

"I suppose you would," he says.

Her lips narrow and anger flashes through her eyes. "I'm trying to warn you."

"Of what?" he asks, hoping this time she'll be specific.

"This week," she says, "you may lose everything."

He studies her for a moment. She seems so sincere, so worried about him, even though she doesn't really know him.

"It wouldn't be the first time," he says, and walks out the door.

* * * *

The first time had been twenty years ago. He'd been working as a bouncer at a major New York nightclub, and he'd gotten friendly with the owner, a balding man who wore too much jewelry and liked a little too much blow. He supplied it to his friends, too, and used Ben, as he'd been known then, to deliver it.

Young Ben proved his honesty -- he always returned the money, every dime of it, to the club's owner -- and his street smarts. He'd thwarted more than one robbery attempt, and he'd beaten a handful of men much larger than himself to a bloody pulp.

After one incident, which Ben won but which left him with a broken rib, split knuckles and two black eyes, the owner gave him a gun and paid for time at a range so that he could learn how to use it.

Ben had an affinity for guns. Great aim, which improved with practice, an eye that seemed perfect even if the scope was off. He knew the damage a gun could do -- saw it up close and personal one night -- and vowed never to use one except in self-defense.

Of course, self-defense isn't always what the cops make it out to be.

Ben had been on a delivery when the owner's supplier went to the club and took it down. Ben may have been passing on the funds, but the owner hadn't been. The club burned with only employees inside, the result, the cops said, of free-basing, matches and too much alcohol. Everyone died. The warning was sent -- and the only person left to get it was Ben.

As he saw it, he had three choices: run for the rest of his life, beg for the supplier's (nonexistent) mercy, or defend himself. He defended himself with a coldness he hadn't realized he had. He planned the attack as calmly as he planned anything, knowing that he could simply be firing the first volley in a war that would never end.

But warnings could be sent both ways, and he wanted the community to know that no one fucked with him. He cashed everything out, moved out of his apartment, and became a ghost.

Six months of work, tracking connections, finding people who specialized in being lost, and then taking care of them, quickly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss.

He was nearly done when they caught him. Lost five guys taking him down, wounding him badly enough that he could no longer defend himself.

That was when he learned he hadn't prepared enough. The club owner had been a small fish, the supplier another small fish, the people he took out more small fish. The man who talked to him was probably a medium fish, one who claimed to represent a larger fish.

He offered Ben training for a job, a high-paying one that he'd have to work only a few times a year.

"You have an affinity for it," the medium fish said. "Shame to let such talent go to waste."

He never wasted it. Somewhere, he lost Ben, the boy bouncer, and became the ghost, the man who could go from place to place and never be recognized, the man who had fifteen layers between himself and the world.

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Years later, when Glenna saw that incident in his chart, she said, "You lost everything and it stripped you down to your warrior nature. Since then, you've never looked back."

He sees no point in looking back. He learns his lesson and moves forward, in the world and not a part of it.

Losing everything means only one thing now: losing himself.

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The afternoon sun is pale through the smog. Cars honk, tourists gawk at the poverty that is Hollywood Boulevard, and he remembers why he hates Los Angeles.

He didn't expect such news. He has been careless in recent months -- having his own chart done only when he had a job. May was, literally, uncharted territory.

Until now.

He pulls the cell phone out of its pouch on his belt. This phone is one he cloned in Detroit a week ago. He hasn't used it yet, so it's as clean as the phone in his rental and the five he stashed at the airport.

As he walks, he dials. Glenna will be able to explain this chart. She'll run it herself and tell him what the darkness is, what the nothing is. She isn't afraid of him, and she has the experience to understand every nuance a chart can make.

He listens to the rings as he passes a diner filled with transvestites, hookers, and wanna-be stars. His rental is parked halfway up the next road, around a curve, up a hill, impossible to see from the main thoroughfare.

Even when he hasn't agreed to a job, he's cautious.

"Cosmos," says an unfamiliar male voice, loud through the earpiece.

No "May I Help You?," no "Leading the Way in Harmony," which is the store's tagline, something Glenna always insists her employees say. In fact, this man's voice is so flat he sounds disinterested, like a cop who is answering the phone to see who is on the other end.

Still, he decides to play it, just to see. "Glenna, please."

"Who's calling?"

"I need a name, sir," and he knows his hunch is right. Glenna has never screened her calls. Not in the ten years he's known her.

A person has to take what comes, she says, _however it comes_.

She is, if he remembers right, some combination of Pisces, Cancer and Aquarius, all intuition and emotion, sensitive, psychic and unique. Certainly not someone who would respond well to a voice as cold as this one.

He decides to push one last time. "Glenna has never asked for my name before. Just put her on."

"No can do, sir," the voice says. "I need a name."

He hangs up, then shuts off the phone, slipping it into his pocket. He'll toss it when he gets onto the freeway, somewhere near a bridge or an off-ramp near gang territory. After he wipes it down, of course.

It isn't until he gets to his rental that he realizes he's shaken. It's such an unfamiliar emotion, he's forgotten how it feels -- the chill down the back, the twisting in the stomach, the unsteady nerves in the hand.

For he was wrong when he thought the only thing he had left was himself. He has Glenna, his seer, his touchstone, and the only person he's trusted since he started down this road twenty years before.

* * * *

The Web is an anonymous man's best friend. On it, he has found sites that have told him how to pick hotel keycard locks, how to buy illegal and untraceable weapons, how to steal identities.

Now, in the privacy of his touristy hotel near Universal Studios, he uses the Web to learn something he does not want to know.

Glenna is dead.

Not just dead. Murdered. Two days before, in what the Flagstaff newspaper is calling a gangland style hit. In other words, a professional job.

He gets more information from the local radio news sites and a Phoenix newspaper that feels an obligation to cover the entire state. The details are familiar. He recognizes the method. The job was a quickie, gun left on the scene registered to a New Orleans police detective who had it stolen (or in New Orleans, with its corrupt department, who sold it) at a take-down five years ago. Hit happened late at night, in a private corner near a vegan restaurant she frequented. One shot, taken no more than three feet away, and not heard by the locals. Silencer, probably, or pillow or purse to muffle the sound.

There were probably other details the cops were keeping to themselves, things like a stranger seen near the store that day or that night, an abandoned rental car, wiped clean, or evidence pointing to a local, evidence that didn't pan out.

The thing that disturbs him the most is that the local police don't handle it themselves. They don't even call Phoenix for help. They assume it is a hit, which means the gunman has organized connections, and they call in the FBI.

He's glad now that the cloned phone is gone. He needs to be gone too. No time to delay. There's probably someone tracking his steps in Hollywood as he's closing his laptop.

Check out is easy. Tourist hotels, gotta love 'em. The staff doesn't care why he's leaving early. They figure they know. Too much fun in the sun. Too many rides. Too much alcohol, not enough money.

He slips out as quietly as he slipped in, drops the rental at LAX, and hops the next Southwest flight to Vegas.

For the first time in years, he needs real help, and there's only one place he can get it.

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He flies Southwest because they let customers pick their own seats. If you don't like who you sit next to,

you can move, no questions asked. He takes a window toward the back, grabs an airsick bag, and makes himself look queasy.

No one sits next to him.

The short flight is uneventful, but his mind is racing. Glenna may have mob connections, but he doubts it. She may have an ex-husband with access, but he doesn't believe that. Hell, she may be the mother of a high school cheerleader whose jealous rival hires a hit man, but he never believed that story in the first place. He certainly doesn't believe it now.

He has a hunch he's her only connection to the dark world he lives in.

Should I be afraid for myself, old friend? My chart was uncertain. It told me that today would introduce me to Death.

He leans against the tiny window, staring at the tops of clouds. She had told him at that first reading that charts weren't easily predictable. She'd looked at his and thought that he was a stand-in for Death because of his job.

I did meet Death yesterday, just not in the way I thought.

She had been wrong twice. Her chart had said that day would introduce her to Death. Without him, Death would never have found her, at least not in this way.

He doesn't need actual proof. He has more important things to worry about.

He needs to figure out if she's a warning or if she's a tool. Or both. The shooter had to know the cops would find her long before he did. If the shooter were after him and knew about Glenna, all the shooter had to do was wait.

So he's not an obvious target. He's something else, but what he doesn't know.

She had his charts for the next job. His chart, the client's chart, and the victim's chart. No names, only reference numbers. Numbers she promised -- and he checked (late one night, easily breaking into that silly little store) -- that never had names attached to them.

She never had his real name anyway or his address. He always contacted her, and she didn't seem to mind.

All she had was birthdates, times, and locations.

That was plenty.

His right hand crumples the air-sick bag. He is still shaken, and beneath that feeling is something else, something even more unsettling.

He does not want to examine what that feeling is.

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Angel Bridges has an astrology palace near one of the Elvis chapels on the strip. The astrology palace is as garish as anything else in Vegas: six stories high with turrets and neon astrological symbols that flash on and off depending on the time of year and the fluctuations in the cosmos.

Angel makes her money telling gamblers how to bet based on the stars, but she runs a side business for

true believers. She makes no money on that one -- she does it strictly for love. And she never asks questions because she values her life and her position in a town where people do anything to guarantee luck.

It's five o'clock when he walks in, the beginning of her evening rush. One of the little waifs who works as an assistant approaches him, but he ignores it. The waif bleats, but he continues to walk toward Angel, cutting ahead of a long and patient line.

She sits on a thick couch, a caftan spread around her ample frame. Diamonds glitter on her ears and fingers -- she can't lead other people to wealth if it doesn't look like she has some of her own.

She sees him, smiles at her current customer, and excuses herself, as if she's going to get more research material. She disappears behind a gold leaf door. He takes a side hallway that seems to go in the opposite direction, but doesn't.

They end up in her office, an ergonomically correct room with no windows and a skylight that, at night, sends patterns of neon across the darkened floor. He learned that at one a.m. on a Christmas Eve as he checked her files, making sure her connections were clean ones.

As she closes the metal door, he hands her the natal chart. She's never seen it before. She's only done client charts for him. She has no idea it's his.

"I need two months," he says, "starting with April 20th of this year. And I'm going to wait for it."

He's never done that before. He's always come back. She peers at him, then adjusts her red wig. He doesn't like it. She looks better with her natural black.

"It's gonna cost," she says. "I'll lose about a quarter of the suckers out there."

"I'll pay," he says.

She nods, presses a button, and tells an assistant to inform the clients she's received news of a change in the stars. Then she focuses on the chart and punches up something on her computer.

He takes an upholstered chair designed for a frame shorter and heavier than his. It's the most uncomfortable chair he's ever sat in. But he doesn't move. Instead, he ponders.

A hit like that always draws the FBI, later rather than sooner in small towns, although he probably should expect sophistication in a strange little town like Sedona. What will the FBI learn from his files?

Too much, actually, if they plug the dates, place names, and birth times into their unsolved data base. One half of the birth information will tie to hits all over the country. It won't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the other half belong to the folks who paid good money to get the first half out of the way.

And then there's his, of course, and its repeated monthly or weekly charts. Not that it'll do the Feds much good. Ben disappeared twenty years ago. A ghost took his place, a ghost no one has been able to trace for a very long time.

They will get his patterns though and, if they put someone smart on the case, a pretty good analysis of his m.o., damn his perfectionist Virgo side. They'll also get an excellent description of him from neighboring shopkeepers and former employees because they'll know what questions to ask.

And from the client list, they'll probably track down a few of his hackers or maybe the fronts who took the order. His carefully formed fifteen will crumble to six or seven or four.

One piece of information and his operation shatters. Was that the goal? Or is he being neutralized because the big fish is finally gone or because someone has finally caught up with him?

They'd caught up with him before, but always failed in hand-to-hand. It took some planning to make him ineffective. Some planning and some unwitting compliance from himself and his superstitions.

He'd gotten complacent, a bad thing in his business.

"This is a piece of shit chart," Angel says.

"Inaccurate?" he asks.

"No, just incomplete, like they were using one of those computer downloads done by someone who only gives half a crap." She runs a bejeweled hand over her eyes. What is it about these astrologers that makes them wear too much jewelry on their fingers?

"So whatever this person told me is incomplete?"

"Dunno," Angel says. "What'd you get told?"

He slips the other chart to her, the one with the week ahead.

Angel frowns at it. "Why're you going to a crap artist when you got me?"

"You're not always with me, babe," he says, folding his hands together and leaning back.

She shakes her head, then she pushes the weekly sheet to him. "Look at this. It doesn't tie. It's as if this astrologer's forgotten the natal chart. We got a birthdate in Eastern Standard Time, and we got an analysis done for someone born in Western Daylight. Doesn't work. This is so basic."

"So it's wrong," he says.

"This weekly thing is a piece of garbage." She tosses it into the nearby wastebasket with a flourish. "But this natal chart, I gotta tell you, is the nastiest thing I've ever seen."

"Because of how it's done?"

"Because of what it means." She frowns at him, shoves the wig back so far he can see the pink of her scalp. "This is another client?"

He nods, not trusting himself to answer.

"This is one mean s.o.b. Dangerous. He thinks he's clean, but he's not. He kills for a living, and even though charts can be figurative, I don't think this one is. He sees himself as a warrior, but he's an assassin, plain and simple. Not the kind of person nice folks should hang with."

He hasn't moved, his hands still across his stomach, his feet stretched out, his body trapped in the world's most uncomfortable chair. But his muscles have all gone tense. He can feel the gun beneath his suitcoat. He hopes his expression hasn't changed, then he wonders if it should have changed. After all, she's just told him one of his clients is a killer.

"What're you supposed to do for this guy?" she asks, and he mentally curses her, wishing that she would remember she's not supposed to ask questions. "A job, like the others?"

He nods.

"I hope it's a legal job. You don't want to mess with this guy in any real way."

"What else does the natal chart tell you?" he asks. Somehow his voice remains calm.

"That he's got more secrets than God. That he's unpredictable and charming and could turn on you in a second. I won't do anything for him, no matter how much he paid me."

She's trying to be nice to him. She doesn't know. His muscles are freezing up. He's holding back the truth, that she has worked for him for five years, thinks he's a friend, thinks he's someone she can trust.

"Well," he says, "let's see what the two-month chart says."

"You don't seem shocked by this."

"I thought he was shady. You're not surprising me."

She nods, focuses on the computer screen. For a long time, all he hears is the tap-tap of keys. He resists the urge to stand and pace.

They had to have already found some of his people. The only way to get to Glenna was to find out about the blind box in Flagstaff. In the past, he used to go there, pick up the stuff and drive it down. Three years ago, he decided she could open the box on occasion. He brought her a key, and sometimes he would call, asking her to pick up the various charts. She would.

A few of his hackers and a couple of his fronts have that address. Others have a blind box in Vegas and another in L.A. If the cops triangulated that cell phone call, they know he was in L.A. Or maybe someone else knows.

He gets up so abruptly the chair bangs against the floor. Angel starts. "You okay?"

"Need to make a private call," he says. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," she says. "This is one confusing mass of planets."

He doesn't like that sound either. He heads to the door, takes the corridor outside and goes in the Elvis chapel. There's a line here too, mostly of drunks. He congratulates one of the champagne drinking men, lifts his cell as he pats him on the side, and then goes onto the strip.

It's changed over the years. Big buildings loom over him, pretending to be something they aren't -- the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, a complete European City State. The neon lights make it as bright as day. Cars pass, people stumble by, many of them holding buckets with tokens in them or nickels. A few have newspapers and others clutch cash as if it isn't real.

He dials the store in L.A., hoping it's open late. On the fifth ring, a woman answers. He recognizes the voice. The palm reader.

"You get Elli May out of there," he says.

"So it's you." The reader curses him in some romance language -- probably Italian. "You could have warned her."

"I had no idea."

"She comes here looking for adventure, not a gun in the face."

A gun in the face? He hadn't expected that. He expected something a few days away, maybe an FBI visit or a discreet contact. Not a direct attack. "Is she all right?"

"Scared. She gave him all her charts. He didn't want money. A good thing, eh? So now she can go back to those parents of hers, the ones who didn't even care that she was gone." The reader curses him again.

He lets her. "Who put the gun in her face?"

"I don't know his name."

"Have you seen him before?"

"No," she says.

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because I may be able to prevent him from coming back."

She pauses. He can feel her brain whirling. He wonders if he's making a mistake, calling her, if the attacker is still there. Then he decides it doesn't matter. Most folks can't track a cell phone call. Even if she has Caller I.D., all she can find out is what the cell phone number is, not where the call originates.

"He came in about three hours ago," she says. "He was young, white, has money -- or at least thinks he does. Hand-tailored suit, but dirty shoes, like he's been traveling or forgets to shine them."

He listens, body tense.

"He points the gun at me first, and I shrug. I've seen guns before, but not eyes like his. Big and brown and spinning, almost. Crazy. He thinks he's smart, but he's only smart like a fox. This kind does not survive long."

Is she talking to the attacker now? Or is this the kind of way she always speaks? He wishes he had paid more attention to her, instead of dismissing her out of hand.

"He wants the charts. He gets angry when he finds out they're all the same birthdate. He wants the other ones, the client charts. She says she has no idea what he means, but she gives him everything. He slaps the gun across her face and she falls. I've got my own gun and I pull it out. He turns, laughs at me, says, 'Grandma, you're no match for me,' and then he leaves, as if the fact we seen him don't matter, as if his visit is normal."

"Then what?" he asks.

"A call to the police, of course. No one's come yet. This part of town, who cares? But you care. You know this man."

"No," he says. "I don't."

"He knows you. He says you're getting old and tired and you don't even realize it. A relic, he calls you. A superstitious relic." She pauses. "You will not come back here."

"That's right."

"I am telling you, you will not come back here. My niece, she thinks he will murder you. She thinks it is

her fault."

"Tell her that her chart is off. She forgot to adjust for time zones." And he hangs up.

He wipes the phone off and then tosses it on the sidewalk outside the Elvis chapel. The drunk will think it has fallen from its perch in his pocket. It won't be until he gets his bill that he realizes something has gone wrong.

He goes back into the astrology palace. The line is shorter. The person who was having his chart done still waiting near the couch, only now he is checking his watch.

He slips into the back, goes to the office. She has swiveled her chair so that she's working on a back desk, using protractors and paper charts and colored pencils. It takes him a moment to realize she's redoing her work by hand.

"What's the problem?" he asks.

"It comes out the same," she says and she sounds complete surprised. "Even with the proper adjustments, this weekly chart comes out exactly the same. Something started a week ago, something very serious, which led to a great loss a few days ago, one which had an impact today."

At that, she looks up at him, as if he can give her the information she seeks. He can, of course, but he won't.

When it becomes clear that he'll say nothing, she continues. "It builds and then there is nothing."

"Nothing?" he asks, beginning to hate that word. "What the hell is nothing?"

She shrugs. "I've never seen anything like it. There is no more chart."

"So it means death."

She shakes her head. "I've seen death in charts before, often charts you give me, sometimes in the gamblers' charts. But it usually appears as a transformation. A person's life continues even if he does not."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She smiles. This is clearly a conversation she's familiar with. "Let's say you die tomorrow. Your financial affairs will continue. Your relationships will continue, at least for a little while. You may still have an impact on the world, long after you're gone. I suppose eventually the chart will come to nothing, but I have never seen one do that. Usually the person who dies does not come back for another reading."

That last she says wryly, as if humor might help her unease. It doesn't help his.

If he stops, if he ends, nothing will continue. He has no relationships, not like she is talking about. He has no friends and family (well, he has a family, but they are not people he has thought of in decades. He left them when he stopped being Ben, maybe even before, when he went to work in the City), and his finance affairs will become untended accounts that banks all over the world will have to deal with some day.

He has no will, no legacy, no real life. When he goes, he will leave nothing behind. He will evaporate, like a spirit in the wind.

"I don't understand," he says.

"Neither do I," she says and frowns. "All we have is a cataclysmic event and then nothing. Perhaps I should run my own chart. Perhaps the world is going to end."

She does not say this with humor. He stares at her, then he flings five times her usual payment on the desk. "Thanks."

"Come back tomorrow," she says. "I'll research this, see if anyone else knows what it means."

"I think you might just want to let this go," he says. "I am."

"I can't let it go. It may have great meaning."

"I doubt it," he says, and lets himself out the door.

The line is even shorter. The man waiting for his reading is talking angrily to one of the waifs.

He goes outside, looks at the fake towns, the people pretending they're having a good time. The cell phone is gone from the sidewalk in front of the Elvis chapel. He wonders if the drunk found it or if someone else picked it up.

It is time to disappear. To become a true ghost, never thought or heard of again. Over the years, he has made a hundred escape plans, and he has liked none of them. Nothing sounds duller than sitting on a tropical beach sipping Mai Tais for the rest of his life.

No matter what Angel said, or how much contempt she said it with, he is a warrior. And he wants to die a warrior's death. If he cannot work, he cannot enjoy his life.

Maybe he should cut all his ties with the past, the fifteen layers (some of which are gone, some of which have betrayed him), move to a different country, and set up again. Someday, perhaps, he can come back here as an independent and start again.

But he is too old to start again. He only has ten more good years, twenty if he keeps himself in perfect condition and chooses targets as old or older than he is.

Perhaps the nothing on his chart reflects his ghost status. Perhaps it means that he will chose a new identity, with a new birthdate, and start again.

Perhaps. But he does not believe it. He has reached the end, and he is not sure what that means.

But he knows what he will do.

He will wait.

* * * *

What he figures is this:

The young man is after him for his client list, which means he has not found the fronts, only the hackers. In fact, he may have only found one hacker -- any one with Flagstaff PO Box would do.

What disturbs him is the connection to astrology. The guy knew about the superstition somehow -- and he thinks he knows how. Sometimes hitmen become legends in their own business, especially if they've been around a while, like he has. They get monikers, usually based on something unusual.

He hasn't been tied into the network in years -- too much risk, risk he doesn't like. But the network is still

tied to him, clearly, or to his reputation. They can't call him the Zodiac Killer -- that had been taken by some psycho who wouldn't know a pro hit if he were instructed in how to do one -- so they probably gave him a different name: the Horoscope Man, the Astrology Hits, something. And from there, this guy searched until he found something unusual.

What doesn't fit, what bothers him, is that the guy's research makes him seem cautious, but his encounters -- both with Glenna and Elli May -- make him seem like a quickie.

The guy's also arrogant, so he doesn't cover his tracks. The fact that he has the charts is both exhilarating and disturbing. Disturbing because the guy's going to get caught and he's going to give up what he knows. Exhilarating, because the FBI, even though they're involved, don't have the charts and can't tie Glenna's clients to anything.

If the guy is as smart as he seems, he's going to find out about Vegas. Once he finds Vegas, he'll find Angel. Once he finds Angel, his spree will end, one way or another.

There's even a timetable, according to the weekly chart. By the sixth of May, the guy'll be in Vegas -- and there'll be a confrontation. Better to know that in advance. No surprises.

No surprises, the better the chance of winning.

If there is something to win.

* * * *

What he doesn't admit to himself as he waits is how disturbed he is. Deep down. He's never been anyone's focus, never been the source of anyone's search -- not him, not his ghostly self. Sure, he's probably in a bunch of police and FBI databases, but for his various crimes.

Right now, he's being tailed for who he is, targeted for what he knows, and the people he's surrounded himself with are being punished.

He hates that.

He hasn't realized how much he hates that until he sits in Angel's office for the second night in a row, trying to find a comfortable chair. The lights are out, but the skylight lets in so much neon ambiance that everything is well lit.

The computer is off, but he has helped himself to her files, realizes she has some connections that make him nervous. He wonders if they know who he is, if they know about his previous break-in, and if they care.

Probably not. If they cared, they'd take care of him. They're probably watching now, just to see what he's doing, just to find out what he knows.

What he knows is that he's having a hard time staying calm. And that's not like him. But he keeps thinking of Glenna, her easy manner, her smile when she saw him after a long absence, the way she believed whatever she did was for the best.

He led the guy right to her, and she had died, violently, because of him.

Strangely enough, that disturbs him. When he gets paid to take a life, that's different. It isn't about him. It's what he does. It's not personal.

This is. This loss had a direct connection to him, more direct than pulling the trigger.

This loss pisses him off. And the fact that it pisses him off pisses him off even more. He isn't supposed to have attachments. He's outgrown them. They're useless in his business. He needs to be a complete loner, and somehow he's failed to do that.

Part of him worried about Angel until he saw who she was dealing with. If the guy offs her, he'll have an entire family of people to answer to. She'll be protected.

It's his remaining astrologers who are in trouble. Them, and his hackers -- the ones who haven't encountered the guy -- and the fronts, and all the others associated with this little operation. He's struggled to keep them as clean as possible. He doesn't want anything to happen to them because of him.

At least, that's what he's telling himself as he sits in the shadows, watching the blue neon Scorpio signal -- an M with a pointed tail -- flash on and off against the cherry colored carpet. He's also thinking he may have overestimated this guy when he hears the security lock click open.

Finally.

He pulls out the semi he got at a militia convention outside of Denver and aims it at the door. He has to wait until he's sure because he doesn't want to nail Angel by mistake.

Someone slips inside, as thin as one of the waifs. The neon is off for the moment, dammit, and the room is darker than usual. Then the gold Taurus ignites -- a circle with horns -- and he sees the leather jacket, the slicked-back hair, the cruel curve to the mouth.

"You could've just asked for my client list," he says.

The guy swivels, surprised. But he covers well. "I had to find you first."

His answer is a spray of bullets that rip the guy up and make him dance before slumping against the wall, lifeless and empty.

Now he's got to move quick. He suspects the palace has walls thick enough to hide the noise, but suspecting is not the same as knowing. He approaches the body, gaping and bloody where the torso should be, and stares at the face.

Unfamiliar, not that he should know who the guy was. And young, arrogant. A quickie, just like he thought. He slips on his gloves and pats the pockets, finding a Hilton room key and a receipt with the room number, and a wallet with I.D. poorly faked, from some computer site.

Not even a quickie then. An amateur, a wanna-be. No wonder he needed the client list. He didn't have connections to get jobs on his own. Glenna had been practice, proof that he could do it.

And maybe he couldn't. A real pro would've shot Elli May and the palm reader. A real pro wouldn't've left such an obvious trail.

A tiny red light is blinking on the back of the computer. He looks for the source -- thinking maybe someone has a laser scope on him. How can that be? There's no way to focus the scope on him from that angle. There should be shadows from the skylight above. He's been checking. The astrological signs are sending the proper light to the carpet.

Some kind of warning light. Some kind of security trigger. He pockets the room key, but destroys the receipt. Then he peels off his gloves, and folds them over his shoes like a cheap pair of rubbers. There'll

be bloody footprints. He can't help that. But that's the only clue they'll have, and with Angel's unsavory connections, the cops'll probably look somewhere else.

He reaches for the door, turns the knob, hears a second click. Not a security lock this time. Something flat and ominous, something he should have expected, but didn't because this, for him, was a quickie too.

He pulls on the door, but it doesn't open. Programmed to lock after violence like that. He's seen security like this before. He's not going to be able to shoot through the metal door, at least not in time.

"Damn," he says as he turns, hoping he has time to get up to the skylight, to break through it. The red light on the computer is blinking so fast that it seems almost constant.

He stands on one of the uncomfortable chairs, the semi pointed at the skylight. He's pulling the trigger when the computer explodes.

* * * *

He has time to analyze it.

It's not really a white light. It's more like sunlight, broad and glistening, incorporating many colors, but so brightly that all he can see is white.

He's afraid to look at it, afraid he'll see that no one is waiting for him, or that the folks who are waiting are really, really, really pissed off.

He hides his eyes, but the light comes through the lids, just like it would do if he were really there. He doesn't look at it, pretends he can't feel its warm glow, and gradually, it fades away as if it never existed.

As if he never existed.

Which, he supposes, he hasn't, not for a very long time.

* * * *

"Ben?"

He opens his eyes. The old lady standing over him has thin gray hair and a broad face. Her features are familiar.

"Ben?" She sounds like she's witnessing a miracle. Behind her head, a TV screen blares the news. A woman is reading headlines, and below her is a sports ticker. It gives the score of the All-Star game.

He frowns. The old lady is calling for nurses, and he realizes that he's in a bed, immobile, and very, very tired.

"You're back, Ben. Thank God. I've been here everyday."

Finally he recognizes the voice. The old lady is Angel. He was wrong. Her hair's natural color isn't black. The tips are, but she's stopped dying it. A scarf lays on an endtable, along with a book about destiny. She's been waiting for him, and reading.

"You saved my life. That serial killer -- "

She doesn't get a chance to finish. His room is invaded by scores of health care professionals in white coats. They surround him, stick him with things, ask him questions he doesn't know the answer to, tell

him he's lucky, lucky, lucky to be alive.

He has lost more than two months. It's mid-July. He has been immobile in a Vegas hospital bed for two months -- not alive, not dead.

Living in limbo. Existing. He was, he realizes, during that span, nothing at all.

They take Angel out, afraid she'll tire him, but she promises to come back.

He has to cope with many realizations -- that his rehabilitation will take months, maybe years. He may not walk again. His left arm has been destroyed. He's afraid to look at his face.

They found out his real identity from his fingerprints, sent for his family, and found out he has none left. His fingerprints are on file, he remembers, because of a drug bust twenty years ago, one the club owner paid their way out of. He had forgotten that. He has forgotten more than he knows.

What he does learn from Angel over the next few days is that, in her eyes, he's a hero. Somehow, she thinks, he got the guy's chart. They're calling the guy -- Dante Evans -- a serial killer who specialized in astrologers.

Evans wasn't as careful as he thought. He left clues at the scene of Glenna's murder and Elli May was able to I.D. him from a photo as the guy who beat her the afternoon of May fourth.

Angel believes that "Ben" knew something was wrong, and when he figured it out, guarded her. She has no clue who he really is, and if she has no clue, then neither do her contacts -- the ones who booby-trapped her office.

She is embarrassed as she explains this. "They made me promise that I'd keep their information secure," she says. "They set up this trap. At first it was supposed to go off if there was unofficial activity in the room, but I was afraid for my assistants, so they set it up to go off if there was other factors. I never asked what those factors were. They promised it would never happen."

He knows. It could have been any number of things: a response to the cordite, to the sound of gunfire, to the spray of warm liquid -- like blood. Or merely a remote device, set off by someone who kept an eye on the place, whenever he believed there was trouble.

Gunfire counted as trouble.

But he says nothing to her, and he also says nothing when she offers to pay for his room. His tracks are covered, so deep that he knows he's facing an opportunity.

Angel sits beside his bed. She's still apologizing to him, feeling guilty for misreading the chart. She doesn't understand that it's not Evans' chart, that it's his chart, but he won't tell her that.

"I still have trouble believing death registers as nothing. But they can't find anything about him. We're the only ones affected," she says.

He listens. He doesn't tell her what he believes. Can't. He's afraid she'll run his chart or the serial killer's chart, which is what she believes it is. If she runs it past May 11, she'll find the nothing ended on the day he woke up. The nothing was the coma.

Even though it wasn't really nothing, not like the chart said. After all, Angel's here and she thinks he's a hero. He has had some impact on her life.

Maybe the nothing was a misinterpretation -- or a non-interpretation. Maybe everything was in such flux that no one could predict what would happen.

"Angel," he says, when she finally pauses for breath, "do you believe in second chances?"

"Of course, honey," she says and pats his good hand. "The religions, they all deal with that. It's even in a person's chart, in the nodes. Past lives always have an impact on present ones."

"No, no," he says. "I'm talking about this life. What if there's a clear line, a break between what you were before and now. Can you be something else?"

She studies him for a moment. He wonders how clearly she's seeing him. Does she think he's talking about his old drug arrest, his wandering lifestyle? Or does she think something deeper is going on, maybe even suspect the darkness he let take over his soul?

"I think a person gets a second chance like that for a reason," she says, "and only a fool would pass it by."

He nods. He's been thinking that too.

"You want me to do your chart, so we can see what path you should walk?"

"No," he says. He's done with that. Charts are too accurate. He's not going to plan his life like that any more. Besides, he wants to forget that he's a warrior with a judge's soul. He wants to think he's been reborn in July. A Cancer. Sensitive, nurturing, protective. Someone else entirely.

"How come you never told me who you really are, Ben?" she asks, looking down. This question matters to her.

He gives it due consideration. "I guess," he says, "because I never knew myself."

Protected by fifteen layers, a soldier in a war he didn't believe in or understand, searching for meaning where there was none, meaning that got the wrong people killed.

He's not a hero, not even close. Doubts he ever can be. He's still superstitious, maybe more so than he was before. He's hanging up his weapons and finding a new path -- one that might make him worthy of the light.

Maybe, the next time it surrounds him, he can look at it and through it, to the world beyond. Maybe the next time, he'll have enough courage to go there, and face himself, what he's been and what he's done.

The thought disturbs him and he closes his eyes, for the first time in his own memory not trying to repress feeling, but to acknowledge it.

To feel something where there was once nothing.

To be a person instead of a ghost.