

ErRatic

by

N. D. Hansen-Hill

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To Emma

Acknowledgments

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ErRatic

Fed with disparity, nursed on hate,
Shunned in rivalry, cursed by Fate.
Sibling antipathy—so foul, so base?
Displacing compassion and human grace?
Vented obscenity and traded for sin,
Evil unleashed—no means to win.

Can good prevail, when it's evil-spawned?
Can love and yearning dissect the bond,
Of a sing'lar obsession which is far from sane,
That entraps the future in remembered pain?
Aborted affection, or misguided tool,
Torn asunder by rat? Or throttled by ghoul?

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Prologue

Emma glanced blearily at the clock. Three a.m., and Studley obviously needed to go out. He was whimpering, deep in his throat, and his cold nose kept nudging her arm.

Damn dog! She reached out and gave the silky coat a pat. Zombie-like, she stumbled across the room, to the front door, and unfastened the lock. “Out!” she commanded, punctuating it with a squeaky yawn.

When she opened her eyes again, the man was standing on the grass, just off the porch.

It was a very small porch.

She slammed the door and locked it, then raced through the house. She kept picturing Him running, trying to beat her to the back door.

It's locked. It's got to be locked.

It was, but she didn't feel any better. No one had any business standing there, on her property, at three in the morning. He was up to no good.

She ran for the kitchen and picked up a knife in one hand and the phone in the other. The knife shook in her frozen fingers. *Not a good thing. He'll use it on me.*

He damn well better not try. Her shadowy reflection in the window glass was that of a madwoman, brandishing a blade. Her staccato movements glinted across the toaster face, and she jumped, slashing the air.

Hysteria burbled up, like an unwanted belch, before sense clunked in with a nearly audible jolt. *Window. Nightlight. He'll see me.* Frantic, she dropped onto the floor, and punched in a fumbling “911”.

If he saw me, I hope he saw the knife, too.

She shouted into the phone, “There was—!”, realized she was shouting, and quickly hissed, “There was a man!”

Why the hell hadn't Studley barked?! The damned dog had practically dumped her in the

killer's lap!

The Police Operator was offering instructions now, and Emma listened to them blankly. She'd just recalled something very pertinent to her case.

"N-Never mind," she said, replacing the receiver with shaking hands.

A dream. It had to be a dream.

But it wasn't and she knew it. It was what she'd tell them, though, when they asked.

She sat there, huddled, too scared to challenge the near-dark. Her eyes were already scrunched closed, but now she drew up her knees and buried her face in her arms.

Shielded. Safer.

Not really.

She couldn't afford to move now, even if it meant lighting the house. She was too afraid of what she might see.

She nestled her head deeper, to block her ears.

Too afraid of what she might hear.

She hummed a little whimper, deep in her throat the way Studley had. Just enough noise to challenge any other whimpers in the room.

When they came with the squad car to check out her call, she'd have to get up—but not till then. Then, it'd be okay—maybe even safe.

Why hadn't Studley barked? That one was easy—now that she'd remembered.

About Studley.

He'd been dead—for almost a week.

Chapter One

I'm not alone. Some people spend their entire lives "on the edge". Variation is what keeps life interesting.

It's just that some types of variation are harder to take than others.

Emma rolled her eyes. Her sigh was gusty. Basically, she lived for those days when her life was as normal as anyone else's, and tried (a little desperately at times) to appear undaunted by the rest.

There's always someone who has it worse.

At least, she had acceptance on her side.

Maybe.

There were moments when Emma doubted that almost more than she doubted herself. The friends, the acceptance, could all be faked, like the mask she wore marked "normal".

This was one of those times. After a near-sleepless night, she was finding it difficult to dredge up optimism. As she walked into the lab, and set up her work station, she made a conscious effort to shake off her depressing thoughts.

Face it: your life's good, save for a few cyclic "disturbances". The last was such an obvious understatement that she gave an unwilling snort of amusement.

"It" always happened in cycles, and Emma had never been able to figure out whether the trigger was some kind of lunar influence, a biorhythmic discrepancy, or perhaps an inexplicably weird metaphysical imbalance.

Maybe the planets are lined up or my chakra is hyperactive or ... ?

Whatever the reason, it was damned annoying. One incident would never satisfy her system, either, and she sometimes wondered whether she was meting out tribute to the gods in the form of embarrassment and panic attacks. And those blasted deities didn't seem to be satisfied with anything less than her total mortification.

To think she'd moved, yet again, to improve the situation! She let out another exasperated snort, then gave Dale, at the next lab bench, an apologetic smile.

"Problems?" he asked, eyeing the paper in her hand. Then, correctly interpreting the expression on her face, he quickly lifted his feet off the floor. "Now?!" he asked, startled.

Dale was one of her oldest friends. He'd been the most tolerant of her flatmates during her attempt at communal living in college. Now, he worked in the same research lab. Amazingly enough, he wasn't put off by her problem. Most of the time, he seemed to find it amusing.

That seemed to be most people's reaction—until they had a close encounter. She wondered, sometimes, why she still had so many friends.

I'd have run the other way, she admitted. She sighed again.

"I don't hear anything," Dale remarked. Usually an episode was punctuated by squeaks and rumbles, scratches and thumps.

"Because it's not *that* problem," she whispered, with a quick glance at Nicky and Chang. "It's the *other* one."

Dale smirked. "Do you really think they don't know, about the 'other' one? Earth to brainless: there's no need to whisper."

"I'd sure as hell rather be prepared," Chang murmured, carefully pipetting into an Eppendorf tube.

"Same here," Nicky agreed. "I want to get my feet up off the ground."

"How can you all be so calm?!" Emma complained. "Don't you know what I'm capable of?!"

"Havoc." Dale shrugged. "Think how boring it'd be without you. Besides, they had the place fumigated last month. Chances are we won't see a thing."

"Sure." Chang chuckled. "You just go on thinking that, Iverson. I, for one, am backing things up." He reached over, clicked the "Save" icon on the laptop, and recorded his file on disk, just in case. Then, to prove his point, he put two tubes on ice, covered the test tube with cotton again, stripped off his gloves and crossed his arms. "Ready."

"You are sooo cold," Nicky chided. "Think of the poor girl's feelings." But she saved her work, too.

“Poor menace,” Dale retorted. “Think how I feel when they run over my feet.”

“It’s not *that* problem,” Emma said again. “It’s the other one. I must have alienated my tenth policeman last night—”

“Eighteenth,” Chang argued. At her outraged look he grinned mockingly. “I’ve been keeping track. It’s how I get my kicks. Beats the Internet.”

“Nothing beats the Internet,” Dale argued.

“Thus speaks the game addict.” Chang strolled over to Dale’s computer and maximized a file on the desktop. “Oh, lookie here.”

Dale reached past him and “X”ed the corner. “Not during work hours. You know that.”

“Sure, Dale,” Nicky said sweetly.

Emma was getting frustrated. “Be that as it may, and add in the codicil that *you are all insane*, it still doesn’t help. Last night it was a man, j-just off my porch.”

“You thought he was real,” Nicky said sympathetically.

“Duh. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have phoned the police. Only logical,” Chang remarked.

“Coffee, anyone?”

“I don’t think you understand the significance,” Emma argued. “The last fifteen times have been *people!*”

Dale shrugged. “So? I fail to see the significance.” He sniggered. “I’m up for coffee.” He strolled from the room.

Nicky came behind, with Emma. “Jock will be gunning for you now—since you called the cops?”

“Oh, yeah,” Emma said miserably. “It was his precinct. No way he won’t know.”

“I wish you luck,” Nicky told her. She put an arm around Emma’s shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze. “When he starts shouting, whatever you do, don’t get carried away.”

Chang poked his head back into the room. “Alternatively, if you decide to go for it, call me, so I can come over and watch.”

* * * * *

Harley crawled in for a coffee at the end of his shift. Paperwork—the bane of all policemen—

and then home. He was half-asleep, which was probably why it took him a while to notice that Jock Jamieson was upset.

So, what else was new? The man's real name was Jack, but he insisted on Jock—said it reminded him of his football days.

Jock was a jerk.

And Harley Chalmers wasn't ready for him this early in the morning—not after eight hours of night duty. This wasn't his usual shift, and it never would be—not if he had to finish it with idiots like Jamieson. Harley liked days. He could handle a jerk like Jock a lot more easily when he was awake.

“Don't look at me, Jock. I'm still coercing coffee into driving me home.” Harley took a loud slurp to end the conversation before it even began.

It would have worked with anyone but Jamieson.

Or maybe it wouldn't have, Harley admitted, when he finally tuned in to what Jamieson was saying.

“But Nichols said it was you who took the call.”

Harley stared at him blankly, hoping the fool would realize Harley wasn't listening.

No. Not Jock.

“My sister,” Jock prompted. “A prowler?”

“The nut case.” It was out before Harley knew it, and for the first time, Jock looked a little peeved.

“Fuck it, Chalmers! It's not like her to call. There must've been a reason.”

“There was. A nightmare.” *I rest my case*. Harley drained his cup. If he'd known the woman was Jock's relation, he'd have made his visit even more cursory than it was. *Clearly, a history of insanity.*

He smiled kindly at Jock and turned to go.

“It's not her fault.” Jock gripped Harley's shoulder, fumbling for excuses now. “Rat's just missing her dog.” He frowned. “She should have called me first.”

The contact made Harley's fist itch to contact Jock's jaw. His fingers were actually twitching. “Rat?” he asked.

Jock shifted nervously, and lost some of the attitude which had acquired him a shift full of enemies. It was obvious he thought he'd given too much away. "Short for Rathburn—or Ratbag. Pet name." At the last he sniggered.

"Not a Jamieson, eh?" *Lucky girl.*

"No. Stepsister." Jock added, with a mocking grin, "Gives me more freedom, if you know what I mean."

Harley thought he did. *Sick bastard. No wonder she didn't call him.*

Harley's fist was positively aching now, and he poured himself another cup of coffee, so his fingers would be kept too busy to react. The only way to get rid of Jock at this point was to give him some information. "I took the call, but she was really tense, so I checked out the house for her."

"Find anything?"

"Nope." Harley shook his head wearily. "Afterwards, she seemed convinced it was a nightmare." *End of story.* Slurp. "Kept apologizing." He paused, knowing he'd hate himself for this later. "Missing her dog, eh?" Slurp. "How many does she have?"

"None, now. 'Studley' was her one and only." Jock sniggered again. "Dog hated me. Glad to see him go."

Harley nodded, but didn't dare open his mouth to comment. His own dog Choco hated this guy, too. Once, when Jock had strolled past his car in the lot, Harley had thought Chocman was going to tear through the glass.

Harley waited until a rather primitive impulse to pummel the dog-hater had passed, then said mildly, "Could have sworn I heard a dog when I was going through the house."

Jock's eyes flickered with some emotion Harley didn't recognize. He averted his face, and said tensely, "I'll stop by and see her later. Make sure everything's okay."

Jock Jamieson had turned into The Mechanical Man. *Interesting.*

"Thanks for taking care of it."

"It", not "her". Even more interesting.

Harley found he recognized the emotion in Jock's eyes after all. It was echoed in the thin line of his lips.

Hate. That little show about “Ratbag” was dated—it belonged to years, maybe decades, before. Whatever had transpired during the interim had changed his outlook—especially if it involved paying her a visit.

Jock Jamieson hated his sister.

He was also afraid of her.

“I’ll tell her to lay off the phony calls.” Jock flicked his crunched coffee cup in the trash and stomped out of the room.

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Harley didn’t know why he was interested, but it damn well made him feel like a fool. Any long association with people like Jamieson did that to him. “Long”, in Jamieson’s case, was anything over five minutes. Jock Jamieson’s unique attribute was his singular ability to inflict rectal pain, wherever he went.

Harley justified what came next by telling himself just how much it would please him to find a skeleton or two in Jock’s closet.

You’re taking advantage of his mental deficiencies.

Harley searched his conscience for traces of guilt, but couldn’t find any. Jock took advantage of their relatively sane minds with his sadistic sense of humor every day. He was a perverted type, with too much interest in the unsavory, an overblown sense of his own authority, and he frequently used far too much “constraint” during an arrest. Nobody wanted to work with him. They all knew how easy it was to be drawn into a confrontation initiated by someone else.

The hell with principles. Harley ran a check to see how many calls had been made to the woman’s address.

Only the one.

He was about to take off when he decided to cross-reference the file, running the name “Emma Rathburn” instead. The results were rather different.

She’d called in eighteen reports from nearly as many locations. None of them had resulted in any suspicious activity whatsoever, let alone an arrest. It seemed that the only suspicious activity was Emma Rathburn’s. The most positive report filed by investigating officers referred to the results as

“inconclusive”. “Non-existent” would probably have fit just as well.

He recalled Jock’s words: *“It’s not like her to call.”* Apparently, Jock didn’t know her as well as he thought. Obviously, she didn’t make a habit of phoning him to bail her out of trouble.

Harley wished he could dismiss the woman as easily as her stepbrother’s prattle. But there’d been fear in her eyes—enough to make him search the house. It occurred to him Jock might be the source of her troubles. That would explain the fear in Jock’s eyes: he didn’t want to get caught.

Don’t get involved.

But then there was Jock’s warning—the one he planned to deliver later today. Harley wondered what form it would take. The girl was tiny, compared to Jock’s big frame. Mental and physical torment would be in keeping with the rest of his personality traits. Abuse was the kind of thing he enjoyed.

Don’t jump to conclusions.

The numerous incidents could have been initiated by some old boyfriend, now playing stalker. The lack of physical evidence suggested mental assault, rather than physical.

Or it could all be a farce. *Maybe the reason Jock hates her is because she’s crazy—too crazy even for him to put up with. This could all be some delusion.*

Harley recalled her expression.

A delusion she believes.

Whatever her gene pool, she arose out of the same environment. Jock’s sister, for crissake! Chances were, she was as self-centered as he was. If this was some sort of game she was playing, for attention, he wasn’t the only officer who’d been misled. If, like him, they got involved enough to run her name and background, they would have wondered, just as he was, whether they were being played for fools.

Contrary to everything he was reading, though, Harley didn’t think she was playing games. Her delusions were too real for that. Whatever was eating at her, she really believed it. As Jock had said, “There must’ve been a reason.”

Maybe the same reason I heard dog whines and scratches in a house with no dog.

Cursing himself for stupidity, and more for listening to Jock, Harley clicked the files closed,

logged out, and left the building. Sleep was what he needed now, before he ended up as crazy as Emma Rathburn.

* * * * *

Dale was worried about tonight. When Emma was nervous, her control was a little shaky, and trouble could pop up every which way. He didn't particularly feel like hanging out with her this evening, but he'd promised Marie. His wife, like almost everyone else Emma knew, was (if occasionally a trifle disgusted) for the most part fascinated rather than appalled by Emma's ability. Marie's initial intro had been a moment of shocked horror, and it had taken a while for her to come to terms with Emma's "talent", but eventually she'd overcome her aversion.

Dale recalled how at first, after hearing his stories, Marie would have done anything to avoid her—and then there Emma had been, on the opening night of opera. A big group of them had shared a box, and Emma had unexpectedly "shared" her secret. When Dale had started laughing, during Pamina's aria, Marie hadn't been able to help herself: she'd joined in.

That was six years ago. Since then, with the help of a lot of biofeedback books checked out of the university library, Emma had gradually acquired more control.

The recent bout of sightings was different, though. Sometimes Emma released some of her tension—whether it was metaphysical or not, Dale had no idea—with the occasional mediumistic stunt. She didn't mean to, but it seemed to be a saner alternative than her usual, and Dale, for one, preferred it. But, he could imagine on a dark night, when you were half asleep...

He'd have to talk to her about it, though. She'd conjured up the last guy in her sleep. Same with her dog. Maybe lay off the nachos before bed?

She must be missing Studley. He'd been a good mutt, and he'd put up with a lot. He'd been protection for her; warning her when things were getting out of hand.

Dale sighed. Home for dinner, then off to Emma's. He couldn't help but wish tonight it could still be Studley standing guard, rather than him.

* * * * *

Patterns were Harley's thing. Whether it was the grid-like interface of a map, the reconstruction of a car wreck from words and evidence, or the determination of criminal activity from

conduct and clue, he excelled. Lately, he'd had a feeling they were grooming him for more. His conclusions had been considered a "vital contribution" to a murder investigation—*i.e.*, he'd solved it for them—and he was pretty certain they were lining him up for detective. He had the schooling, he had the brains, and he now had the experience. The last thing he needed was to have his name associated in any way with Jock Jamieson's. It'd be certain death to his career.

I might just as well murder myself.

Then why am I doing this? Harley blamed it on the change of schedule, residual fatigue from the night before, curiosity, and lastly—and perhaps most honestly—stupidity. He'd always had a secret fascination with the paranormal, and he couldn't forget the dog's bark from the night before. It had had a hollowness to it, as though the bark itself held an echoing resonance. Yet, the sound had been loud, and it had responded to his movements around the house.

Almost as if it were trying to thwart my entry. What had freaked him out even more, though, were those tip-tapping dog claws. When the barking failed to bar his passage, those damned claws would follow him around a room, and he could have sworn once or twice, a canine nose had sniffed at his legs and privates. It was the kind of behavior he would have berated Choco for, and it wasn't until he'd growled, almost under his breath, "Cut it out!" that the invisible mutt in Emma Rathburn's house had backed off, and left him to it.

Then why am I going back for more?

Because it was the most interesting callout he'd experienced in the past eight years. He could admit it now: he would have come back today anyway, on some lame pretext, whether Jock was involved or not. Jock was actually the biggest obstacle, because it was his sister, and—either way—he'd know that Harley had been there. It might even make Jock think Harley wanted to know him.

Big mistake.

Harley was still thinking it when he came around the corner, just in time to see Emma pull into her driveway.

* * * * *

Emma dreaded Jock's arrival.

But that goes without saying, she thought dismally. *After all, I ruined his life. He wouldn't be*

such a jerk if it weren't for me.

No doubt about it, he wouldn't spend so much of his life over-compensating if he hadn't been stuck covering for her all those years.

And being a dick became a habit with him. If he were tough enough, and manly enough, he'd be untouchable. Nothing could sour his life—not even Emma Rathburn.

He was the one who'd christened her "Rat", but it hadn't been out of goodwill. He'd hated her back then because she had, in essence, cost him his family. When Emma's mom had met his dad it had been mere months after his own mom had left. Jock had taken to his second mother wholeheartedly, and Emma had been the younger sister he'd never wanted, but learned to love.

Later he'd say that Emma had been such a little thing, and so cute, that he'd had no idea Satan lurked inside her.

That was when he'd been going through his religious phase—when he'd thought he could evict her inner demons with staunch prayers and holy water.

What bothered Jock most was how much he'd let himself love her and her mom. He'd accepted them, without reservation, because he was needy. He missed his own mom, and hers had greeted him with open arms.

The trouble had begun when Emma turned nine. Jock was thirteen, and full of rebellion. She'd kicked his rebellion right in the butt. Rather than despising his family in a normal progression toward separation, poor Jock had been forced into the role of protector. He was always scared—for his dad, for his mom, for himself, and even a little for Emma. At the same time he'd be screeching and yelling, he'd be afraid to leave the house, for fear that *They* would come. The specter of all that docility turning into a feeding frenzy horrified him, and filled his nightmares for years. He'd reacted the only way he knew how; the only way he could cope.

Under the pressure of Emma's freak show, and Jock's explosive temper, their family unit had crumbled, and their parents had split. The pressure wasn't off Jock, though. His stepmother and Emma still lived in the same school district. Emma's arrival at his high school had set the pattern for Jock's future existence.

Protection. Aversion. Calculation. Cover. Jock had been tough, staunch, and—at times—

downright mean. Like most bullies, he had a following, and he remembered high school as the best years of his life. He'd covered for Emma, even though their parents were no longer together, but he'd gotten back at her by nicknaming her "The Rat", and then, "Rat". It had stuck with her. Even Dale called her "Rat" sometimes—a leftover from college days, when Jock had paid her the occasional visit. Anyone who'd ever experienced Emma's particular brand of mania could see how appropriate the name was.

No wonder it had stuck.

Emma really felt—most days—her life was getting under control. Running smoothly, with few unexpected surprises and fewer unwanted visitors. Her friends were really her friends, and they'd stuck with her, through deluge and onslaught. She'd discovered it didn't matter what mood she was in—oh, fear and nervousness might evoke a response, but they didn't affect how it played out. Her life might not always be peaceful, but it never turned out to be the ravenous feeding fest she'd once feared. She'd managed to leave that concern behind her. The only people who feared that now were newcomers to her life. The others treated her occasional lapses the way Dale, Chang, and Nicky did—amusing, sometimes dismaying, but not really threatening. In fact, she guessed the uncertainty of her existence was what kept them—and others—coming round for more. "You never know what Emma's going to do next," she'd overheard, more than once. And the oft-times laughing response, "I can give you a pretty good idea." Words like that, followed by friendly laughter, did a lot for a self-esteem which had frequently been near rock-bottom.

Yes, things were pretty good these days, except for her occasional very odd visitor. Emma still didn't know what to do about it—him—them, but given her past experiences with odd phenomena, she was—almost—confident she could figure it out. For the moment, though, physical encounters were about to become much more problematic than metaphysical ones. Her dear ex-brother Jock was, even now, striding up her front walk.

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Harley sat in his car and watched her for a full ten minutes.

What am I—some kind of stalker?

No, you dumbass, you're a wannabe detective, who's about to blow away all his opportunities

nosing around in what is none of his business.

It actually took less than five minutes to figure out what was bothering her: Emma Rathburn was deliberately procrastinating. She was wandering, a little aimlessly, to the mailbox and back; watering the flowers by the walk; straightening the hanging basket on the porch. Every once in a while she'd stare at one of the windows, as though expecting the curtains to twitch. Then, she'd hurriedly go back to fussing with something else. Harley fully expected her to wash the car or mow the grass next—anything rather than enter her front door.

Finally, she took a deep breath, and if Harley hadn't known better, he'd have sworn she held it for the full time it took her to dig the key out of her pocket, and open the door. Harley actually had his hand on the car door handle, when Jock Jamieson's car came tearing around the corner. When Jock stepped out of his car, Harley took the coward's way out, and did the only thing he could think of: he ducked.

* * * * *

Jock was going to be difficult. Emma could see it now, and she blamed herself for the signs of stress on his face. Her "Hi, Jock!" was cheerful, but sounded false, even to her own ears. Her added, "I wouldn't have called unless I really thought I had a problem," didn't make things any better.

Jock, wearing his thunder brow, stormed in, slammed the door, then thumped through to the living room. He plunked down on her couch. "What's the story now, *Rat*?" he shouted.

Emma flinched. "Just a mistake. I thought he—"

Jock didn't give her a chance to finish. "It's *always* a mistake! *You're* a mistake!" he continued, his voice rising. "A genetic accident, that never should have happened!"

He couldn't sit still after all. Jumping to his feet, he pounded across the floor, his mouth working, but no words coming out.

"I've been working on biofeedback—" she began.

His eyes widened. "Biofeedback?" He knocked over her designer-copy lamp, and booted her table. "Maybe a little destructive feedback's what you need!" His face tight with fury, he slammed her bookshelves sideways, sending them spilling across the wood floor. "How 'bout some noise? Will that help?" He stalked into the kitchen, and Emma grimaced as she heard her dishes go

flying. He came back into the room with a knife, and cheerfully shredded her just-paid-for lounge suite. “That help? Enough ‘feedback’?”

His initial fury exhausted, Jock dropped down on the shredded chair and flung the knife across the room. It embedded with a twang in the far wall. “I need you out of my life,” he told her. “Every time I feel I’m getting somewhere, it blows up, right in my face.”

“Sorry, Jock,” she murmured. It was her fault. What had she cost him this time? A promotion? Maybe, even, his job? It didn’t seem fair that her job seemed relatively secure, while he— one of my victims, she thought dismally—always caught hell for her mistakes. “I’m so sorry—”

The words weren’t even out when she heard it—them. It began with a squeak, and was followed by a low rumble. “Oh, God!” she murmured.

“Aw, hell!”

It would be the last thing Jock would want—to be caught here during one of her episodes.

“*I hate you!*” Jock snarled. He twisted her way, and she knew he wanted to hurt her then—to get back at her for this, for everything. His grasp on her arm dented the muscle, ragged fingernails ripping flesh. *Crush her, the way she’s crushed me.* She could read it, could read him. His fury shimmered the air between them.

He won’t! He was always angry—had always been angry. Most of the time she took it as her due—the blame so much hers that it wasn’t worth discussing—but this? This was something else. Jock was so furious she could smell it. It emanated from him like some kind of molten wave. His teeth were bared, and the fingers gripping her arm were now tipped in red. “I’ll kill you!” he shouted, shaking her so hard her teeth rattled.

It was the trigger. They’d been coming before, but now their numbers tripled. Like water seeping in through the cracks, they poured into the room—a solid stream of undulating brown bodies, rough tails, and whiskered snouts. On and on, in numbers like Emma had never seen before. Under the doors, along the pipes, in through the cupboards, dropping from the ceiling, racing down the stairs, running along the doorjambs and windowsills, along the picture sill, across the drapes, through holes in the window screens, on and on and on.

* * * * *

Harley didn't know what prompted him to move. Maybe it was Jock's bearing as he'd headed toward her house. He'd looked like a man who needed subduing. More than that: he looked ready to kill. Harley was halfway up her walkway when Jock's "I'll kill you!" rang out.

Harley hit the porch at a run. His hand was on the front knob when a voice at his back shouted, "I'd find a tree if I were you—!"

Harley never heard the rest. The words were lost in vibration. A thunderous rumble juddered the planks beneath his feet, and—convinced it was an earthquake—Harley latched onto the porch rail. He wobbled, lost his footing and fell to his knees.

Then, he saw It—*Them*.

My God! His eyes wild, Harley's jaw gaped, and he hesitated but an instant before leaping up on the railing and clinging to the struts above.

Rats. Hundreds—no, *thousands*—of rats. They were pouring in from everywhere: under landscaped shrubs, from the vacant lot across the street, out of neighboring basements, across roofs, up out of the storm drains, from everywhere. He gasped in horror as they ran past him—over his feet, over each other, across the railing, then down onto the porch—before pouring in through a widening gap of doorway.

I opened it! he thought in horror.

In his eagerness to help, he'd turned that knob, and given the hordes entrance. True, they were pouring in through window screens, too, but by far the greatest numbers were skittering in through the front door.

The numbers seemed endless, but they gradually tapered off till only a few latecomers were left. The lawn, which had been slightly on the long side, was now scalped in some places, and littered with rat droppings on the rest. The squeaks and thuds gradually quietened, but if there'd been screams from the people inside, they'd been drowned by the deluge.

Either that, or they never had the chance to scream.

Harley clung there, lost in the horror, and dreading what he had to do next. His feet wanted to lead him onto the grass and streak for home, while his mouth hung open in a silent scream for help.

Duty first, God help me. He sniffed, gagged on the stink of rat urine, and pulled out his phone.

“Wait!” It was the guy’s voice from before, and now Harley recalled his shouted words, *I’d find a tree if I were you—!*

Harley froze, phone in hand. “You *knew*.”

“Yeah,” the guy said calmly. “But don’t call. Emma doesn’t need that kind of notoriety.” As though reading the question in Harley’s eyes, he added helpfully, “It’s okay. My name’s Dale Iverson. I work with her.”

At what? Harley remembered the job description in the file: “researcher”. “Rat research?” he asked.

“Yeah,” the guy replied. He seemed to think it was hilarious. “We’re into rat mesmerization. Brand new field.” He sniggered, but must have seen that Harley was taking it wrong.

Harley had his finger back on the phone buttons.

“Wait till you see. Please.”

Harley knew he was a fool for complying, but he nodded curtly. He didn’t want to speak any more. Breathing all that rat stink made him feel like he had it in his mouth. He fought down the urge to gag again.

If you get eaten, Chalmers, it’s your own fault. This has to be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done.

No—that was coming here in the first place.

It wasn’t difficult to see where the rats had gone. They overflowed the living room and out into the hall. Piles of them, many of them upside down, all in peaceful repose. Their scrabbling, running feet and nasty squeaks had been universally replaced by soft snores that sent a rumble of vibration through the air.

Jock Jamieson sat there, as if made of stone. He was buried up to his chest. Only his eyes made a frantic acknowledgment of Harley’s presence. Harley could almost hear the “*Oh, shit!*” he didn’t dare vocalize, as Jock raised his eyes heavenwards, in what Harley could only presume was a prayer for deliverance.

The girl was buried chest-deep, too. The highest pile radiated from her, and she sat there impatiently. Harley could read it in her face. But she didn’t move.

Did she still think they were going to eat her—them? It was a very real possibility, in Harley's mind. He lifted his phone, and Emma's head shook, by just a fraction. *No!* Her eyes were frantic.

She's right. Might set them off.

It was then he realized Emma's eyes weren't panicked—just frantic. She was using them now to convey some message, and it included the man at his side. Harley silently backed out of the room and looked inquiringly at Dale.

"It always happens this way," Dale whispered, into Harley's ear. He eyed the rat pile. "Few more this time, though."

"Alw—" Some of the slumberers shifted, and Harley lowered his voice. "Always?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Dale nodded. "She was trying to tell you there's nothing to worry about." He actually looked as though he was trying not to laugh. Harley couldn't believe it. "Most of the time," Dale hissed, "she's right."

Harley looked warily back into the living room. Emma Rathburn nodded almost imperceptibly and forced a smile.

Harley turned back to Dale, incredulity in his eyes. His whispered, "And when she's wrong?" was barely out when the alarm on his phone burst into a loud sing-song wail.

Time to wake up.

"Shit!" Dale shouted, obviously no longer worrying about keeping his voice down. For the first time, he looked scared. He shouted the answer to Harley's question back over his shoulder, as he tore out the front door. "You run like hell!"

Chapter Two

They hit him before he hit the bottom of the steps. The other guy made it back to his tree, but Harley never had a chance. He tripped over rats, landed on rat-cushioned brick, wriggled and fought to get up on all fours—while the weight of the onslaught crunched him down. His world was squeaks, squeals, groans, squawks; scraping, scratching, thudding, pummeling. Tiny toenails snagged his clothes, and rat panic tore at his hair as they fled. He was cheek against brick, arms flailing, fending them off, but that was their mission, anyway—over and off and away, furry body after furry body after furry body. Harley’s eyes were scrunched closed against a thousand tiny claws. His face was stinging; raw with scratches.

They’ll eat me!

The blood! He buried his face in his arms, but he couldn’t hide it all. *Better an ear than an eye.* His toes were safe in shoes, but his jeans suddenly seemed such a flimsy fabric. His legs, his genitals. His back and spine. The horde came on.

Like a pack of piranhas.

He gagged again, burrowing his face deeper under his arm.

It’ll be over in seconds.

It was. The weight of sheer numbers had been pinning him prone, and suddenly, it dwindled. Harley peeled himself off the brick with jerky, save-yourself desperation, and pulled out his gun. *Fire off a shot, and they’ll all run.* He got up on brick-beaten knees, unable to control his all-over shaking. Nothing to be ashamed of—just reaction, he thought bravely. *Shock.* He twisted, gun at the ready, searching out his intended victims.

They were gone. He’d expected corpses to be littering the ground—half-eaten tributes to rat appetites, but there was nothing. No blood, no fur, nothing. Even the rats he’d pounded when he’d fallen had somehow vanished, as if down some magical hole in the Earth.

He shuddered. Their tiny needlish claws were still ghosting his skin, doing their scratchy

dance on his back. If they were to come back now, they'd come right for him—go straight for the raw meat. His whimper of terror surprised him, and he cleared his throat loudly to cover, then twisted madly—afraid that any sound of weakness would lead them to suspect they had a victim to claim.

Nothing. His tension eased a notch. And then someone tapped him on the shoulder.

The gun should have fired, but instead, it flew. Harley shamed himself with a yelp; overreacting with a panicky roll that brought him back on his feet, and let him reclaim his weapon.

His eyes flicked back and forth. It was only Tree Man. *Dale?* Harley wasn't sure—but then, he wasn't sure of anything right now.

“Never touch a man with a loaded weapon.” The teeth chattering didn't do much to enforce his message. Harley's eyes shifted from the man's face back to their flick-flick wary watch of their surroundings. Not a rat in sight.

Yeah—but you know how fast they came on last time. They're everywhere. Houses, fields, sewers.

He held his gun at the ready.

Yeah, they were real, Harley. Don't doubt yourself. He tilted his head, and shook a rat pellet out of his ear. *I must look like a madman,* he realized.

Hell, I am one. What he'd just experienced was insane. He crouched there, semi-stunned, as the shivery sensation slowly faded. It was the first time he could ever recall feeling this rattled.

“Rat”-tled, he thought hysterically. *How appropriate.*

Hysteria. In a minute, he'd be giggling like a schoolgirl.

Tree Man hesitated for an instant, then placed a wary hand on Harley's shoulder. “You okay?” he asked. There was an element of sympathy to his voice.

In a moment of lucidity, Harley recognized a fellow sufferer. His eyes quit their panicky searching, and lifted to the other man's face. “Is it safe now?” he whispered hoarsely. His voice hardly shook at all.

* * * * *

Dale nodded. “Happened to me in the lab,” he admitted. “Glass everywhere. It was a mess.” At the sudden heat in Harley's expression, Dale said grimly, “*You* woke them up. Do you set your

damned alarm on stake-outs, too?” So obvious the man was police, and far too eager with his damned gun. *Another asshole like Jock.* Jock Jamieson had tainted Dale’s opinion of all policemen.

Nor did his words help. Dale had a feeling the man was ready to arrest Emma and haul her off to the Big House. He protested, “You saw it—they’re docile. They run in, sure, but then they sleep it off, and disappear.” Something flickered in Harley’s eyes at that one, and Dale hastily shook his head. “They go back where they came from. Nobody ever gets hurt.” He added, “I’ve known Emma ten years, so you might say I’m familiar with her ...” His eyes lifted heavenwards as he sought the right phrase. “...attraction for animals.” For emphasis, Dale said reasonably, “Some of the saints had it, too, if I recall my St. Francis of Assisi correctly.”

“All animals?” Harley asked.

Dale cleared his throat. “Limited to a few species, but ...” He held up his hands against the argument in Harley’s face. “who’s to say the derivation of Francis’ gift?”

* * * * *

“So, now she’s a saint,” Harley said flatly. He couldn’t help it—a glint of amusement appeared in his eyes. At least he no longer had any question about the source of her nickname. He had to fight against the sudden urge to laugh like a buffoon.

Hysteria. Control it, Chalmers.

In his efforts to counter his moment of weakness, Harley’s next words came out more brutally than he’d intended. “She’s a public nuisance,” he spat out. After that, he found himself, literally, spitting. The insides of his cheeks were raw from biting them, and he couldn’t get the rat taste out of his mouth. Not that he’d actually tasted rat, but the taint was everywhere.

Hairs. Rat hairs, in your nose.

He fought the embarrassing urge to gag again. He was stained, disgusting, and those damned little feet had left their marks on his skin. He gave an inadvertent shudder. “Just reaction,” he grunted.

It was the other man’s turn to look amused, but Harley appreciated how he tried to hide it.

“She’s more of a private nuisance,” Dale said. “It’s not *her* fault you took them by surprise.”

“So, now it’s *my* fault?” Harley couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Dale appeared to consider it. “Well, yeah.”

He seemed about to say more, when Emma's voice interrupted him. "I agree with *him*," she said staunchly, nodding towards Harley. "Lock me up and toss away the key." She had a roll of toilet paper in her hand and began awkwardly brushing at Harley's clothes, picking off the worst of the rat pellets. "I'm sooo sorry."

Dammit, if it didn't sound like she meant it, but Harley tried not to let it sway him. "Saint and martyr," he muttered. He was surprised by the flash of anger in her eyes. "'You have the right to remain—'"

"It should have been done years ago." Jock's interruption was both harsh and unforgiving. "Those rats of hers are gonna kill somebody."

Dale turned on him. "You make them sound like pets! Emma can't *help* it!"

Emma shook her head. "I bet a psychopath can't help it, either." Dale opened his mouth to argue again, but she held up a hand. "They're both mental conditions, Dale!"

"States of mind," he debated. "This is a metaphysical phenomenon!"

So much for his arrest. Harley clung to his temper by sheer willpower. "What about injuries?!" he barked.

* * * * *

Emma's eyes widened in alarm. "Did they hurt you?" she asked, anxiously. She looked him up and down. Other than some scrapes, where his nose and chin had contacted the pathway, and some claw scratches, he seemed okay. "Are you hurt?"

"And property damage!" Jock stormed. "What about that?"

"Bullshit!" Dale argued. "The only damage is right here, to this residence—and Emma will fix it, the way she always does." He looked to Emma for concurrence, and she nodded.

Fix it. "What about my neighbors?" Emma asked now, in near-despair. Jock's friend had his gun stowed now, but one lady was out on her porch, and there were a number of twitchy curtains. It was still twilight. Somebody must have seen them.

It was the nightmare of her existence—never being able to live in peace.

Move, move, move. Good thing I don't have all my boxes unpacked, she thought dismally. She forced a smile and gave a wave to the neighbor across the street. The woman had brought over

cookies on her first day there. “Damn!” she whispered.

* * * * *

Harley saw the direction her eyes had taken, and the other woman’s glare. “Let’s take this inside,” he said firmly.

“No way!” Jock argued. “What about my shirt? My jeans?” Jock looked to Harley for approval, which immediately set Harley’s back up. Somehow, Jock read his blank face as agreement. More confident now, he sneered, “What about *them*? Who’s gonna pay for them? If you don’t arrest her ass, Harley, I sure as hell will.”

“Did she invite you over?” Dale asked him pointedly. “Or you?” He turned narrowed eyes on Harley. “Did she threaten anybody? Arrange this scenario to—in any way—harm you?! Are you injured? Were ... you ... attacked?”

No, Harley had to admit. The rats ran over him. *I just happened to be standing in their way. Hit and run.*

You can’t arrest a rat. His lips twitched.

But Jock wasn’t through. Maybe he’d sensed some kind of victory in the air. Maybe he wanted his sister locked up, in some kind of institution. Harley could almost feel pity for him then. Years of this. It must have been hell.

“I’m a cop!” Jock roared. “So’s he—!”

“Does he have a warrant?” Dale pushed.

Jock looked at Harley, and Harley sighed. “No. ‘He’ doesn’t,” he admitted.

“Well, there you are,” Dale concluded, looking pleased with himself.

Jock’s grunt was almost a growl. He grabbed Dale’s wrist.

Dale looked pointedly at Jock’s hand. “What’s this? An arrest, for ‘aiding and abetting’? Try to make that one stick.”

Harley yanked Jock’s hand back.

Dale glanced at his watch and sighed. “Now, if you’re finished with these accusations,” he said, dismissing them casually, “Emma and I have some lab work to discuss.” He put a hand on Emma’s back, and firmly propelled her in through the front door.

* * * * *

“I am sooo damn good!” Dale was practically dancing. “Did you see the way I handled them? Did you?” He grinned. “I’ve always wanted to do that!”

“You were a master,” Emma told him distractedly. She was already pulling out the vacuum.

Dale shook his head in disbelief. “And I used to think my life was dull. I’ll tell you, Rat—around you, opportunity knocks.” He grinned again.

“Yeah,” Emma said dryly. “Knocks, thuds, and squeaks.”

“Only noise.” He made a big point of looking innocently around. “Do you see any rats? I don’t see any rats.”

Emma snorted, pointing to the scratch marks on her table, and the rat pellets littering the floor. “Some people would call that evidence. Disinfectant time,” she sighed, “again.”

“I think the good Lord knows how much you hate doing housework.”

“So He’s cursed me?”

Dale’s smile was overly sweet. “Hey, you said it—I didn’t.”

“Shut up, Dale. Go home and brag to Marie.”

“Damn right I will. She, at least, appreciates me.” He spotted the remains of her lounge suite, and asked, appalled, “Did the rats do that? Didn’t you just pay that off?”

“I forgot to tell them,” she said sarcastically. Her smirk faded, and she sighed. “Jock did it. He was,” she put it mildly, “a little pissed off.”

Dale twitched the curtain aside to peek out. Jock and Harley were still standing there, arguing. “So, there is still a rat on the premises. Maybe two of them.”

“You can’t blame Jock for being mad,” she said. “If it were you—”

“Don’t go there, Rathburn, or I’ll take you on a quick trip down Memory Lane.” He shifted anxiously. “Good! They’re leaving.” He grinned.

Emma smirked. “Bested ‘The Man’, eh?”

“Damn straight,” he retorted. “Can’t wait to tell Marie.”

“If your story needs backing-up, just have her call me.”

Dale checked at that. He looked slightly insulted. “Think she won’t believe me?”

“I think she knows how prone to exaggeration you are.”

Dale considered it, and his huffiness vanished. “Why are women so cynical?” he asked.

“Not cynical—just not totally gullible, either.”

Dale grinned. “I’ll have her call you.”

“And I’ll confirm your hero-hood.” She smiled, and told him sincerely, “You bailed me out, Dale. I don’t know if my freedom is deserved, but I appreciate it. You have my thanks.”

Dale dismissed it with a wave of his hand and yanked open the door. A little belatedly, he mumbled, “Shouldn’t leave you with the mess.”

He was already halfway to his car when he heard Emma’s, “It’s *my* mess.” She’d lost the formal tone, and he recalled the number of times she’d bailed him out of trouble. He might be a good talker, but he wasn’t the best scientist, and they both knew it.

Oh, well, he thought. *Next time*. That was one thing with Emma: you could always figure there’d be a next time for catastrophe.

“And you know how I love to clean!” she shouted.

A blatant hint, if ever he’d heard one.

“Great!” he said, no longer listening. Wait till Marie heard about the way he’d handled things! As she called it, “The Latest in The Emma Chronicles.” Women might not be gullible, but they were suckers for heroes. His eyes lit up. He was gone almost as soon as the second policeman’s car had pulled away from the curb.

* * * * *

The last thing he wanted to do right now was talk sense into Jock Jamieson’s head, but Harley had a nasty suspicion Jamieson planned to get even with his stepsister. He’d probably never seriously considered arresting her before, but now that someone else had suggested it, all those dammed-up family loyalties were off. His, “If you don’t arrest her ass, Harley, I sure as hell will”, had sounded a little too determined to be dissuaded by logic.

And it had been far too easy to make him leave her house.

No, this afternoon’s events weren’t finished—not by Jock Jamieson’s standards. Harley just wasn’t sure which way his temper was heading. An arrest would be likely to draw Jock under

scrutiny, too—something he wouldn't want.

There was always the remedy Jock had been about to deal out when the rats had turned up. Harley would have thought he'd be too scared of rousing the masses again to hit her, but maybe Jock knew something Harley didn't—like she could only muster rats at certain times of day, or one assault used her up for a while.

It was certain *she* wouldn't want word leaking out, either—not if she'd managed to keep her problems a secret this long. Her dismay over the neighbor's reaction hadn't been feigned. Emma Rathburn really *did* want to maintain a low profile.

Harley wondered whether her co-worker was more than an associate. If so, Jock would have a difficult time getting to Emma. Her friend Dale might not be as dirty a fighter as Jock, but he had brains.

He wasn't there last night when I searched her place.

Harley couldn't recall any signs of male habitation, and he tried to remember exactly what Dale had said. He'd been so familiar with the rat problem that Harley had assumed he and Emma had a closer-than-co-worker relationship, but now Harley had a feeling he was wrong. The guy had claimed he'd known her ten years, yet he hadn't done anything to counter whatever demons had been stalking her during the last five. Otherwise, why would she have phoned for help seventeen, eighteen times?

Could it be she was just being spooked by her rats? Had she phoned because they were making more noise than usual, and she'd thought it was something else?

Stupid, Chalmers. He'd seen her buried up to her neck in rats, and she hadn't been afraid.

But she was last night. Therefore, it wasn't rats.

Jock, trying to scare her away? Getting her to move again in hopes this time, she'd leave the area?

If that was it, he'd be back there tonight—Harley would have bet money on it. He still didn't have much use for Jock Jamieson, but he had a lot more understanding. It said something for the man that he hadn't turned her in before now.

Jock's attitude at this point would depend on how much he'd been threatened by her

activities. Harley knew his own presence at the scene was definitely a contributing factor. If Jock believed his career was damaged, or that he was about to become the precinct joke, he'd want to take it out on somebody. He had too much of the bully in him. It might be the result of a lifetime of provocation, but he wasn't good at playing victim. Maybe he thought he'd already borne more than his share.

No matter what, Harley knew he needed to talk to Jock, before the man did something stupid.

Like asking tidal backwash to stay on the beach, or the sun not to rise.

He flashed his lights at Jock's car, and pulled over. Then, he waited, lead in the pit of his stomach. Time to have it out with one of his least favorite people.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later Harley's mouth was dry from talking. "The only way *anyone's* going to know you're related is if *you* make the association. Different last names, Jock." Harley gripped the other man's arm. "You don't have to know her."

A flicker of something like relief shone in Jock's eyes.

He wasn't the only one feeling relieved. Harley could only admire the thickness of the man's skull. Harley concluded it wasn't concern for a sibling which had prevailed over the years as much as gross insensitivity to anything but Jock's own interests. Everything he said was relative to the degree of persecution Emma had inflicted on him, and he'd revealed far more than he'd probably intended about how much persecution he'd inflicted back. Then the dickwit had grinned, and expected Harley to appreciate the "subtlety" of his retribution.

Jock had gone on at length regarding the ways he'd "covered" for her, and more on how much today's episode was just one more example of how little control she actually had. "She should be locked up," he insisted, sure he was speaking with a sympathetic fellow-sufferer. "Did I tell you the latest? Biofeedback," he spat out, shaking his head in disbelief. "I practiced 'biofeedback' on her often enough," he said scornfully, "and it's never done a damn thing. She still drives me crazy, every chance she gets." He unconsciously ground one fist into the other. It was a real "Jock" gesture, and he had no idea how revealing it was. Now, he grumbled, "If it's negative feedback she wants, I can supply it." He'd actually smiled at the thought, his fist grinding his palm all the harder.

“Bet she’s not too happy about her situation, either.” As soon as he’d said it, Harley knew he’d made a mistake. As far as Jock was concerned, Jock was the victim here—only Jock. So Harley shrugged it off with a “Who wouldn’t be?”

That unleashed another flood, which Harley finally stopped with a “How long has she been at it?” It held just the right amount of ambiguity. Jock clearly interpreted it as “How long have you been tortured?”

Harley came away feeling coated in more than rat shit, but endowed with a sense of purpose. He understood now why Emma’s co-worker had stood up for her—somebody had to. As much as Jock may have suffered from Emma’s episodes, it could be nothing to the amount Emma had. Jock hadn’t been the only one who’d lost a family—plus, Emma had had to live with the guilt. Guilt for her mother’s failed relationship, and her stepfather’s disillusionment, and mainly, according to Jock, for the damage to her brother. No matter how much Jock claimed he’d protected her over the years, it wasn’t worth the persecution he’d subjected her to.

Besides, after his own experiences with Emma’s personal brand of mayhem, it seemed to Harley that Emma Rathburn didn’t need the kind of help Jock was offering. She was quite capable of protecting herself. Jock might like to think she was still dependent on him, but it was more imagined than real. Harley had to press it home maybe five times to get his point past Jock’s anger. The man had held onto his grudges so long he didn’t know how to function without them. A power trip for Jock—a persecution trip for her?

“You don’t have to know her ever again,” Harley prodded.

Jock was still deliberating. His social status was based on coercing people to recognize him. Harley could almost read his mind. He was weighing whether deliverance from his sister’s problems could balance against the social standing she gave him. Apparently, according to Jock, Emma had quite a rep as the scientist. She moved in different social circles, but he’d sometimes acted as her escort.

It didn’t take any particularly powerful deduction to figure out what Jock wasn’t saying. Emma was the one person in the world who would forgive him anything. He’d lived on her guilt for so long—played on their relationship and her culpability—that he wasn’t sure how to eliminate her

influence. Her rats gave him an excuse; a reason to be less than he was supposed to be. Could he manage without them? Without her?

Jock's misguided logic was so half ass backwards, and so damn transparent, that Harley flinched. What was really bugging Jock was that he'd have no one to beat up. No one to ridicule. No one to give him a reason to hate his life. Hell, there were lots of reasons Jock couldn't afford to let her go—and none of them had anything to do with Emma's well-being.

Now, Jock was making excuses. “She’s not so bad. And hell, she’s my sister—” he began.

Harley cut him off with a sharp, “No, she’s not. You told me your parents broke up when Emma turned ten. Eight years together. That lab worker friend of hers has known her longer than that.”

“She went to my school—”

Harley shrugged. “So, you knew her. I knew lots of kids who went to my school—hated a bunch, too. Did you two hang out or something?”

Jock feigned horror. “Sure, Harley.” He snorted in derision.

“The point is, she’s not a relative—she’s not even a friend. Neither one of us called in a report, and neither one of us has to know her.”

“What were you doing there, anyway?” Jock asked suspiciously. Apparently, it had only now occurred to him to ask why Harley was there.

Just passing by?

Not even Jock would buy that crock, so Harley decided on partial honesty. It might be enough to dissuade Jock from further action. He knew better than to suggest a paranormal element. Jerks like Jamieson thrived on anything they perceived as a weakness. Harley refused to offer him any ammunition. “She seemed really scared last night, and I wondered if there was something more to her report, like a stalker.” He watched Jock closely. No reaction. Harley continued, “So I decided to sit there; watch for a while. Just curious.”

The latter sounded bad, Harley realized. After all, Emma was the man’s stepsister. He’d made himself sound like some kind of voyeur. *Secretly watching.*

Jock nodded eagerly, though, as if he’d indulged in something similar himself. It made Harley

feel sick.

Harley frowned. “Then, I saw you head in and you looked damn mad,” he said grimly. “I heard your threats.”

Jock tensed. “I wouldn’t have done anything.”

“I know, Jock,” Harley lied. “But I needed to follow it through, if you know what I mean.”

It took a few seconds, but Jock figured it out. Harley knew, because he gulped, and his voice squeaked a little as he said, “Yeah, Harley. I think I do.”

Jock had taken off pretty quickly after that. “I wouldn’t worry about the stalker,” he’d argued. “Probably more rat noises. It comes in waves, y’know.”

“No, I didn’t,” Harley had said mildly.

“Yeah.” Jock sighed and nodded. “Happens two, three times over a week, then that’s it for a while.”

“Good to know,” Harley said.

“Yeah,” Jock grunted, then burst out laughing. “Good to know, even if she’s not!” He was still laughing as he climbed back into his car.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Emma was on the phone to Marie. She listened, then laughed.

“Yeah, I’m embellishing a little. It was a near thing, though. I was almost behind bars.”

“Dale would have loved that,” Marie admitted, a smile in her voice. “‘Being behind bars’, I mean. I sometimes think it’s his goal in life, to be dissociated from society.”

Emma heard Dale’s voice in the background. “As long as I’m not dissociated from you.”

Marie giggled, and her next words were garbled. “The martyr complex—” She laughed again. “Look, Emma—I’ve got to go.” Her laughter made a hissing sound in the receiver.

Emma found herself smiling in sync. “Have fun!” She hung up the phone, and looked dismally around her living room.

It was picked up, disinfected, and she hated it. The part she hated most was her suspicion that she was responsible for the new “aura” in the room. Not a smell, and not the damage by knife or claws. She’d taped and patched those parts of her life back together, by working like a fiend. Cleaning

up after her “visitors” was always a horrible prospect, but she had it down pat, now.

Tools of my trade.

Hose outside, then a sprinkler and grass seed. Water in as much as possible. She frequently wished she could take the hose to the inside, but a shop vac worked its industrial action on the mess. The only signs of a problem now lay in her trash bin outside, a close inspection of her grass, and a new, damp, antiseptic shabbiness to her furnishings.

It could have been worse.

It could have been the kitchen, or my bedroom. Visits like that would haunt her dreams.

Why can't I get used to this? She downplayed it, sure, but Dale and Chang and Nicky were better at casual acceptance of her episodes than she was.

Would someone get used to a cyclic series of car wrecks, even if they transpired only intermittently? Emma didn't think so. Maybe the increase in paranormal activity was actually an improvement. Maybe, in another year or two, the rat incidents would cease altogether, to be replaced by visual phenomena.

Then I can be batty Emma Rathburn, more of a neighborhood weirdo than I already am.

Medium to the Middle Class.

Hey, at least people don't have to know how weird you are, then.

Nobody except the police. She considered Harley's visit last night, and again today. That indicated a level of suspicion she knew she deserved.

Maybe he's just Jock's friend. There were excuses for Jock, but none for the people who chose to befriend him. She could excuse or even deny Jock's jerkiness, but not that of those who admired his traits enough to hang out with him. Emma knew it wasn't fair, and subjectively, she was glad he had someone with similar interests to spend time with, but objectively, she also recognized, somewhere deep inside, Jock's essential stupidity. His brutality was another issue she didn't want to explore too deeply. Suffice it to say he no doubt resolved a lot of his angst with his police work.

I wish he were out of my life.

Words. I'm glad he can't hear them. She was being unfamiliar, nonsisterly, and cold as hell. Guilt and exasperation warred.

Jock was a constant reminder of what she was and what she'd done. Past and present, with a nasty prognosis for her future. Just once, she thought in dismal contemplation, it would be nice to be an only child.

She'd been able to put up with her mother's grievances. Blame could be tolerated if it was referred to only on expired wedding anniversaries and Christmas. Emma couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live without guilt.

Maybe that's where she was headed. If the rat stuff stopped, and the ghost stuff took over, she might be able to help people.

The thought gave her the creeps. *Summoning the dead.* She shivered.

Maybe the ghosts would disappear, too, if she could learn to ignore them. *What you refuse to see doesn't really exist.* That maxim worked for scores of tightassed people every day.

Emma scanned her living room. No movement, nothing dire. It was dark outside, and no matter how many lights she put on, the room wouldn't get any brighter.

No big deal. The dark stuff didn't exist. She'd made up her mind.

You can always call Chang. He'd come around, just for the novelty. Emma's hand was halfway to the phone when she pulled back. If she brought him into this now, and he ended up as scared as she was, the novelty of it would be lost. Work was the only place where people met with her on a regular basis, and accepted her. It wasn't worth jeopardizing that for the odd goosebump or two.

Besides, he was a friend—not a boyfriend. An engaged friend. How would Viv interpret a late-night visit to her house?

She could come, too.

Emma knew she'd been lucky with Marie and the rats. If Viv were to have a paranormal encounter with either ghosts or rats, it could severely damage Chang's personal life—and their work relationship. That went for her other workmates, too. They all had other things to deal with. They didn't need her problems foisted on them.

It didn't stop Emma from wishing there was someone—anyone—she could call.

Even Jock?

She searched her brain. No, God help her, not Jock, for any reason.

There was a thunk outside, on the porch, and the lights flickered slightly. When they came back on they were dimmer than before. Emma curled into the big chair, pulling her feet up on the seat. She gave a frightened shiver.

Not Jock—not even now.

Chapter Three

Harley was back on days tomorrow. He'd been filling in for Ricker, but it wasn't something he planned on doing again. Right now, he was heading for home to take a shower. His plans included a beer, a few ball tosses with Choco, a shitload of TV and then some sleep.

Too bad that damned chat with Jock stuck with him as strongly as the rat stink did. As he stood in the shower, he kept thinking about that morning, and what it was going to cost him. After he'd logged off the computer, it must have been break time for half the people he knew. Actually, by the time he'd finished reports, research, and his Q and A with Jocko, he'd encountered just about everyone on both shifts. Day shifters might see him every day, but that morning he'd worn the gloss of the night shifter. His workmates wanted to know how it had been to "be a rookie again".

Joke for the day.

Accommodating was the name of the game, though. If they were short-staffed, you filled in. What was that saying? "*A supervisor not only has to know every job, but be willing to do it.*" It was the way to earn respect.

Also, a way to get ahead. Harley liked the people he worked with—for just a moment, Jock Jamieson strolled behind his eyes, and he grimaced—but Harley was a man who needed challenges. He was trying to move up the ranks, and it wasn't only his own co-workers who mattered. It wouldn't hurt to get to know the people on other shifts as well.

One person he didn't want to know better was Jock. He wondered whether the man would prove a problem. Maybe Jock would think they'd already forged some secret bond or alliance; some conspiracy of secrecy. It was the last thing Harley wanted, and he planned on disabusing Jock of the notion if it *had* entered his feeble brain.

To disabuse him meant he'd have to talk to the moron again. It made Harley dread the morrow. Not only would there be a few lame comments from people who wanted to play out his night shift "lapse", and didn't have anything better to talk about, but he'd probably have to counter a few

subtle and not-so-subtle queries regarding his new “friendship” with Jock.

Hey, I have broad shoulders.

His recollected his dad’s words with a smile: “*Broad shoulders weren’t made for bearing loads of bullshit—they were made so you could turn your back on it, and avoid getting hit in the face.*”

Words of wisdom. *If I’m so wise, why can’t I turn my back on Emma Rathburn?*

He was still wondering it forty-five minutes later, when he pulled up in front of her house again.

* * * * *

She’d held off as long as she could, hoarding her sense of normalcy, and holding her imagination in check, but was finally coerced by the silence. It was thick and oppressive, her microcosm muffled, as though she’d been stricken deaf to the world outside.

Doom. If doom had a sound, it would be this dense and bottomless void.

Once triggered, her imagination rode her fear. Grim visions chased each other behind her eyes—and their star was the man she’d seen lurking, just off her porch.

Dead and buried. Weighted down and muffled by tons of earth. Stricken with eternal silence.

Stop it!

TV. She jumped up and, reluctant to put her feet on the ground, ran lopsidedly across the sofa and grabbed the remote off the side table. The TV came on with a loud blast that made her start, and almost made her topple off the couch. She headed back to the chair—the only island in the room. Not only was it blessed with a high back and big, cushy arms, but it backed up against a wall. She grabbed the decorative throw off its seat and wrapped up in it.

I should go. Leave. Get out of here.

She thought with longing of people and places with lights and buzzing conversation and endless action. The phone sat in her lap now but she knew she couldn’t use it. There was no one to call.

Wait it out. Sooner or later, it’ll be over. By tomorrow, everything’ll be okay.

The lights flickered again, the TV cutting in and out. The reception was going now, and static

sizzling filled the screen. Ghost images moved in negative stances, and she couldn't stand it. Emma averted her eyes and wondered how far she'd get.

I'd have to make it to the car first. Through the living room, the hall, the kitchen. Into the garage.

But then there'd be the car windows. All those places for someone to lurk, just beyond the glass. *At every intersection, every stop sign.*

Hiding in her rearview mirror.

Because it wasn't this house, this place. *It's me.*

Emma was hit by inspiration. With shaking fingers, she punched in a number she'd seen on a billboard. It would cost her, but it might break the cycle. Then, she scrunched her eyes closed, and settled down to wait.

* * * * *

He was halfway into hating himself, and feeling way too much like Jock Jamieson for comfort. Did he really believe she was guilty of illegal activity? Could he justify his presence, if some neighbor reported him?

They're not going to, Harley. If they didn't acknowledge the rats, why the hell would they acknowledge you? More than likely, it was yet another instance of induced oblivion. If it didn't directly impact them, it didn't exist. Harley had seen the look on that neighbor lady's face, though. For her, Emma no longer existed, either. He couldn't help but feel a little pity for her predicament.

He'd started up his car, fed up with his own nosiness, when the lights in her house flickered and nearly went out. Even after they were back on, they remained dim compared to the other houses on the block. It wasn't a singular phenomena, limited to her living room or front hall. The entire house possessed a wavery dimness, like a weak fluorescent tube.

Uh-oh.

In severe need of rewiring? Overloaded, maybe?

Or someone playing around with the circuit breakers? He deliberated for a few minutes, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. There was too much Jock Jamieson in the air, and he didn't want to get involved.

Then, why are you?

The truth was, he had no idea.

He gave a loud and frustrated sigh, rested his head briefly on the steering wheel, and pounded it with his fist. The gesture didn't do much to relieve his frustration. He'd been stupid enough to get himself into this situation. Now, his sense of duty wouldn't let him leave without at least checking things out.

Remember, Chalmers, she phoned for assistance, just last night. Maybe it would provide enough of a reason for him to be hanging around her house, especially if no one mentioned his appearance earlier in the evening.

She won't. You know too much about her rats.

Feeling slightly dirty rather than heroic, now that all his coercive tactics were in place, Harley grabbed a flashlight and climbed out of his car. He'd taken only one determined step toward her house when he halted in his tracks.

A purple VW with gigantic pink bunny ears pulled up, into her driveway. A big pink rabbit, basket in hand, trotted up to Emma's front door and hastily rang the bell.

* * * * *

Emma heard the front doorbell and dashed across the darkness like a sprinter going for the gold.

Don't look, don't look, don't look, don't look.

She wouldn't let her attention be diverted, but focused on the floor and her feet moving speedily across it. The door was just ahead. If she looked neither right nor left, and didn't eye that wooden bulwark as a blockade to freedom, she had it made.

But in that last instant, she knew she wasn't alone. Her breath was so tight in her chest her gasp was a wheeze. The front hall was chill and still; her shaky exhalations coming out in swirling white.

Like a ghost.

A squeak escaped her lips, but she wouldn't let the feeling of being surrounded, of being wedged in by ice floes, stop her. Her progress was suddenly as choppy and erratic as a ship scraping a

berg, but determination won out. The fingers that clenched the door handle stuck like damp meat to frozen metal, and there was an audible crackling as she twisted the knob. It took both hands and a solid yank, foot against the jamb, to lever it open.

A few more seconds and it would have been stuck, frozen in place. She was certain of it. Emma whimpered again, and barreled outside, into the arms of the bunny.

* * * * *

It looked to Harley, standing in the shadows next to his car, like she was assaulting the giant rabbit. She'd come diving out of the house, and he watched as the bunny, already awkward in an oversized costume, overcompensated. He went tumbling backwards, rolling them both onto the mushy grass.

Could it be the rabbit wasn't the innocuous symbol he seemed? Harley had taken a couple of steps, automatically moving to the rescue, before he remembered the rats. He checked, scanning the neighborhood warily for signs of movement.

Nothing. Either Emma wasn't "active", or her attention had been diverted.

Diverted, all right, he thought, watching with unanticipated amusement her tussle with the overdressed performer. Harley had finally remembered where he'd seen the big bunny before—on a billboard downtown. He was the latest in a trend of happiness delivery services. More than likely, he'd come here, song in mid-warble, and been flattened for his efforts.

If this is the kind of hazard she's reporting, something has to be done. The humor faded from Harley's eyes. If, in her confusion, she was attacking people, she needed to be stopped. Add her rats to the equation, and the situation became untenable.

If I don't stop it—her—now, I'll be responsible. Because I saw it happening, and did nothing about it.

If the rabbit wanted to press charges for assault, Harley could arrest her now—maybe get her the help she needed.

Maybe ruin her life—her career. He recalled what her co-worker had said. He'd seemed to have a lot of respect for her.

Harley deliberated for nearly ten seconds more, then jogged over to help Emma extricate

herself from the rabbit's clutches. The support of her co-worker was more than matched on the down side by her relationship with Jocko. And the balance had just been tipped by Harley's own observations. Assault was assault, whether you were the one directing the punch, or the rats.

But when Harley bent down to lift her up, off the bunny, Emma went nuts. She'd been clinging to the pink fur, but now she began pummeling Harley. He'd seen that kind of reaction before—enough to recognize it wasn't anger, any more than her bunny hug had been affection. Emma Rathburn was reacting in terror.

And she thought Harley Chalmers was the source. She was squealing, kicking, pounding on him with her fists. Twisting like a mad thing in his arms as she fought to escape. Finally, he did the only thing he could think of. He shouted, "Emma! It's me—Jock's friend—Harley!"

She froze, absorbing that information. Then she twisted slowly to look at him. Her eyes were dilated and her skin coated with sweat. She was shivering with reaction, but her relief was rapidly being replaced by mortification.

The rabbit was on his feet by this time, his mask a little menacing, and his paws on his hips. He looked ready to attack. At that moment, he stamped his foot and Harley lost it. His arm, still around Emma's waist, shook with his suppressed laughter.

Emma was back in possession of her senses. She slipped out of Harley's grasp, retrieved her wallet from the shrubbery, and paid the rabbit generously. Her smile was wavery. "I threw in a big tip—for your services."

Harley's laughter went from silent to uncontrolled. He was offending Mr. Bunny, though, so he added a ten from his own pocket. "D-Dry cleaning b-bill," he managed.

The rabbit gave an abrupt nod, his ears flapping with the gesture. He stomped toward his VW Beetle, and was about to climb in when he relented, with a grumbled expletive. It was clear he was struggling, but finally, magnanimity won out. The rabbit turned their way, and offered them a sweeping bow, then tossed Harley's ten onto the ground, under the sprinkler's sweep. "Renaldo Rabbit," he said, elegantly. "Rescue Rodent." Harley was sure he was grinning behind the mask. "Endangered damsels are my specialty." He opened the car door with flair, then clambered awkwardly in.

He drove away with a grinding of gears, and Harley scrambled to retrieve his cash. “Who sent the rabbit?” he asked Emma.

Emma’s eyes flicked toward her front door, her sigh a gusty admission, and lifted one hand. “Guilty.” To his raised eyebrows, she explained, “Merely a case of subliminal conditioning, billboard style.” Emma shook her head and sighed again—with what appeared to be relief, this time. “Have to say, he’s the only rodent I’ve ever met with a decent sense of timing.”

Afterwards, Harley wondered how long it was going to take her to go back inside. Someone should talk with her about this afternoon’s rat marathon, and tonight’s terror trip—he just didn’t know whether the someone should be him.

It suddenly occurred to him that she might have been running from a “they”, rather than a “he”. “Are they inside?” he asked softly. “The rats?” It seemed a reasonable conclusion, as far as Harley was concerned, but she obviously didn't think so.

“No rats,” she told him, a little testily.

Why the attitude? Guilty, until proven innocent?

Or maybe she thinks I plan on coming in. He had, but only to talk. Something had frightened her, and he wanted to find out what it was.

But Emma showed no interest in re-entering her house. She seemed predisposed to silence, rather than any more action, unless action included turning off the sprinkler. After that, she hung around the porch, her eyes on the garage door.

Was she heading somewhere? He’d opened his mouth to offer her a lift, when she blurted, “They’re not, you know.”

He realized she’d been debating whether to speak with him any more at all. His rat inquiry *had* offended her. What did she expect? “Not what?” he asked now, confused.

“Not rodents.”

All he could think of were rats. Occupational hazard, if you intended to spend much time with Emma Rathburn. “Of course they are.”

* * * * *

Emma smirked at him. “Rabbits,” she explained. “Not rats.” Clearly, he was hung up on her

rat problem. Probably all he could think of when he looked at her. She knew he wouldn't believe her if she told him that for tonight, at least, rats were not her biggest problem.

It was also obvious he liked to be the one in control. He gave a speaking glance toward her front door. "Staying out all night?"

"No," Emma retorted. She opened the garage door, thought again about the abundance of glass and visibility beyond her car windows, and ran the options through her head. *If I drive fast, I won't have time to worry about Him "showing up"*.

Yeah, but if He hops out in front of you, and you don't stop, you might actually be running over someone else.

She needed people and company. Suddenly, she had an inspiration. "*Leo 's!*" she shouted enthusiastically. Heaps of people, tons of noise, and it was open all night. She could miss a few nights' sleep until this little paranormal cycle passed.

Harley jumped at her shout, and did that wary glance-around thing.

It hit Emma wrong—as though he thought everything she did was either about to endanger him personally, or cause trouble for everyone else. As a person who was generally liked, she didn't appreciate being treated like some kind of lethal weapon.

Maybe, like Jock, this Harley was trying to be deliberately annoying. As her brother, Jock could be excused, but Harley? Hadn't Jock warned him about how important it was to be discreet? "Stop it!" she hissed, frustrated anew. "You're making a scene."

His face reflected his disbelief, but there was a tremor in his voice as he retorted calmly, "I wasn't the one beating up the pink bunny."

She heard the tremor, but misinterpreted it, as suppressed rage. She'd heard it in Jock's voice often enough, and nodded wisely. For years she'd assumed that all policepeople had anger management issues. It was why they became policepeople. "I fell on him," she explained coolly. "Or, more precisely, tripped over him."

"While you were running," Harley prompted.

She nodded again. "That's about it. He seemed okay, didn't he?" she suddenly asked, concerned.

“He has a lot of padding. Maybe more, under the costume.” Harley grinned. “What were you running from?”

“Disarming,” she sidestepped it. “That smile. Now I know what the phrase means: you’re trying to disarm me with charm.”

“Is it working?”

“Did my plan with the rabbit?” she countered.

“Now who’s disarming whom?” He noticed her eyes glinted with approval at his use of the “whom”. It was all he could do not to start laughing again. “Why were you running?”

“How did Jock do it?” He was looking blank again, so she elaborated, “Get you to spy on me this way?”

Mr. Police folded his arms, and for a moment, Emma was tempted to do something blatantly illegal, right in his face. Let him arrest my ass, she thought boldly. It might be a better solution: company on the ride, lots of people. Or would they put her in some kind of holding cell, all alone?

Where I couldn’t get away.

The shiver took her by surprise. Mr. Police saw it, too. “Let’s go in,” he said.

“No!” Her answer was too sharp.

“Rats?” he asked, in a whisper.

“Is that all you can think about?!” Emma shook her head.

Harley grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the door, his whisper an urgent, “Who’s in there? Why’d you run?”

The eyes which met his held elements of the misery and terror which had shunted her out the door. “Because I knew it’d be safer,” she admitted, in a wry whisper. It was so obviously the answer she was surprised that Harley hadn’t guessed it. “If I’d called a cab, instead of the rabbit, he would’ve known I planned to leave.”

Harley was really forceful after that. “Who?” he asked, his voice a sharp hiss. “Where is he?”

At least Mr. Police had upgraded her from bunny assailant to being on the run.

“Your living room?” He fingered his gun.

No matter how she phrased it, there was no way he was going to believe her. Emma

deliberately widened her eyes, and crouched down warily at his side. “Block of ice!” she whispered. “Behind the front door.”

Harley straightened, lowered his hands, and stared at her as though she were nuts. “What are you on?” he asked harshly. It was clear he didn’t enjoy being played for a fool.

“Earth,” she told him. “I’ve got a paranormal problem, and no hothead with a gun can fix it.”

Harley’s jaw tightened. “You’re more like Jock than I thought.”

It wasn’t a compliment, and Emma knew it. Her face flushed with shame, and she swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” she said to his stiff back, as he walked away.

He checked slightly, nodded, then carried on.

“You’re nothing like Jock!” she blurted, and she suddenly realized it was true. The man was leaving, and she was going to be left alone.

In the dark.

“I’m in distress!” she shouted.

“Call your rabbit!” he shouted back, and could’ve kicked himself for letting provocation overcome his common sense. Nevertheless he paused, and pounded a pensive fist on the limb of a nearby tree. Aggravating, yes. Worth staying for? He wasn’t sure. “Your neighbors must hate you,” he told her, turning around, and wondering why he was doing it. He couldn’t recall when he’d acted like such an idiot. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“I wish *I* weren’t,” Emma admitted. She came over to him, seemingly desperate to keep him talking—anything so he wouldn’t walk away. “The neighbors don’t hate me.”

“Why? What did you tell them, about the rats?”

“Why would you assume I’d lie to the people around me?” She almost, but not quite, managed to sound outraged. “That’s the trouble with police these days: negative thinking.” She must have seen the annoyance flicker in his eyes, because she added sweetly, “Not that I mean you.”

Harley snorted, then asked again, “Okay, so what did you tell them?”

Emma sighed, and it sounded heartfelt. “Same old story. I bought one of those gadgets that deters insects and rodents, except it didn’t—deter, that is.”

“It drew them in, instead.”

She nodded. “Liar, thief—”

He frowned at that.

“I *did* buy five of those gadgets, then told them they didn’t work. They gave me my money back.” Something in his expression must have prompted her to add, “And I’ve stolen at least a dozen rolls of toilet paper from work, and never replaced them. I could have used paper towels. Or ... or newspaper.”

“Spoiled.” He shook his head. Harley couldn’t remember when he’d been this amused, and it bothered him that he couldn’t hang onto his irritation. Somehow, this woman had taken him from terror to hilarity in less than twenty-four hours. “That’s how it begins,” he added darkly.

“So now I’m evil.” She looked up at him, worried. “I was serious, though, when I said I had a paranormal problem.”

“I know. I heard the dog when I was walking around.”

“You heard Studley?!” She sniffed sadly. “Still trying to protect me.” Her eyes were slightly glassy now.

“From the rat—?” He noted her expression, and hastily changed it to: “From what?”

“A man.”

Harley frowned.

“Not a real man. I mean, I thought he was real then, but not later. He’s dead ... a ghost.” Her eyes were huge. Harley was reminded of those kids at camp who sit around the campfire telling horror stories.

“Can’t you just ignore him? Tune him out or something?”

“You believe me!” Emma sounded pleased.

“Only because I heard the dog myself,” Harley admitted. “I don’t handle hauntings. Are you sure this isn’t some nut case playing tricks on you?” He was thinking of Jock, but this seemed too subtle an exercise for him. It was more likely Emma had infuriated someone else with her “problem”, but he hesitated to say so.

Emma shrugged. “That would make any physiological phenomena—”

“Like the ‘block of ice’ behind the door?” Harley interrupted.

“That was merely a metaphor,” she admitted, “for the intense, grave-like chill I felt.” She shivered.

“Lots of people see ghosts, Emma. My Aunt Jenny used to see one of my cousins in her bathtub. A friend of mine was bothered by a poltergeist for nearly a year. Do you know the history of the house?” He stared at the windows, unconsciously watching for signs of movement.

“People always ask that.”

Harley looked startled.

“Knowing more about the ghosts would just make me more susceptible—play on my sympathies, that kind of thing.”

His lips were twitching again, but with amusement now, rather than anger.

Emma smirked, and said sarcastically, “I can see this is all very entertaining from your perspective!”

He tried to squelch his smile and succeeded, except for the glint in his eyes. Apparently it was encouraging enough for her to ask him seriously, “Do you think some people are predisposed—to evil, I mean?”

Harley nodded slowly. “Circumstances predispose them, and that’s the excuse the lawyers like to live on, but hell—we all make choices.” He pulled out his gun. “Do you think this gun in my hand predisposes me to violence?”

“Well, actually, yes. I wish you’d put it away.”

Harley nodded, and tucked the Beretta in its holster. “What else are you?” His eyes glinted again, and he wondered whether she knew he was confusing her on purpose.

“Your rhetoric’s gravely in need of work,” she told him, with a sigh. “I bet you make lots of false arrests, just because you’re statutorily unclear.”

He burst out laughing. “That’s why we have to memorize it—the Miranda Rights, that is. And I wouldn’t use the word ‘gravely’ too freely, if I were you.”

“Damned police. Hit me when I’m down.” But she was smiling now, the haunted look gone from her eyes.

He nodded approvingly.

“To answer your question, I’m a swindler. ‘Grand Larceny Fungus’. Illegal on an international scale. You don’t have the scope to handle me.” She fidgeted under his official look, and explained, “They told me I couldn’t ship this one endophyte because the lab on the receiving end didn’t have an account set up. The point is, the endophyte can enhance growth in wheat, and I thought they should have it. I mean, hell! They barely have a lab—just a couple of microscopes and an old fridge they use as an incubator.” It must have sounded like a series of excuses, even to her own ears, because she added quickly, “The point is, their people are starving, and they have no funding, so I did it.” She crossed her arms firmly and narrowed her eyes. “I’ve done it heaps of times. I’ll do it again, too. You can’t stop me.”

“You *are* a nasty piece of work,” Harley retorted. “You’re not naive enough to believe good intentions excuse what is, essentially, a criminal act?” In that instant, Harley knew Jock Jamieson had succeeded in ruining his life. The man had introduced him to his sister.

Things will never be the same.

Harley grinned. “That said,” he went on, lifting her hand. Then he couldn’t help himself. He hesitated.

“I washed it,” Emma assured him. “No rats.”

Harley nodded and lifted it to his lips. “Will you have dinner with me?” he asked.

Something—a longing for romance?—shone in her eyes. It was rapidly replaced by tears.

“I’d love to,” she sniffled. “But I won’t.” With only the briefest hesitation, she turned away, grasped the doorknob, and almost defiantly thrust open her front door.

She’s more afraid of me than she is of her ghosts. The thought took him aback. Had he been too overbearing? Too demanding? Or was it because he hadn’t appeared to take her seriously enough? To prove himself, he reminded her seriously, “I haven’t checked the house for you yet.”

“It’s fine,” she mumbled. “Overactive imagination.” She shut the door in his face, then swiftly opened it a crack. “Nothing to worry about.”

It was easy to read her voice. Even though she was upset, she didn’t want to appear rude, or ungrateful for his offer. She wouldn’t let him see her, and he guessed her tears had gotten away.

“Thanks ... for everything.”

Click. The door closed again, but this time, with apologetic slowness.

The deadbolt clunked, and he heard her steps as she walked, then sprinted, across the entry.

Was it only today he'd been longing for challenges? Looking forward to some test of his abilities? He'd thought the answer was a detective's badge.

This had to be the first time he could ever recall being “romantically challenged”. It was a novel experience. He wasn't sure he liked it, but she—AKA “Rat”—was bound to make it interesting.

Well, you wanted a challenge. Looks like you've got it.

Harley took gingerly spongy steps across the overly-watered lawn. He kept thinking about her ghost problem, and wondering whether his sensible words had made some impression on her. If she could just staunch out her fear, she'd win. Dead things couldn't hurt you. Scare the hell out of you, maybe, but it was physical, not metaphysical, phenomena which could put you six feet under.

Harley believed in handling the most important stuff first. Threats, fists, kicks, guns, knives, steel pipes, batons fell into those categories. Ghosts belonged more to the “fluff” category. If you had time to play with the idea, it was hobby stuff only.

But to her, it's important. Downplaying it in his own head didn't make it any less important to her.

He recalled the poltergeist which had plagued his friend Tom. Harley had always wondered how much had really happened, and how much was imagined. Difficult to prove, either way. Nothing factual.

It was more a matter of disappearing items—something which could plague anyone. It was a little harder to dismiss Aunt Jenny's visions of her dead son in the bathtub, but the mind played tricks sometimes.

What about the dog? Harley had to admit he'd never thought about dogs as specters. The entire idea was ludicrous—like cows haunting a slaughterhouse. Now, at a distance, he could discount his experience as the product of too little sleep and an unaccustomed shift change; of echoes from neighboring houses. Nothing real, and there'd been no “chill” like the kind Emma had described. Just a little noise in a place it didn't belong.

Harley paused at the lawn edge and glanced back at the house. He'd just remembered the

problem with the lights. That sounded a lot like human interference. He'd meant to bring it up with her—to ask her about dimmer switches, or whether she'd had any electrical problems before—because it could be a fire hazard.

If the perpetrator was human, though, chances were he was gone. All that activity out front would have alerted him to visitors. Unlikely he'd take the risk of discovery.

Harley was thinking Jock again. The man wasn't totally without ambition. He wouldn't want to be caught out by Harley—especially after their discussion this afternoon.

Harley was lost in thought, staring unfocused at Emma's tree—the one he'd been pounding with his fist—as he considered the possibilities. Should he go? The policeman in him said no. He'd done nothing whatsoever to investigate the things that were plaguing her. He recalled her words: "I'm in distress!". She had, more or less, asked for help.

She just doesn't want the romantic kind, he thought, reddening slightly. He was the one who'd confused the issue.

Wrong place, and definitely the wrong time.

He was still playing it out on his internal viewscreen when he was distracted by movement in his peripheral vision. He turned, his eyes refocusing on something which hadn't been there a split second before. Like one of those 3D puzzles, it had been hidden in the line of the porch rail, the rays of the front light, the hard edge of concrete. It was a part of the intricately branched shrub near Emma's door, the rough-barked limb of the tree, the brick of the path. Now that it—He—was present, Harley wondered how he hadn't seen him before. Gut instinct told him the man had been there all along.

And now that I know how to see him, I won't be able to miss him again.

The idea was spooky, to say the least. Spiky gooseflesh chased dancing goosebumps down Harley's arms and chest. It wasn't nearly as spooky, though, as what happened next.

The man turned, to meet Harley's eyes. His own were in darkness, but something told Harley this creature wouldn't have the same problems with visualization that he had. *No problems seeing in the dark.*

As the silhouette twisted, Harley sucked in a quick breath. For just an instant, the curve of the

forehead, of aquiline nose and prominent chin were etched, darkly unmistakable against the lighter-colored front door. It was a silhouette Harley recognized.

It was also one he'd never forget, any more than he'd forget the way he'd prided himself on his detective work, in solving the case.

A look-alike? His brain was in horror mode, and instinctively sought a reason.

No. Harley was shaking his head now, and he didn't know whether it was more in acceptance or denial. However he played this, some part of him knew the truth, and it made his guts clench, his breath catch.

There are some things which can't be rationalized.

Harley realized how much he'd wronged the woman in the house. She did, indeed, have a paranormal problem. So, it seemed, did he. Harley could admit it now. No hint of doubt remained.

The man was Terence Edward Forsby. Harley had arrested his father last year.

For the murder of his only son.

Chapter Four

It seemed that she'd barely hopped into the chair when the chill penetrated the living room once more.

Ice floes, damming me in.

As terror trembled in on her frozen flesh, she remembered Harley's words: "*Can't you just ignore him? Tune him out or something?*"

She tried. Closed her eyes and did all she could to close her mind. It was hard, too, with Harley's image stubbornly refusing to be dismissed.

Nor was the closure thing working. The ice floes were coming on so quickly this time Emma got worried. She'd opted not to go out with Harley, and as a result, was as depressed as hell. Could her frustration—her depression—be giving the ghost an in?

No way.

It would mean emotional outbursts could also influence her other unwanted visitors.

She couldn't afford to have emotion acting as a trigger for the rats. Cyclic fluctuations in lunar activity, or seismic disturbances, or whatever else triggered those episodes, meant her "summoning" consisted of a simple channeling *only*. The truth was, she channeled in trouble, plain and simple. For herself, and sometimes for the people around her. The rats were a nuisance, particularly when they'd been startled or frightened, but they'd never bitten anyone in her presence. Their arrival was always frenzied, but then they slept it off. They usually vanished with far more subtlety, and far less agitation, unless disturbed. Even then, though, they'd never attacked anyone. Never devoured or even nibbled at a passerby. The consistency of it had made Emma feel almost safe.

And since most of the people who knew about her awkward circumstances had chosen to overlook them, she had begun to feel almost normal.

But if emotions could affect her ghosts, then they were also likely to affect the rest, which was the same as giving her anger command over the rats. The idea was so horrendous that she didn't even want to consider it—didn't even want to admit the possibility.

So, don't. Don't think about it, or try to solve it. She sat there in the dimming light and the gathering cold, and tried to think of anything but.

The rats are like the ghosts. She'd said as much to Harley: *don't get to know them or their pasts, because the more you dwell, the more you risk giving them access.* The rats wouldn't benefit from being at the forefront of Emma's mind, any more than the ghosts would, and the last thing she wanted was to give any of them emotions to prey on. The biofeedback methods she'd discussed with Jock hadn't been fiction. Emma hoped to spurn all her unwanted visitors, by issuing them negative energy—a barricade, of sorts—before they could stick either a rat claw, or a spectral foot, inside her door.

But, at the same time, she was a scientist, and she knew there had to be a reason why she was so out of control. Dale had been right: the rat numbers had tripled this afternoon over what she usually summoned, and Emma didn't think they were a product of her present neighborhood. She'd lived in far worse places, where rat infestation would have been a regular occurrence, even without her interference.

But Jock was on the verge of strangling you.

Emotion again. A fear response. Self-defense.

Don't think like that. She'd made it her Eleventh Commandment to always try to think the best of everyone.

Be honest. It's because you're afraid to think badly of them. Afraid of what you might inadvertently do.

Hypocrite.

Thinking only pure thoughts was a lost cause, most of the time. She didn't have it in her to be a saint. It was too much at odds with human nature.

Like everything else you do.

Right now she was also finding her determined goodwill damned hard to sustain. Harley was Jock's friend, but Emma had known too many of Jock's friends in the past to be comfortable with *that* admission. She could excuse her brother, because she knew the hell she'd sometimes put him through, but she couldn't excuse his friends for their coarseness or stupidity—the petty meannesses or the grim

tricks. Mostly, though, she couldn't excuse them for their bullying natures. It had only been by a trick of Fate—or a fist by Jock—that she wasn't on the receiving end of more slurs and digs.

You're not in high school any more.

And she hadn't thought of high school in years, but it had been nearly that long since someone had asked her out. She'd always kept herself horrendously busy, against the possibility, until the last few years, when she'd relaxed her guard a little. The truth was, she was afraid that she'd begin to like somebody, only to run them over with rats. Since she couldn't summon the rats on command, she would be placing herself in the unenviable position of appearing like a liar or a loony if she tried to explain it beforehand. The only other option was taking a would-be lover by surprise.

Like diarrhea in the wedding bed. Odious, totally unromantic, and certain to send a lover fleeing.

Harley saw you in action, Emma—and he still asked you out. Very comforting, but her mind automatically wondered, *What's wrong with him? Can't he find anyone else? Or, worse—do rats turn him on?*

What does he want? Why me?

Maybe he has bizarre proclivities. Some of Jock's other friends did. Emma loved her stepbrother, but friendship with Jock wasn't exactly a mark of good character. Add to that Harley's occupation and the fact he wanted to cultivate her interest, and the sum added suspiciously to one more loser, with leanings toward the weird. Obviously, the man wasn't aware how little control she really had. It's not like she could perform on cue. *One more gun in his collection?*

But he hadn't seemed the type, and she'd been so tempted to say yes that it had thrown her. Now she was angry—really angry—at herself.

Better to be angry than afraid, and better for it to be directed at herself than anyone else. If there was a true test, of emotional effects on the rats, it would happen now—to her.

But, it wasn't the rats who were heading her way. The icy feeling was coming down hard, like frost settling on a stretch of lawn. Emma shivered, let her eyes swiftly scan the room, then scrunched down further into the chair. Mr. Ghost had returned, and unlike the rats, he hadn't come to rest innocuously at her feet. She didn't know what he wanted, nor did she wish to.

Emma hunkered down in the cushions, and hid beneath the ornamental throw. Let all hell break loose around her, but she wasn't coming out for anything.

Her sigh was a shivery breath.

And people wondered why she didn't date.

* * * * *

Harley didn't know what to do. He was petrified—literally—and he stood there like a statue. Did he really think Forsby wouldn't—couldn't—see him?

He's staring right at you.

It was a situation for which he had no reactions, no responses. If he'd ever given much thought to ghosts, other than as interesting paranormal phenomena, it was as vestiges of souls living on another plane. He was as curious as the next man regarding life after death, but since the living and dead didn't usually interact, he'd concluded that seeing a ghost was an accident—a happy accident brought on by wishful thinking, perhaps, in the case of Aunt Jenny and her lost child. An unhappy accident when the ghost stirred up noise and stole articles around the house, like his friend Tom's poltergeist. Harley could accept that much, but maybe because he'd always been so practical, he'd never expected to be visited by one, let alone two, ghostly phenomena. Yet, it had happened twice in twenty-four hours.

He knew a moment's resentment as he considered the source. *Emma Rathburn.*

She didn't ask you to be here—not tonight. His resentment faded as he considered how brave the woman was—how willing to go it alone. The only reason she'd called the police at all was because she'd thought it—He—was real.

He was ... eight months ago. Maybe ... ?

Harley eyed Forsby's peculiar translucence. He could see the porch rail through his gut.

Okaaay. No maybes. The fucker's dead.

Harley stood there, irresolute, wondering whether he was being extraordinarily brave, or extraordinarily stupid. For some unknown reason known only to Emma Rathburn, the two planes of existence had overlapped, allowing him vision into that spectral world. It wasn't working the way Harley had always presumed it would, though. He might have expected a flash of prescience; a flicker

or two of ghostly activity. Never, in all his imaginings, had a “vision” included a return inspection by a dead man.

Why would it? Unhampered by flesh, and easily able to circumvent doors and walls, the dead should be able to see all already.

Therefore, Chalmers, it's not an inspection. It's a warning.

Maybe, even, a threat.

That's what it felt like. This wasn't a precognitive harbinger of danger. Nor did Forsby appear as though he were here to save Harley's life. This seemed much grimmer—more like, *if you don't comply, your life is over.*

Harley swallowed hard. He was unnerved, no doubt about it, but he'd never been one to allow a threat to pass unchallenged. All it did was allow the instigator to get away with shit again and again.

He cleared his throat. “I don't like threats,” he growled.

Forsby's smile was enough to set Harley's nape hair standing on end. Emma was right—there are some people who are predisposed to evil. Harley was in the presence of one right now.

If he'd had any doubts they were laid to rest an instant later. Emma's white front door was suddenly splattered in vivid crimson. It was dripping; pooling on the porch. Harley had only seen one scene like it before: an assassin's wet work, enacted on an unfortunate witness, who never got the opportunity to enter the Witness Protection scheme.

T. Edward Forsby passed through that crimson veil, as though it were liquid rather than wood. Before Harley could gather breath for a warning shout to the woman within, the ghost man and his wet work were gone.

In the distance, muffled by the four walls, a dog began to bark. The sound grew louder and sharper, then escalated into furied howls. The sound was echoed milliseconds later, by the shrill terror of a woman's scream.

* * * * *

Wasn't cold supposed to dull the senses? Every sense she possessed seemed to be doing double time. No matter how hard she tried to block it, her hearing and nasal passages persisted in picking up nearly intangible sensory cues. She was just glad her eyes were hidden in the blanket. She

didn't want to see what was coming next.

There's no escape. It was like the rats. She remembered the first rat invasions, at age nine. She'd run, as hard and as fast as a nine-year-old could, but they'd been faster. Coming on those little rat feet, like the pet rats at school. The ones she'd always liked.

But, these—they just came on and on, in numbers too vast for her to comprehend. And in the background, her mother had been screaming.

The blanket was being tugged away now, with inexorable slowness. Emma tangled it with her wrists, and secured it with her feet, but it just kept going. Even the part beneath her rear was determinedly sliding away, and taking her with it.

Studley was barking, and as the blanket moved, his angry growls and snarls took on a shrill note. He was frenziedly barking and clawing now, in his struggle to get to her, to protect her.

Emma's eyes were wet with terror, and her breath, within the last layers of cloth, came out in frosty cloud.

Emma scrunched her eyes closed, against discovery—a child's answer to her adult dilemma. She could hear his footsteps, smell the foul stink of his breath, but if she couldn't see him he wasn't really there.

Then, with nearly the same inexorable slowness which was stealing the blanket, her eyelids were forced open. The personal intrusion, the way it could transcend space to touch her, abuse her....

The last tangle of blanket fled, and Studley's shrill barks rose to a howl.

Emma looked at Him—she didn't have a choice. He was standing there, nearly as solid as herself, except for the places where rot had eaten his skin. Where bacteria had already gone to work on his corpse, turning the once smooth skin to mushy goo.

He smiled at her, with shredded lips, then lifted a dripping hand toward her face.

In that second, even Studley's howling was gone. All Emma could hear were her mother's screams.

No, she realized. They're mine.

* * * * *

Harley didn't stop to think about it. He tore up the path, and barreled into the door, shoulder

first.

It held, and inside the house Emma's screams were peaking. In a frenzy, Harley hit the panel again, then slammed the latch with his boot. The frame gave, and the door crashed back. He was through, into the frozen hallway. It was so damn cold in there he half expected icicles to be dripping from the ceiling.

He heard the door—impossibly—slam shut behind him.

She was in the living room. Harley ran that way, relieved by the very human sound of his own pounding feet. He halted, but only for an instant, at the grisly sight before him.

Emma was cowering back in her chair, Forsby's fingers clenching her throat. Even now, her scream was dying; trapped by those ghastly digits.

Harley grabbed a lamp and swung it at Forsby, but it merely passed through, as though through a shadow.

If you can't handle a problem one way, you do it another.

Harley dove at Emma, tipping the chair over backwards, and sending them both rolling. He jumped to his feet, lifted her up by one arm, and shoved her behind him. Then, he stood staunchly, to face down her demon. He wondered if it was a mistake, even as he mouthed the words. "Get the hell out!"

It was. The smaller chair, and then the couch, snapped over onto their sides. In the windows the blinds rattled and the curtains danced in a frenzied jangle on their rods. Ornaments—vases and statues and candleholders—flopped and flew, while the carpet ripped in weird furrows.

* * * * *

Emma sagged against Harley, then wrapped her arms round his waist. He was so warm, so alive. She burrowed her face into the dent between his shoulder blades. *God! If only—*

But it wasn't to be. She felt Harley's shudder, and knew she couldn't let him stand hero alone.

Emma relinquished her hold on his waist and pushed back, away from him. Maybe—just maybe—she could do for him what she didn't seem able to do for herself.

She stepped sideways, out from behind Harley, to face the ghost-man head on. "Get the hell OUT!" she hissed, echoing Harley's words, but pointing her hand toward her front door. Her words

held an intensity Harley's shaking tones had lacked; some intonation which brooked no refusal. As Emma jabbed her index finger toward the broken door, Forsby was shunted backwards so fast he was but a blur of motion. He hit the wooden panels in a veil of crimson splash, then dissolved in a rending of broken tissue and bone. The door gave a visible judder as it consumed his essence, bloodbath and all.

He was gone. The crisp chill lacing the room audibly cracked, and warmth flooded in.

"Voilà!" Emma whispered, a little stupidly. She sagged, and Harley grasped her around the waist. She looked up at him, her eyes pleading.

Harley bettered his grip. She was so pale even her lips were white. Emma was about to fold, whether she knew it or not.

"Don't tell—" she gasped.

Harley didn't hear the rest. Emma went limp, folding like a rag doll.

He caught her, and swooped her up in his arms. She was so little, to be the source of so much trouble. "Emma!" he whispered.

As he shifted her, her head tipped back, and Harley froze as he spied the purple-blue marks at her neck. Forsby had been out for blood. What Harley couldn't figure out was why. What good would it do him?

It upset everything he'd ever heard about ghostly phenomena, with the exception of some of those poltergeists, who pinched and slapped.

Pinched. Slapped. But strangled? Harley frowned and tilted her head back up, burying her face against him.

You're a fool, Chalmers. He was about to do the stupidest thing he could think of, and he blamed it on Emma's attacker. If it had been anyone but Forsby in Emma's house, he wouldn't have done it—would never have considered taking her back to his place.

Riiight.

But he couldn't forget how she'd stood at his side, to face down the thing which had tried to kill her just seconds before. She wouldn't let him face it alone. And now, if he were to leave her, she'd be defenseless.

Not even her dog any more. No protection. No warning.

Emma stirred, then instantly began to thrash and struggle.

“It’s okay!” Harley told her. “It’s *me!*”

She turned blank eyes his way. In that moment, he thought she didn’t recognize him. *The shock.*

“Emma! It’s Harley! Do you remember?”

Emma’s rigid limbs relaxed, and she nodded. Her lips creased in a smile, even as her eyes drifted closed once more. “Yesss,” she murmured, sighing, nestling one small hand against his chest. This was the man who’d challenged the demon on her behalf. Like Studley, his determination and defiance had stirred her to battle. *Of course, I remember you,* her tired brain whispered. Emma’s smile widened. “You’re Sir Studley,” she said.

Harley carried her outside, took a breath of fresh air, and wondered what the hell he was doing.

You’re a policeman. You don’t break down doors without making some kind of report, and you never take crime victims back to your own house. Don’t even consider it.

She’s not merely a “crime victim”. She’s Jock Jamieson’s stepsister.

Oh, Lord, his internal warning system groaned. *Even worse.*

This little incident might be enough to convince Jocko they were friends. The possibility didn’t bear thinking about. It was so distasteful Harley had to suppress the impulse to dump Emma on the porch and run for it.

He smirked down at her, curled up so trustingly against his chest. Life would definitely be easier if he were a better man—or a worse one. A better man might be able to overlook Jock Jamieson’s faults. A worse one would abandon this wench without an ounce of guilt.

As it was, Harley found himself stuck in the middle—neatly cornered by The Rat. He couldn’t help but wonder whether Jock had ever been placed in a similar situation, with rats and dead people popping up on the doorstep. Police work must seem absolutely tame after repeated encounters with ransacking rats and gallivanting ghouls.

Sympathy, however well-deserved, for Jock wouldn’t help right now. He needed a

destination. Where to next? As much as Harley might long for the security of home, after a night quite literally from hell, bringing Emma there would have to be his last resort.

Harley remembered Emma's coworker, from the evening's rat-in. The man had certainly been familiar with her foibles.

What was his name? Derrick, Dean. Something with a D. Harley went so far as to search the list of names on her cell phone, and read the last couple of emails. Violation of her privacy, maybe, but his urgent, "Is there someone I should call?!" to her had been met with nothing. There were several D names listed, but Harley couldn't put a face to any of them. The truth was, for someone supposedly versed in information-gathering, he'd been horribly remiss.

I could call Jock. The thought triggered his gag reflex. That idea wasn't a winner, in any respect.

But what if Emma tells him, about tonight? She obviously didn't talk about her problems much—not if she'd managed to stay off the scandal sheets this long—but Jock was, at least nominally, family.

And I, by my own admission, am Jock's friend. Harley groaned again. This time, it was loud enough that Emma stirred.

She'd never understand that he'd rather face a thousand ghosts than one day in Jock's company.

The hell with it, he thought. He'd take her home with him and worry about the consequences later.

* * * * *

By the time Harley had reached his house, and tackled Choco's exuberant interest, he'd talked himself into nervous wreckage. He needed a clue for "what next." He didn't like this chaotic confusion surrounding him. He wanted some kind of warning if he was about to be invaded by rats, or ghosts, or Emma Rathburn's numbskull brother. Since Harley had no idea how often Jock went around and checked on her, he didn't know whether to prepare himself for a lie, a visit, or a punch.

Harley plunked down on the edge of the couch and gripped Emma's shoulders. No response. He shook her lightly. "Emma!"

Hell, the dead were easier to wake than she was.

Easy for you to joke about a ghost now, he thought, studying his own comfortable room. Choco, his Great Dane-Springer Spaniel cross, had plopped himself on Harley's right foot. Now, the dog sat there contentedly, drooling heavily over his boot. There was no sign of anything scary, or even remotely threatening, unless the size of Choco's jaws intimidated you. They were safe.

It would have been a different story at Emma's house. If he and Emma had failed to thwart Forsby's assault...

Harley smirked as he gazed down at her. What was it about The Rat that incited him to heroics? Hero stuff, like running to the rescue, breaking down doors, and "thwarting" dead villains? He mentally traced her profile, then griped when Choco followed the direction of his gaze and hastily jumped up to lick Emma's eyelids.

"Stop it!" Harley ordered, and attempted to tug that big head away.

Choco was just as determined. He lapped roughly at Emma's cheek, then sniffed her bruised neck, growled deep in his throat, and assiduously applied himself to mopping the ghost finger marks away. Emma moaned and rolled onto her back, one hand automatically reaching out to caress Choco's ears.

"Oh, *God!*" Harley muttered. Now he'd never be able to pull the lug off.

But Harley's own eyes were now focused on the bruises. Should he have taken her to the hospital, instead of bringing her here? It was the awkwardness of it which had made him hesitate. Not only did he suspect Emma wouldn't have wanted the notoriety or questions, but Harley didn't know how he'd explain it on her behalf. She obviously hadn't strangled herself, and he wasn't about to file a report on this one.

Now he had another worry, and it was all his fault. Would Emma even remember him when she awoke? What if she didn't? What if, like some mediums he'd heard of, she had no memory of Terence Forsby entering her house? Who would she blame then for the marks on her neck?

She'd blame the weird policeman, who'd been there for her rat invasion, and for some unknown reason, had come back.

And taken her to *his* house.

The unfairness of it irked him. He was accustomed to being unappreciated—that went with the job—but he’d never been so terrified in his life as in that moment of spectral confrontation, with its aspects of beyond-the-grave retribution. That moment when he’d faced Forsby’s spook, and somehow, with her help, had banished it. He knew it was foolish to expect gratitude, but the idea—that she might not remember any of it—made him feel stupider than he had already. He’d put himself in an unconscionable position, out of some misguided sense of *faux* nobility.

My own fault, for butting in.

And if you hadn’t? Would you be sitting there with a corpse, and nothing to justify your visit?

All the physical evidence thwarting him, from fingerprints to witnesses.

Harley recalled his confrontation with Forsby. His “I don’t like threats”, intended to daunt a dead man.

It appeared as though Terence Forsby hadn’t liked threats, either. If Emma Rathburn had died tonight, the first one they would have blamed would have been the only person on the scene.

The one who’d bashed in her door without cause. Who had no reason to be there.

Harley Delacourte Chalmers.

* * * * *

Emma rolled over in bed—only to find she couldn’t. There was something behind her back, blocking the way.

The something was spongy and uneven, with a damp, dented surface. Her fingers came away sticky.

She jerked her hand back, as though from something hot. Given the horror of the night before, her mind could head only one place. To the graveyard.

Dented. Sticky.

Blood.

Oh my God! She edged forward, away from it.

What could it be?! All kinds of horrific possibilities raced through her brain.

Check it out.

Her fear a guttural sob deep in her throat, she went to complete the turn she’d started in her

sleep.

It was the wrong move. She was already so twisted up in the narrow confines of her resting place, that her efforts only tugged the wet object closer, so its smushiness rubbed her back. Now she was nearly as grossed out as she was frightened, as she pictured a slimy red trail across her skin. Her bed was just so narrow.

Narrow?!

Not ... my ... bed! The satin-lined confines of a coffin popped into her head. Panic turned her nails into claws as she fought her way out of the covers. With a last wriggle, her face was free, her nose buried in old plaid upholstery.

No satin lining. No coffin. A sofa.

Where? Who?

It was as far as she got. Her memories were still sorting themselves from sleep-strung fragments, but it was already too late. She'd roused the beast on the floor.

As Emma continued to paw at the blankets, kicking and tearing at the sheets to free herself the rest of the way, her bed space suddenly dipped and thudded.

Emma knew who it was.

The rotting man ... here ... to claim her.

Run!

Emma jerked upright in a tangle of cloth, her head slamming the denticles and cavernous maw of a huge, slobbering muzzle.

She was looking into the nasal and oral cavities of a gigantic rat. Emma gasped in horror, but it froze mid-suck, for the rat had nasty breath, and drooling tendencies to match. She dove back under the blankets, burrowing deep and heading south toward the other end of the sofa. For a moment she thought she had it fooled. The giant was still pawing the blankets behind her.

But, the creature was too quick for her slumber-numbed senses. As she poked her head out of the sheet again, a big tongue lapped her face, trailing saliva across her cheekbone.

Not rat.

Dog.

Her thundering heart slowed to a fast-paced race, and she flopped down, onto the armrest. “Hi, Dog,” she whispered. Her shaking hand hesitated, then reached out to caress the droopy ears.

Encouraged by this sign of favor, the giant bounced over to the gooey object it had buried in her bedding, and dug out a half-chewed foam football. He presented it to her nose, then dropped it onto her arm.

Unaware of the dog’s addiction, she made the mistake of picking up the slimy ball. The beast bounced back, then went into retriever mode. It crouched slightly, all the while staring at the ball intently, brows down, every muscle tense.

She was just glad it hadn’t eyed her that way. This was unquestionably the biggest dog she’d ever had contact with. Studley would have been dwarfed by this brute.

But he made up in courage what he lacked in size.

Emma jiggled the ball and the dog wobbled and swayed.

How did I get here?

Perhaps the better question was *why?*

A kidnapping? She snorted, and the dog took it as a sign of affection. The big tail shook furiously, sending dust weegees of hair and dirt sailing skyward. “You big lug!” Emma grinned. No kidnapper would leave that much evidence on the victim.

She recalled last night as frantic, and terrifying, but she wasn’t ready to ponder it too closely—not yet. She shivered, looked around, and instantly pinpointed the immediate source of her trouble. He was asleep in a chair, his snoring drowned out by canine enthusiasm.

This was the kind of thing Jock would have done—arrogant, as though he knew best. Hauling her off somewhere, without once consulting her about any of it.

Her conscience twanged a little. This man—Harley—had hung in when even Jock would have hightailed it away.

Grateful she might be, but she’d also been terrified only seconds past. Prickles of fear were still giving her wayward shivers. After last night’s experience, it was absolutely cruel to expect her to wake up in a strange place—and allow her to be tackled by a dog as big as this one.

Hey, he was tackled by your rats.

I didn't ask him to be there. He was there by choice.

I'm not.

Harley was dozing in a chair, feet up on a coffee table. Totally oblivious.

Oblivious was Jock's operative word. Apparently, it was this man's, too. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. *I thought policemen were supposed to be alert to danger.*

The entire house could have fallen down around him and he wouldn't have stirred.

Impulse warred with good sense.

The dog whimpered deep in his throat. Emma chuckled.

Time to wake up.

As the dog's ears twitched with excitement, Emma flung the ball—right into Harley Chalmers' lap.

Chapter Five

Dale, Chang, and Nicky were in the coffee room when Emma finally made it to work. Dale waited until she'd maneuvered her coffee halfway across the room before he shouted out, "So *that's* why you were late? You were fooling around with that *policeman*?"

Emma turned magenta, but didn't answer until she'd reached their table. "I can't believe this!" she hissed. "What are you, psychic?" She couldn't figure out how he knew Harley had dropped her off.

"Just exceptionally nosy," Chang told her.

Dale shook his head disparagingly. "Slurs—all I ever get." He shoved a big chunk of doughnut in his mouth, then spoke around a rain of crumbs. "It's omniscience. BTW, Emma—don't even bother running that gel today. I can tell you how it's going to turn out."

"God save me from dumbasses and idiots," Emma murmured.

"If He did, you wouldn't have any friends left," Nicky said. "Chang saw you from the window upstairs, and Dale ID'd your escort. You can email me with a complete report." She grinned evilly. "Include materials and methods, please."

"A policeman." Chang's sigh was a condemnation. "Is this Jock's work?!" he asked distastefully. "Is he introducing you to his friends now?"

"'Jerk' doesn't have any friends," Dale reminded him.

Nicky gave Emma's shoulder a commiserating pat. "What was it—his gun? Was it big?"

Emma grimaced. "You are sooo disgusting."

"He didn't know how to aim it, did he?" Nicky tsk-tsked. "You poor thing."

Chang sniggered.

Emma changed the subject. "I called the Rabbit," she told Nicky.

Nicky gripped Emma's shoulders, her eyes huge. "Oh my God, Emma! Did it work?!"

Chang was frowning. "What about a 'rabbit'? You're not preg—" he began.

Emma quickly cut him off. All she needed were more rumors, floating around this place. “No, you fool! The Rabbit—you know, the one who’s on the billboard downtown?”

“Yeeeaah,” he said slowly. “He does those birthday songs or something, doesn’t he?”

“He does more than that,” Nicky retorted. Her eyes were glinting with excitement.

“Uh-oh.” Dale looked from one to the other. “I don’t think I want to hear the rest.”

“I wasn’t going to say much, but it was one of those spontaneous things to call him. When the dead guy—”

Nicky gasped. Her expression set Chang off, and he started laughing.

“He’s a paranormal investigator—”

“The dead guy?” Dale asked, confused.

“No, the *Rabbit!*” Emma said impatiently. “But he was there, when I needed him, even though he didn’t know what was going on.”

“Why didn’t he?” Dale asked. He waited a second, then prompted impatiently, “Know what was going on?”

“Because I ran him down,” Emma admitted. She saw Dale’s expression. “Not like that! With my feet!”

“What is he?” Chang asked. “Four-foot-ten?”

“I took him by surprise. Then the policeman came and things got weird, but by that time, the Rabbit was gone.”

Chang caught Dale’s eye and the two of them burst out laughing.

“I want to be there,” Nicky told her. “The next time it happens.”

Emma shook her head. “Uh-uh. It’s not safe.”

“I’ve met your rats, Emma. If they don’t intimidate me, some spirit isn’t going to.”

Emma knew the argument would continue. It would be reasonable, and damn near irrefutable.

She really has no idea. Emma didn’t like being so pig-headed about it, but she’d been friends with these people for years. The combination of spook and a bunny rabbit champion would be too much to resist. They’d think that because a paranormal investigator was on the scene, it’d be safe.

She held up a hand, effectively cutting Nicky off mid-rationale. “This is why.” Emma’s eyes

were wet now, and her voice hushed. “Not all spirits are harmless.” She pulled down the neck of her sweater, revealing the blue-brown bruises. “If Jock’s friend hadn’t come when he did, I’d probably be dead right now.”

* * * * *

After work, Dale insisted they all finish their discussion at a coffee shop. “I’m not going home to Marie without the whole story,” he warned Emma. “No way is she going to let me sleep tonight unless I spill my guts.”

“You could lie,” Chang suggested.

Dale snorted. “Sure, Moron. Have you ever tried lying to Viv?”

“It’s not a productive exercise,” Chang replied primly.

“I rest my case. Emma, listen to Nicky. She’s got a point. You shouldn’t be alone.”

Emma sighed. Dale was really worried about those finger marks. In his most objectively congenial scientific manner, he’d told her he didn’t know whether she was right, about a ghost killing her, but the fact it had attacked her at all was the creepiest thing he’d ever heard.

Emma snorted. First, Dale. Now, Nicky. She’d never expected Nicky to be so stubborn about this. And the last thing Emma needed was Dale siding with her. “You know I appreciate your offer, *Nicola*, but this isn’t your problem. It really has nothing to do with you.”

Nicky blew on her nails, buffed them on her shirt, then consulted her day planner.

“I know you’re listening,” Emma told her. It was her dire tone, which brooked no refusal.

It was wasted. Nicky ignored Emma’s arguments with renowned tenacity.

“Hopeless,” Chang muttered in an aside to Dale. Dale’s nod was barely there. No sense getting Emma more riled up than she already was.

Nicky was going for adamant. When she was like that, there was no swaying her, and they all knew it. “I don’t care what you say,” she told Emma flatly. “I’m coming to stay with you.” Emma opened her mouth to argue, but Nicky lifted a hand. “Shhh!”

“But—!”

“Shhh!”

“You can’t—!”

“Shhh!”

“Dammit, Nix!”

“Shhh!” Nicky waited for another argument, then smiled congenially when silence reigned. “I do so hate it when you’re profane, dammit!”

Emma knew Nicky thought she had enough know-how and religious armament to protect her—them. *She just doesn’t realize.*

“Of course I realize.” Nicky looked impatient at Emma’s shocked expression. “You’re as transparent as glass, and if I can see it, the dead guy can, too. Besides, because of the rat thing, you’ve trained yourself to be Ms. Nice all the time. It’s just not natural. It’s okay to fight back—and mean it.” She put an arm around Emma’s shoulder and gave an artistic shiver. “This is scary as hell.” She smiled. “Isn’t it *great?!?*”

Emma didn’t look as gratified. “At least we’ll have the dog.”

“And at best we’ll have the policeman?”

Nicky had been teasing her all afternoon, claiming Emma’s eyes positively gleamed whenever she mentioned "her policeman". According to Nicky, The Rabbit may have arrived in the nick of time, but it was Harley the Hero who’d saved her life.

Nicky added, “It wasn’t in the line of duty, you know.”

Emma nodded, but her smile was accompanied by a sigh. “I know. If he’s smart, though, he’ll deliver the dog, then hightail it away from me as fast he can.”

Chang was blatantly curious about the ghost detective, and had already begged Emma to ask whether the guy needed any extra volunteers on his team. “What time’s the PI guy coming?”

“Oh my God!” Dale groaned. “So, now we’re into abbreviations?”

“Acronyms,” Chang corrected. “I couldn’t go around calling him the ‘Paranormal Investigator’ now, could I?”

“Why don’t you try calling him by his name?” Dale looked at Emma. “What *is* his name?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He called himself ‘Renaldo Rabbit’, so Renaldo might be his first name.”

“Then how the hell do you know he’s a psychic?”

“He’s not necessarily, you know,” Emma told him. “A lot of paranormal enthusiasts aren’t psychic.”

Dale buried his face in his hands. “Emma!”

She smiled. Dale groaned. He wasn’t usually so slow to recognize when she was being deliberately provoking. Her smile widened. He did so hate being “had”. “I found it on his website. He joked about doing a rabbit gig to support his ‘hobby’. He said it’s been really helpful in countering paranormal-related stress.”

Dale was still looking skeptical.

“He’s done thousands of consultations, since you didn’t bother asking. He’s not a wacko.” Emma added, “He has a PhD in psychology, Dale. I bet he keeps his full name a secret to retain his credibility.”

“*Doctor* Bunny,” Chang murmured. “Sounds perfectly credible to me.” He offered Emma a sickening smile. “At least he’ll be able to tell if you’re wacko.”

“Maybe,” Emma agreed, “but I think it’s more important he analyzes Forsby—you know, the one who attacked me.”

“He introduced himself *first?!?*” Dale asked, his voice cracking.

“No, you idiot. Harley knew him—said he arrested his father last year for his murder.”

“Maybe this was Harley’s little medium trick, not yours.”

Emma smirked at him. “Sure, Dale. He wasn’t around when Forsby turned up on my porch.”

“Yeah, but he turned up later. Sounds pretty suspicious to me.”

“Definitely a metaphysical tangle,” Chang put in. “Maybe the ghost wants him there, for reasons of his own.” The last was said with such ghoulishness that Dale flung a balled-up napkin his way.

Nicky shook her head disdainfully. “Well, it all sounds pretty clear-cut to me. Obviously a case of false arrest.”

Chang didn’t follow her logic. “Then why’d he try to kill Emma?”

“Maybe he likes killing things,” Dale said seriously.

Chang nodded. “Could be his father had a good reason for murdering him. Or maybe it’s

some genetic penchant for psychopathy that they share. ‘The family that plays together....’?”

Nicky shrugged. “Or maybe he didn’t kill him at all, but Emma looks a lot like the real murderer. Ghosts are only human, you know. They can make mistakes.” She turned to Emma. “What time’s Renaldo coming?”

“He’s not,” Emma admitted miserably.

“Why not?” Chang asked.

“Because he might stir things up,” she whispered.

“Translation,” Dale told them. “Emma’s afraid it might have been his presence that made Forsby—” He looked to Emma for confirmation and she nodded. “—attack her.”

She smirked. “Anyway, I haven’t asked him yet.”

“You might not have to,” Chang sniggered. “Maybe he ‘sensed’ your need.” He grinned at her. “Could be he’ll be back anyway. He probably doesn’t run into that many people in such obvious need of his psychological help.”

Dale mused, “If he’s really that into paranormal investigation, Emma could just drop him a hint about her trouble—”

“And he’ll come hopping her way as fast as he can,” Chang finished.

* * * * *

It had been bothering him all through his morning classes, and it looked set to bug him all afternoon, too. Renaldo kept remembering that last call of the evening, and the woman’s terrified reaction. It pissed him off that he’d been so stupid. Anyone could see that something was terribly wrong.

So, I bowed like some cretin, and took off, without even asking whether she was okay.

That would have been a stupid question, too. It was obvious she wasn’t, even if that guy did turn up to help her.

But, she fought him first. Maybe she wasn’t mistaking him for somebody else. Maybe I shouldn’t have left.

“Rescue Rodent.” He recalled his own words with disgust. Self-delusions of grandeur, mixed with a surplus of pride.

Now he was over-analyzing things again. It was almost as bad a habit as talking to himself, but he did that, too.

It wasn't until he was halfway through his afternoon classes that it occurred to him to question the woman's motives. Up to this point, he'd merely assumed that whatever event she'd summoned him for had gone horribly wrong—maybe due to somebody's drinking, or their violent temper. It wouldn't have been the first time. Family events frequently advented huge emotional displays.

It was one of the reasons he liked his little moonlighting job: it gave him the opportunity to ply his trade. It was one thing teaching psychology or using it in controlled situations, and quite another using it in the field. He'd found he had a knack for resolving difficult situations. His secret dream was of working as a hostage negotiator. He pictured himself stepping into an impossible situation and finding a means to reach the wayward parties. Getting them to lay down their weapons and release their hostages. The unsung hero; a god among negotiators.

It wasn't going to happen. He sighed. His damned preoccupation with the dead was bound to kill any opportunities for advancement. He was lucky he still had a job at the university. If he hadn't helped the Dean's sister last year....

Suffice it to say, Southwest U didn't like their teachers entertaining dubious trades on the side. It tended to "degrade their standards". It hadn't reached the formal letter stage, because Dean Paxwell had needed his help. Paxwell had dropped certain hints that he'd like to forget the incident now, but at the same time, he didn't dare push too hard. Apparently, Renaldo's effectiveness in removing his sister's ghost visitor had daunted the man.

Did Paxwell fear that if he were to complain, Renaldo would somehow transfer the ghost to *his* house instead? Maybe bring down wrathful spirits on his million-dollar split-level? Ridiculous, but nothing was said, so Renaldo let the situation slide.

If I were a good psychologist I'd talk it through with him.

But he really had no wish to give up his paranormal investigations. Those were usually situations where he really *did* act as an intermediary, even if the circumstances were sometimes questionable. For many people, a soul in jeopardy was almost more terrifying than a life. Infinite risk

versus finite risk.

And Renaldo never took cases where his own eternal destiny might be in any kind of jeopardy—the kind which had demonic overtones. There were exorcists to handle those situations. His was an organized, scientific approach, complete with metering equipment, cameras, motion detectors, Geiger counters, and ion detectors. He was after hard and irrefutable evidence, but the proof was frequently as indirect and nebulous as it was in his psychological analyses of human interaction. Behavior, whether it was in the living, or the dead, was often difficult to gauge or predict.

It could be read, however. That woman last night had been terrified. She was at risk, and the cause could have been human. Or, judging from the level of fear, it could have been “departed human”. He’d seen that same look, more than once.

Whoever had motivated her response had still been in her house, given her reactions. Renaldo realized that he might have totally misunderstood her motives—the reason for her call. When he’d asked her whether it was a birthday party, her “yes” had been a quick and distracted agreement. He suspected now it had been more to complete the call than to keep her activities a secret.

Decency demanded that he pay her a return visit. *She didn't get her money's worth.* His lips twitched. *I never got to sing.*

He lifted one eyebrow elegantly, then dressed in his best: black leather with heavy boots.

Still in costume, Renaldo?

Of a different kind. Pride demanded he arrive on his motorcycle this time—and leave the big pink bunny ears at home.

* * * * *

Just as Harley arrived, a big black Kawasaki Vulcan roared into Emma’s driveway. The guy didn’t even look his way, but climbed off the bike, and strolled across the grass. He pulled off his helmet, shook his shaggy hair out of his face, and squatted down to inspect the lawn. He was peering, absorbed, at the rat pellets nestled into the grass.

Harley sat behind the wheel, very conscious of his own frown. He didn’t know who this guy was.

But it has nothing to do with you.

Too bad the realization did so little to ease his irritation.

He was far better off having no involvement in anything Emma did or said. It was none of his business whether she had an entire team of lawn maintenance personnel inspecting her grass on a daily basis.

But when the biker took a pair of forceps out of his pocket, and slid a couple of the pellets into a plastic bag, it didn't stop Harley from acting. Why was he here? Was he out to get some proof, about Emma's rat problem? Harley slid silently out of his car.

Or, it would have been silent, if Choco hadn't objected so violently to being left behind.

Harley gave an inward groan. Choco had spotted the bike. Choco loved motorcycles, which was why Harley's own precious Yamaha didn't run any more. Choco had loved the seat, and the tires, and the tubes.

Let it go, Chalmers. He was only a pup, and that was his teething phase.

It didn't help. Harley looked with jealousy at the big black bike, then with nearly as much jealousy at the guy on Emma's lawn. Had she called him? What was he doing here?

And what business did he have picking the rat turds off her grass?

Harley sighed, disturbed by his own antisocial behavior. If Emma had called the guy, he must be okay.

Except now, the man was wandering over to check out the bare spot, where Emma had sprinkled grass seed to cover her sins. Harley was a little stunned by the affection with which he regarded this small, desperate effort.

If I know the woman much longer, I'm going to end up in my own jail.

It didn't stop him. Choco whined, deep in his throat, and wriggled his tail violently as he looked from Harley to the motorcycle. Harley hesitated only briefly, praying like hell he could overcome the impulse.

Alas, it was no good. He lifted the latch just enough to release the catch. Choco, with an excited whine and yip, knocked open the door.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Emma was looking so distraught that Harley felt a pang of guilt. For

someone attempting to keep a low profile, he'd just drawn some awfully unwelcome attention her way. If the biker *was* collecting evidence, Choco had just given him every reason to do his worst. It wouldn't matter that it wasn't Emma's fault. It had happened at her house.

Harley tried to weasel them out of it. The problem was, Choco was just too big to fit through a standard weasel hole. Harley told Emma, "I can't figure out what happened."

His face was a picture of innocence, as he met Renaldo's eyes. "I just came by to drop Choco off, the way Emma and I arranged." *There*. The dog had an appointment. He was expected. But, judging from Emma's surprise on seeing the biker, the motorcycle man wasn't. If the guy wanted to cast blame, he could look to Harley first. But the truth was, the man had no business parking in Emma's driveway. Harley added, for good measure, "He gets really protective—of his friends." It was as close to a threat as he could afford. It insinuated all that mighty dog muscle might turn, given enough provocation.

Choco whimpered. Perfect timing, Harley thought, until he looked at Choco's face. It was a portrait of dumb in action. He was complaining because Harley wouldn't let him near the bike any more.

And the seat was the same color as Choco's near-demolished leather chew. The only thing holding Choco back right now was the displeasure in Harley's voice. Despite his size, Choco didn't exactly exude hostility.

Emma's expression looked like thunder, and Harley suspected she was about to kick him off her premises. He shifted uncomfortably. A restraining order might not be that far off, either. Emma considered herself right in the middle of this mess, and she somehow knew Harley had done it deliberately.

So did the woman with her, but unlike Emma, she seemed to find it hilarious. "Nope," she said now, bluntly. "But that was a nice, gutsy try. We came *this* close to buying it." She grinned at Renaldo, who was obviously still smoldering.

* * * * *

I owe him. Harley had come to her rescue the night before.

It was the only thing holding Emma back.

Besides the fact he had those sculpted arms and strong shoulders.

Don't be shallow. He's a dick.

He was also her hero. She'd never had a hero before. "The Rabbit didn't count," she murmured, then reddened as she saw both men's expressions. *Dreadful habit.* Saying what you were thinking could get you into so much trouble.

But not as much trouble as Choco was about to get them all in. He'd now decided he liked Renaldo almost as much as he did the bike. The giant canine was bouncing around the poor soul, barking with husky yaps that somehow suited his misbegotten form.

This man was no fool. He reached down, picked up the package Harley had brought for Emma, and flung it Frisbee-style across the yard. "Fetch!" he commanded, and the dog took off, its tail waving madly.

"Oh, look," Renaldo said with false enthusiasm. "I taught him a new trick."

Harley sighed, his face unreadable. "Choco's good security for you, Emma," he said thoughtfully, "but I can see he'll be a little awkward to control."

"'Awkward'?" Renaldo repeated, allowing the smallest note of incredulity to enter his voice. "Into understatement, aren't you?" He studied Harley's face for a moment, then nodded, as though he'd made an assessment. "Yeah," he said slowly, "I can see that you are."

"How's your motorcycle?" Emma interrupted. It was lying on its side, like a beached whale. As she watched, Choco ran over and sniffed it, which made it teeter slightly, its metallic squawk sounding pained.

"It's fine," Renaldo replied, almost as painfully. "I decided lifting it was a fruitless exercise." He raised one brow in Choco's direction. "Until the dog was curbed."

Emma's nod was remorseful. "Nicky, Harley, Emma," she said, pointing, in quick introduction. She knew it was far too late for the polite exercise, but the situation had somehow gotten out of hand.

Story of my life. "Sorry about all this," she went on, waving her hands in the attitude of one who was suffering from a major case of frustrated exasperation. At her side, Nicky chuckled again, which annoyed Emma further. Emma marched over to the man's bike and tried to heft it off the

ground. "I'm just sooo sorry," she said again, pained. "If there's anything I can do—?"

"Purely curiosity," Renaldo began. He and Harley joined her, and lifted the motorcycle back onto its tires. "But—" His voice quit and he jumped when Choco offered him a rude sniff.

"*Down, Choco!*" Harley ordered. Choco's front end hit the ground, stayed there for a breath, then took off on springy back legs toward the porch. "Great!" Harley muttered. Maybe it was asking too much, but he'd expected Choco to show *some* rudiments of good behavior. Hell, he'd worked with him on dog obedience long enough.

When Harley saw the scratches on the bike's paint, he recognized how much his own behavior had also been lacking, and lowered his head in embarrassment. "I'll pay for that, of course," he offered gruffly. "Sorry—"

Renaldo ran his fingers over the paint. "Again," he griped.

Harley frowned. "Hey, look! I said I'm—"

"Not you," Renaldo interrupted him. "She's got so much paint on her now she's starting to look chunky."

"Did you dump her?" Harley was nearly moved to pity by that. It was a nice bike. Only a close-up view indicated it had once been nicer.

"Once." Renaldo caught Harley's eye and grinned. "All right—twice. That's all I'll admit to."

Harley took advantage of their brief rapport with a rather abrupt, "Why'd you take that sample?" In his mind, there was no time for subtlety. Before the guy left, Harley wanted an explanation. Emma had arrived after the fact. Harley was willing to bet she had no idea what the guy had been doing.

Renaldo hesitated, and Harley knew he was debating whether to tell him the truth.

"It's unusual," he finally said. He shrugged. "None of my business, really. I tend to notice things like that."

"What sample?" Emma asked.

"From your lawn," Harley told her.

For an instant, Emma looked scared. "New fertilizer," she lied.

Renaldo bowed. "I understand," he said.

Emma stared at him, trying to decipher this overwhelming sense of familiarity. Then, her tension split in a smile. Nobody bowed these days—not unless they were wearing big floppy ears and a fluffy white tail. “I know you!” she exclaimed, extending her hand.

“Oh, good,” Harley murmured.

Renaldo lifted one brow and studied him coolly. “Maybe I should have worn my ears,” he said. “Some people have the discernment of a *Paramecium*.” He handed Emma his business card.

But Harley had figured it out, too. “Better than having the acquisitive habits of a dung beetle,” he said.

Chapter Six

A few minutes later, Emma was still standing by Renaldo's side, gazing up at him intently. It made Harley wanted to grit his teeth.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you came back!"

She sounded so relieved, and so enthused by The Rabbit's presence that Harley's hasty throat-clearing came out more like a growl.

Renaldo heard it. Harley quickly averted his face and busied himself with attempting to minimize the scratch marks on The Rabbit's paint.

Why did I bother coming back? Up till now, Harley had been able to vindicate his presence—at least to himself—by recalling his valorous conduct of the night before. But, after Choco's little escapades, and Emma's effusive greeting to Rabbit Man, he was beginning to see things differently.

Emma neither wanted nor needed him—Harley D. Chalmers—here. He was an unwelcome addition to an already difficult situation. His badge stood between him and any friendship they may have developed. Usually, this distancing factor was a welcome thing—protection against getting involved. But it wasn't Harley who was in need of protection right now, and it was readily apparent that his presence was more of a threat to Emma's well-being than an asset, at least as far as her friends were concerned.

Worse: a ticking bomb, which could explode into jail time at any moment.

Rub me the wrong way, and I might just blow.

It hadn't been that many years since Harley had been a civilian. He knew as well as any of them that his uniform designated him a different species. Not that he was wearing it tonight, but he might as well have been. He suspected even Rabbit Man knew he was a cop.

Of course, he thought derisively, I've done so much to offset the illusion!

If he were to be honest about it, Emma had actually ousted Forsby on her own. Maybe he'd inspired her a little, in the fighting-back department, but Forsby hadn't exactly been intimidated by

Harley Chalmers' threats. Emma could handle it, just like she handled her rats, he thought, a trace of admiration in his quickly averted glance. She had to be one of the sanest people he'd met, considering the provocation she'd endured. Hell, she had rats, Jock, ghosts, Jock, neighbors, Jock, to put up with, and she'd weathered it all. Weird as it seemed, she'd also managed to retain her social standing with her friends, despite her problems.

She doesn't need me. If truth be told, he was no deterrent to her rats, her ghosts, or even Jock.

And I came close to chasing off the person she really did want to see.

Time to go. "Choco, come!" Harley lunged for Choco's collar, but the beast had had too many dog-minutes of freedom. He wasn't about to give up now. "Dammit, Chocbrain!" Harley murmured.

Choco heard the latter, recognizing it for frustrated surrender. With a bounce and a teasing bark, he took off so fast, you'd think he really *was* after a rabbit.

Renaldo was watching. "Do you have any kids?" he asked Harley, as Choco's retreating rear disappeared around the corner of the house.

Harley shook his head.

"Good," Renaldo muttered. At Harley's expression, he held up his hands defensively.

"Merely an observation," he said.

"And a conclusion," Emma retorted, a suggestion of anger in her voice.

Harley found it very gratifying.

"Tsk, tsk," Nicky chided, her eyes on Renaldo. "I would have expected more from a trained observer."

Emma threw out, "He's a parapsychologist," as though that explained his lapse.

"More madness than method?" Renaldo asked, a glint of humor in his eyes. He told Harley, "It means I have even less credibility than you do." His eyes focused on Choco, as he tore back into view. Renaldo remarked with some asperity, "And that's saying a lot."

Harley met his eyes, and he knew Renaldo was gauging his reaction. "One of those 'psi' guys, huh?" he grunted, uncomfortably aware that if Renaldo was a rabbit, Harley Chalmers was acting very much like a baboon. He shrugged it off and studied The Rabbit with the same intensity with which the man was not-so-secretly examining him. It was one of those muscle-flexing moments, and they both

knew it. Harley's lips twitched. "Must need a lot of credentials to offset a profession like that." He considered the rabbit gig and cleared his throat pointedly. "*Both* your professions."

He could have kicked himself when he saw the expression on Nicky's face. She was laughing, but Harley didn't think Emma would find it so funny. He glanced at her.

Emma's eyes were bright with amusement. "PhD in psychology," she told Harley. "Will that do?"

"About as credible as mycology," he retorted. He'd done some checking of his own. She had a PhD in mycology, and she'd been doing research at Biopath for over eight years.

Nicky snorted with amusement, but Emma, looking past her, gave a sudden gasp.

Harley reacted, instinctively placing himself between her and the blackness beyond. His, "What's up, Emma?" was barely audible.

"That," Emma murmured. Her finger pointed shakily toward Choco, and the shaggy Afghan Hound wrestling with him on the grass. Choco's mock growl might have been intimidating to the other dog, if it weren't for his wildly wagging tail.

Nicky's eyes dilated, her fingers splaying over pale lips. "Oh, God!" she murmured.

"Choco!" Harley bellowed. "You're gonna do *damage!*" Afghans were so lightweight—almost fragile—that Choco would crunch his playmate if he wasn't careful.

"Don't think I've ever seen an Afghan Hound," Renaldo remarked. "Quite a rare breed."

"Rarer than you realize," Nicky whispered, a trace of awe in her voice.

Emma patted her leg in traditional dog-calling style. It was as natural as the quick whistle which came from her lips. How many times had she performed these same gestures in this very yard, during the brief time she and Studley had spent here?

The Afghan stopped wrestling with Choco, wagged its tail, and then—tongue still lolling—vanished in the blink of an eye.

Emma dropped to her knees, and Choco bounded over, to eagerly lick her face. She patted him absently, her eyes focused on the spot where the Afghan had been.

"That was Studley," she told them, her lips curving in a sad smile. "He's buried right under that tree."

* * * * *

Emma invited them in. There really wasn't anything else to do, and she felt so shaken she didn't have much composure left. Besides, she knew Nicky was going to insist on both the shelter of four walls, and as much company as they could muster. If Emma had been rattled by Studley's appearance, Nicky was positively quivering—she was doing that huddled thing, arms wrapped around herself and involuntary shivers striking when she least expected it. She kept throwing apologetic glances at Emma, as though she knew she should be stauncher than this, but she just couldn't help it.

For her part, Emma was embarrassed, mortified, appalled. Nicky and Renaldo had both had a demo now, but Nicky, at least, would be wondering how bad things were going to get before they got better. She'd known Emma eight years, and was familiar with her paranormal problems, of course, but thus far, she'd only experienced the rats. Rat invasions were no preparation for the walking dead.

Emma looked at her. Nicky's legs were wobbling so much Renaldo practically had to carry her in the door.

No preparation at all. Nicky was also wondering, no doubt, if they were going to be overrun with as many ghosts as they usually were rats.

Emma sensed Renaldo's eyes on her then, and guessed that her semi-composure was giving her away.

I should be a quivering mass of gooseflesh, too.

"I need to go," she whispered.

It won't be open," Nicky retorted, her voice quavery. "Thursday. They're open only for groups." She gave Emma a trace of a smile. "See? I was prepared, for all contingencies."

"Except seeing Studley in the yard."

"Yeah," Nicky agreed, with attempted lightness. "That one threw me. 'Death to life' may be fine from a religious perspective," she continued, through white lips, "but I'm not as ready as I thought for the consequences."

Harley was listening. Emma wanted to "go", and he wondered about her destination. At first, he'd thought she meant the obvious, and he'd been prepared to escort her to the bathroom door, then stand with his back turned should she need it. Now he was confused. Did Emma want to go to church?

It seemed a reasonable reaction, given what they'd seen. "Where to?" he asked kindly.

It only occurred to him afterwards that she might want to hit a bar. God knows, he'd like a drink right now, too, but if Emma were to hit the bottle every time she had an "episode", she'd be dead drunk half the time. No, somehow he didn't think it had anything to do with alcohol. Besides, none of bars he knew were "only open to groups" on Thursdays.

Out of character.

Given the little you know about her? She certainly didn't play by any rules he recognized.

He watched her. *No, not a bar.* Emma had something else in mind. What, he couldn't begin to guess. One thing was certain: if he knew this woman long enough, everything within his own mind would be thoroughly shattered. All his logic, to say nothing of his hold on reality.

He noticed Renaldo was being unusually quiet, given the circumstances. Anyone normal would have been gasping, or griping, or blithering, or quaking in his shoes like Nicky, or demanding an explanation. *Not Renaldo.* Harley found it excessively irritating at a tense moment like this. It meant The Rabbit was playing Mr. Psychology now—observing all their behavior.

"Enough with the assessments already," Harley told the other man curtly. "It's not the humans you need to assess; it's the ghosts."

"More than the one?" Renaldo lifted one brow. Harley had already decided it was a habit with this man—a habit he didn't like. *The Superior Being, judging all his inferiors...*

Harley felt a sudden urge to drop his own qualifications casually into the conversation. He had a master's in criminology. Not a doctorate, but he wasn't exactly illiterate, either.

He restrained himself with an effort. All evening he'd been "qualifying" in gross stupidity. No sense in making it worse.

Especially since Renaldo was nodding wisely now—another habit Harley decided he didn't like. "I'll need to bring over some equipment," Rabbit Man was telling Emma calmly, "and there's a questionnaire I'd like you to fill out—maybe some tests I'd like to conduct, if that's all right with you?" There was a glint of excitement in his eyes that he couldn't quite suppress. "I might have to bring my team..." he cleared his throat "... of qualified researchers in, to help with verification."

"How will that help?" Harley asked. "We're not talking about confirming a presence here—"

we're talking about getting rid of it.”

Renaldo lowered his head so they couldn't see his face. “If Emma feels threatened by the dog, we can attempt to do something about it—”

Nicky cut him off with a quick, “The dog's the least of her worries. I think you should go after the man!”

Renaldo looked up quickly. “What man?” Again, there was that excited glint in his eyes. This time, his enthusiasm was unmistakable.

* * * * *

Emma sighed. She really hated admissions like this to people she didn't know. She needed this man's help, yes, but at the moment, his ghoulish excitement wasn't making revelation any easier. Somehow, she hadn't expected him to be as thrilled by his parapsychological exploits as she was by fungal discoveries in her lab.

It's not normal, she thought, looking at him askance.

Normal? Who are you to judge?

“What man?” he repeated, a hint of eager impatience in his tone.

Emma forced herself to meet his eyes. “The one who tried to kill me,” she said.

A few minutes later—confession over—Emma was feeling raw, as though she'd blurted some deep, dark secret and was now open to metaphysical retribution. The Rabbit was hooked on this stuff, and no matter how disciplined, she didn't think he'd easily let her revelations go. She just didn't know whether she was ready to face his “team” with her problem.

He doesn't even know about the rats.

The last made her face flush with embarrassment. What if she'd merely made herself an object of study—the subject of a scientific paper? Would Renaldo be able to protect her identity? Would his team even bother?

Relax, Emma. He's done thousands of consultations. There are bound to be some cases far more bizarre than yours. Besides, he can't print anything without your permission. He wouldn't want to jeopardize his own credibility, either.

He was doing the objective thing right now—jotting down notes in a small notebook, all the

while attempting to conceal his eagerness to get this “investigation” underway.

“Coffee?” she asked. It was the last thing in the world she felt like doing, and it showed in her face.

“We’ll go out for it,” Harley assured her. “After he’s finished taking notes.” The last held a derisive tone, and Emma hid a nervous smile as she watched the changing expressions on Harley’s face. Apparently, he’d designated himself her defender, whether she liked it or not. It surprised her that, for the moment at least, she really didn’t mind. Between Studley’s reappearance, and her brief but frightened admissions about Forsby, she felt reluctant to deal with much more tonight.

“I think you’re guilty of prejudice,” Renaldo told them. His tone was mild, but he closed the small notebook with a firm snap.

Ghost Defender, Harley thought. *God help us if we defile the ectoplasm.*

“Many times, people’s fear will exacerbate what really happened,” The Rabbit lectured. “You know,” he explained, “‘magnify’ an event.”

Harley donned a dumb, absorbed look.

Despite his obvious irritation, Renaldo’s lips twitched. “Different interpretation, different story. Ghosts want attention. They’re not out for blood.” He smiled. “It wouldn’t do them a whole lot of good, now, would it?”

Harley sniggered rudely. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Rabbit Man was actually trying to humor them—had practically accused Emma of exaggeration. His anger flared and he glared Renaldo’s smile down.

Renaldo opted for a calm and collected head nod, which annoyed Harley even more. What made it worse was his suspicion Rabbit Man knew it.

“Some dead guy comes strolling into the house, tries to strangle Emma, here, and you accuse her of ‘exaggerating?’” Harley’s tone dropped to a deadly quiet. “Maybe, even, *condone* his actions?”

Renaldo marveled that Harley’s calm voice could sound so much more deadly than his own. *Amazing....*

Aloud, he said peaceably, “There’s no need to condone it. Usually, a reasonable expression of irritation will do the trick. You’re forgetting, Harley, that all ghosts were, and for the most part, still

are, human. They'll respond to a polite request—*just like anyone else.*”

So, mind your manners, Chalmers. Harley would have laughed, but this was territory he had a far better handle on than The Rabbit, despite the other man's PhD. He worked with the dregs of society every day. *“Polite”, my ass.*

Granted, many of the dregs had reasons for their descent into antisocial behavior, but in the end, each person made a choice. Evil might be, as Emma had suggested, a predisposition, but it still wasn't born in a person—it was made, by conscious decisions. “Not all people are polite,” Harley retorted, almost flippantly. “I'm a cop. I ought to know.” The Rabbit's rather pointed nod of agreement might have been frustrating, if Harley hadn't found it so amusing. Clearly, the man didn't approve of policemen. It may even have been more specific than that. It could be the man didn't approve of Harley D. Chalmers.

Harley didn't let it sway him. He was accustomed to disapproval. It went with the badge. “Some make bad—you might even call them ‘wicked’—choices.” He plunked down in a chair. “A lot of times it's a power play, but that's not why one of these fiends chops off fingers, blasts out brains or does his daily disemboweling. Call it a ‘personality flaw’ in their make-up, but—” He held up a hand as Renaldo opened his mouth. “—*don't* give them the glory of calling them psychotic, or blaming their misguided youths.” His eyes met Renaldo's, and his voice became a growl. “Some people are evil because they *enjoy* it. No anger, no reason to blame anyone else. They get off on screams, the shriller the better.” Harley turned to Emma. “Show him your neck.”

Emma frowned. She didn't like being given orders, even though she knew Harley was trying to make a point.

Harley read the irritation in her face, and squeezed out, through stiff lips: “Please.”

Emma nodded, a little curtly, and pulled down the collar of the turtleneck. Forsby's finger marks were black smudges, outlined in green and yellow.

“Not all people are reasonable,” Harley said. “Not all ghosts are, either.”

Renaldo's nostrils flared, but his voice was calm. He was clearly attempting to make up for Harley's lack of objectivity with some sound reasoning. Just as clearly, he was having trouble phrasing his doubts without creating offence. “Manifestations of our own fears can sometimes be

reflected in physical injury—”

Nicky, who’d been silent throughout, now leaned over to whisper in Emma’s ear. “Did you get that, Emma?” she said with asperity. “Psychokinesis. He’s suggesting *you* did it to *yourself*.” She didn’t bother whispering the last. She looked expectantly at Harley. “I say, fill him with lead.”

Renaldo lifted one eyebrow. “Vicious, aren’t you?”

Nicky smiled sweetly. “It’s the way we treat ‘rabbits’ around here.”

A flicker of surprise showed in Renaldo’s eyes. His last visit must have been a major topic for discussion. Even the newcomers knew who he was.

“Not funny,” Emma retorted. “Think about it: he could be right. Maybe I did do this.”

“Of course, he’s right,” Harley said. All eyes turned his way. “In taking a rational approach. Not that I agree with his assessment.” He tilted his head, his smile more like a smirk. “She didn’t do it to herself, Rabbit Man, unless she’s a hypnotist, too.”

“‘Too’?” Renaldo repeated.

Harley frowned. With this guy, you had to watch everything you said. “*I saw* Forsby’s fingers at her throat.” He looked apologetically at Emma. “What’s worse is, I think he only did it because I told him I didn’t like threats.”

Renaldo looked confused. “I don’t get it. You think he went after her to get back at you? Why? Did you know him?” He looked from him to her and back again, his expression silently querying their relationship.

Harley didn’t elaborate on their relationship, but when it came to Forsby he was open to the point of being blunt. “Last year, I put Forsby’s father away for his murder. If Emma had died last night, I would have been the only one in her house at the time.”

Renaldo stood there, silently digesting this new information.

Harley could guess what was going through his head: could the policeman be responsible? If not for her injuries, then for providing this particular spirit with the means to enter? Guilt was a powerful motivator. *If Harley suspected he’d made an error, in prosecuting the father...*

Nicky, meanwhile, had placed an arm protectively around Emma’s shoulders. She felt abnormally exposed, with so much dark house at her back. If she was going to play Emma’s backup,

she couldn't help but wish there was someone to cover *her* back, too.

When they'd talked this over with Dale and Chang, Nicky had thought she had a good understanding idea regarding what she was getting into, but Harley's words had scared her. She'd clicked on his admissions, much as Renaldo had. Could Harley, with his big gun and giant dog, be (at least partly) responsible? Hell, if Emma, with her almost naive approach to existence, could lure in ghosts and rats, why not Harley, with his self-proclaimed experience of evil?

Nicky's lips twitched as she considered how weird their conversation would have been, given other circumstances, or with different companions. She knew too much about the paranormal, and had known Emma too long, though, to retain much in the way of doubt or skepticism.

Rats. Ghosts. Evil.

Gooseflesh danced down her forearms, as the hair on her nape rose to the occasion. "Sounds like there's a solution," she proposed to the others, all the while fighting to control her wayward shivers. She waited for Harley to respond, but apparently he hadn't grasped the obvious. Her pointed stare became piercing. "Take a hike," she suggested, strongly. "Emma's got enough trouble. She doesn't need you stirring things up."

Emma shook her head. "It's gone beyond that, Nix," she murmured. "He—Forsby—showed up *before* Harley did."

Renaldo heard it and frowned. There was no hysteria or skepticism in her voice. This was far from her first psychic episode, dammit! The degree of malevolence involved, and the intensity of that "hands-on" visit, hinted at some kind of demonic influence. Definitely the kind of case he usually turned over to someone else.

For a moment, he seriously considered it. He folded his arms and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his gaze unfocused. When he finally lifted his eyes, they stared directly into Nicky's.

Emma's friend. She was scared—he could see the gooseflesh on her forearms—but she wasn't turning tail and running.

Renaldo sighed, and offered her the trace of a smile. "It seems we may have a problem," he said, mildly. *There. It was out.* He'd more or less committed himself.

And excitement took over. Most of his consultations had involved far more nebulous

entities—not dead dogs who romped in the yard for all to see, or responded to their owner’s calls.

And the man?

Renaldo couldn’t believe his luck. He realized he was grinning like a fool, and quickly schooled his face to cool detachment.

He thought he was managing it pretty well until he felt the twinge in his lower lip. He’d been nibbling on it—a bad habit whenever he was nervous or impatient. He tucked his teeth back inside his lip, but a glance at Nicky made him wonder whether, for an instant, at least, he’d looked like the rabbit persona he was trying so hard to play down.

Renaldo couldn’t realize that to Harley, at least, no matter how expressionless his face, his restlessly shifting feet were a dead giveaway.

Harley said nothing, though, about his own reservations regarding The Rabbit. He’d heard Emma release the pent-up breath she’d been holding, and a quick glance at her face told him the story. He’d seen that expression a time or two when he’d helped out on a Search and Rescue. Her relief was transparent—like that of a stranded climber for whom rescue had finally arrived. Renaldo might not be able to do a damn thing, but if nothing else, Emma would have a confessor who specialized in peculiar problems.

Harley nodded his approval. Whatever Renaldo’s motivation, Emma needed him. Besides, the man had guts. “It seems,” he agreed, just as mildly, “you may be right.”

It was Harley who contrived where to go next. Emma had mentioned coffee, but he’d be damned if he was going to let her make it. They needed wind-down time, and that wasn’t going to happen here, even if he were the one to administer the caffeine. “Coffee shop,” he ordered. He’d sort out destinations afterwards, but right now, they needed to clear some heads.

Beginning with my own.

Fear might be good motivation for running, but it corrupted all the logic circuits. *Not conducive to clear thinking.*

The Rabbit, of course, was balking. Harley could only conclude he wanted to stay where all the action was.

If he only knew, he’d be chasing Emma around with a video camera.

Harley hoped Emma realized what she was letting herself in for. He prodded Rabbit Man with a pointed, “My car—unless, of course, you’d rather take your bike?” *Surely*, Renaldo would know better than to question Emma any more right now.

Surely, I’m not going to let him.

* * * * *

Renaldo was so enthused he forgot to act superior or detached. “No, thanks,” he said, eyes gleaming.

He looked curiously at Nicky, but she quickly disabused him of that notion. “Don’t even go there, Rabbit Man,” she said. “I have about as much involvement in this as you do. The difference being,” she smiled, “Emma asked for your help, and I ‘volunteered’ mine.”

“‘Volunteered’ meaning what I think it does?”

Nicky nodded, but her smile faded. “I told her I was coming for the weekend—and didn’t give her a choice.”

She shivered, and Renaldo knew it wasn’t feigned. There was a bleak, frightened look in the woman’s eyes. She was terrified.

“You’d be better out of it,” he said abruptly, surprising even himself.

Nicky sighed, and when she spoke again, it was with a certain hesitancy. “You take your work seriously, don’t you?”

“I try to keep it professional. There’s frequently a resonance, EM flux, or temperature variation that can be measured during an event. Verification’s scientific—or, at least, as scientific as we can make it.”

“Then I don’t think I should say too much,” Nicky retorted, a trace of wry amusement to her voice. “I don’t want to impair your objectivity.” She tilted her head and looked up at him. “At the same time, I need to be honest with you. Harley may have had some effect on all this, but it’s unlikely he’s the source.” She sighed again, thoughtfully. “*His* effect is more likely to be directional than magnifying. I just don’t know,” she admitted, frustrated. “Emma claims she saw the bastard first.”

Renaldo nodded, struggling to retain a look of wisdom. He’d been so tempted there to deliberately misconstrue things, and had to bite his lips to refrain from asking her, “‘Bastard’ as in

‘Harley’?’”

It made him realize how badly he was going about this. *Questionnaire and interview first. I don't even know their last names.*

They had a mystery here, but it was still recent enough to be fairly easy to track. On the down side, it was also recent enough to be couched in grief, over Forsby's death. Still, if you had to have a case with dark overtones, it would be better to have it recent rather than archaic. It might give them a shot at finding the cause of the disturbance—maybe even at dislodging the entity. Forsby must have reasons for his violent reactions. Something had set him off, and they needed to find out what it was.

Harley. He's enough to put anyone off.

Renaldo rolled his eyes. He was allowing circumstances—like my scratched and newly dented Vulcan, he thought grumpily—to influence him.

Interview her ASAP, he put on his mental list. He glanced surreptitiously at Harley. Alone.

Renaldo needed to know whether she was into anything esoteric, like séances or Ouija boards, or if she'd experimented with black magic, witchcraft, or automatic writing. If Emma or someone close to her had been playing around with rituals, she may have accidentally channeled in something much darker than a wayward spirit. There were a few cases he'd encountered where the entity was demonic and only someone with experience in exorcism had been capable of dealing with it. In those instances, it wasn't a simple matter of determining what a lost soul wanted or why he was demanding attention, but discerning lies from half-truths, in order to send the spirit on its way, whether it wanted to leave or not.

Not my area of expertise. And, no matter how much he wanted to help, professionalism would demand that he gracefully bow out. He made a mental vow, though, not to abandon Emma before he'd found someone else to help her, even if *he* was unable to.

He gave a mental sigh, realized he was investing too much decisiveness into the process before he'd even conducted an interview. *Defeating myself before I start.*

He was also chewing his lip again. Renaldo nodded absently and a little belatedly in response to Nicky's comments, while he mentally moved on to cataloguing the equipment they'd need.

Wait till Merlin hears about this one!

Renaldo realized he was screwing this up yet again, and forced himself to focus on Nicky's lips. He lowered his eyes, but then they were on her breasts. He swallowed hard, concealed it in a nod, and made himself look somewhere past her right shoulder, instead.

Concentrate. His eyes flicked again.

Her face, you fool.

He was back on her lips, but at least his ears were tuned in now.

Her next words told Renaldo a lot about her loyalties. Nicky knew Emma Rathburn well, had guessed what she might be in for, yet had still chosen to involve herself. "With Emma," she said ruefully, "things can sometimes go unexplained."

Renaldo considered that, at the same time considering Nicky's role in this. She hadn't professed any interest in paranormal activity, nor did she seem to feel anything more personal toward Emma than a long-standing friendship. She had neither Renaldo's enthusiasm nor Harley's more blatant—bulldog-like, he thought derogatorily—interest.

Renaldo's eyes fixed on Emma. Harley was unceremoniously bundling her into a jacket, and urging her out the door. "Coffee," was his only explanation, and he was suggesting—strongly—that they use his car. "So I can drive us all mad," was his answer to the question on Renaldo's face. "Though, some of us have a shorter distance to go than others." He hesitated—*waiting for an argument*, Renaldo suspected. When it didn't come, Harley tried to prompt one. "Sure you don't want to take your bike?" he asked.

"I can drive," Emma had offered then. Renaldo interpreted it as an effort to smooth out the tension Harley was generating.

"Yep," Harley had told her—*dismissively*, Renaldo decided—"Know that." The man wore an irritatingly superior smile as he took the woman's arm and led her through the door and out to his car. Opening his car door and guiding her in that direction really didn't give Emma much opportunity for refusal, either, unless she wanted to balk at the gate. Renaldo had a brief and ludicrous vision of the woman with hands and feet braced on the door frame, refusing to be budged.

The little scenario made up Renaldo's mind. If he wanted an unbiased study, he would have to lose the policeman. The man was too likely to object, intrude, direct, or interject, if he didn't agree

with Renaldo's methods. Harley had far too many opinions about all of this, especially where Emma was concerned.

The mastiff, guarding his prize.

Renaldo opened Harley's rear door a little stiffly, and gestured Nicky inside. The poor woman had barely seated herself when Harley's more intelligent half came bounding round the side of the house. Choco was obviously panicked, because he thought his master had forgotten him.

Which he had—Renaldo read it in his face. Harley's alarm was ludicrous, and at least equal to Choco's as the giant tore across the grass, making bigger divots in the already torn-up surface as he went. The dog, tongue lolling sideways out of his mouth, leapt into Renaldo's would-be seat, and proceeded to lick Nicky's face. She flailed and gargled as if desperate to come up for air.

Renaldo tried yanking the dog's collar, but Choco wouldn't budge. He was taking no chances on being left behind once more. So, Renaldo went around to the other door, opened it, and tugged Nicky out. If anything, his posture became stiffer when he realized the gargling noise was laughter. Nicky was laughing so hard she was incoherent.

"Now, see," Renaldo told Harley through the open window, "the woman's hysterical." At his words, Nicky's eyes met Emma's and they both went into whoops of unrestrained hilarity. Nicky's face was shiny with dog slobber, and there was a line of white foam on her jaw. Her hair in front was stringy and more than a little soggy.

"Down, Choco!" Harley yelled, as the big dog tried to clamber over the seat, to sit with Harley.

Hysteria. Reaction. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. Renaldo couldn't hang onto his irritation. He burst out laughing, too.

Still chuckling, he took Nicky's hand and propelled her toward his motorcycle, never realizing that he was being every bit as controlling and presumptuous as Harley had been with Emma. Renaldo handed Nicky the spare helmet, gunned the engine, and roared off, down the street.

If the policeman intended to meet them for coffee, he'd have to work at it a little.

Inside the car, Harley recognized the challenge for what it was. He grinned at Emma, automatically shoving Choco's big head aside as the dog took a tongue-swipe at his face. "Guess he

decided to take the bike after all," he said.

Chapter Seven

There was no way Renaldo was going to let this opportunity be blown more than it had already. His most important job, at this point, was to get these people to confide in him. It was the part of his work that always made him feel a little like dirt—as though he were preparing to violate some basic trust.

Lay it all on the line so I can find you lacking?

But if they wanted help, he required objectivity, and he needed their openness—their ungarnished admissions regarding what they'd seen.

Yeah, Renaldo. He knew what he felt like doing—and it wasn't some dryly jotted sequencing of events. Once away from Emma's house, he wanted to sit down and discuss what he'd seen—to babble excitedly about how bizarre the sight of that Afghan Hound had been. Shared experiences did that to a man—and illogical as it might be, Renaldo was hard-pressed not to operate on his instincts, and be upfront with these people. Only the realization that it would be stupid kept him from acting on it. He never could tolerate labels like “stupid” and “idiot”, and he could tolerate them even less if someone was applying the label to him. He had no doubt Max and Merlin wouldn't hesitate to label him worse, if he blew this case.

He caught a glimpse of himself in his side mirror. He was wearing a giant jackass smile, and looked more like a buffoon than he did with the rabbit costume.

Am I ever a geek! He could wear studs and spikes and dark glasses to go with his leathers, but he'd still be a nerd. There was no way around it.

His best approach, given the circumstances, would be to find a way to get these people to accept, then ignore, him. Let him be part of the furniture, the background; an impartial observer.

Sure, he thought, with a wry grin. Far too late for that. They already knew what he was, and Harley, at least, recognized his passion for the paranormal. Besides, Renaldo wasn't that good an actor, and with Nicky here, a perverse part of his personality firmly refused to be ignored. He'd acted the way he had as a kid, when he'd done wheelies and skateboard stunts in front of Kate Braesure's

house. Only, in this instance, he'd lectured Nicky instead—making himself sound like some kind of erudite dickhead.

Only to impress her, he thought, cringing with embarrassment, and very aware of her hands grasping his waist. *You did that, all right—impressed upon her that you're an arrogant prick.*

He'd been overreacting because they'd seen him in his rabbit suit, and those who hadn't—namely Nicky—had heard about it. Normally, he took a perverse pleasure in the fact everyone misjudged him on the basis of his bizarre garb; underrated the power of the rabbit, which gave him plenty of opportunity for observation. Today, though, the rabbit costume had seemed majorly detrimental to his social success.

He sighed. A geek, and a lousy actor, too. The only way he could pull off a role was by dressing in a bunny suit, so they couldn't see his face.

It was harder to admit that it was also likely to be the reason he'd never made it very far as a clinical psychologist. His emotions showed through too clearly. He might as well have been wearing a sign that said, "Disapproving", "Well-said", or "You expect me to believe that?".

Nicky had certainly had no trouble reading him tonight—he'd been able to tell as much by the glint in her eyes.

Any more than Harley had. The only one who seemed oblivious—*thank Freud!*—was Emma Rathburn.

Harley beat him to the coffee shop, which was a miracle, given that he was driving a car rather than a bike.

Devious bastard.

Clearly, the local police were conversant with all the shortcuts.

Smarting pride had a lot to do with Renaldo's reaction. As Harley led the way toward the restaurant, Nicky moved to join Emma. Renaldo strolled slowly behind them, listening to a non-existent caller on his cell phone. He knew it was childish, but rather than analyze the hell out of his stupidity, he simply excused himself by labeling his little lagging ploy as "observation"—the truth being, there was no way he was going to let the policeman think he'd won. If Renaldo was dawdling, it was because he was just too damned busy to bestir himself to anything hastier.

It paid off in a way he hadn't expected—but one which made his skin do that nonscientific fleshy crawl once more. And, if he hadn't dawdled, he would have missed it.

Or, maybe you wouldn't, Renaldo thought later, when he was being practical once more.

Maybe this one had your name on it.

At first it was merely background clunking noises, which he ignored the way society had inured him to. Extraneous noises, but perfectly natural among the security-conscious. Car door locks being released electronically. No biggie.

It wasn't until the clunks and bleeps intensified that Renaldo realized he'd been hearing them for at least half a minute. Emma and Nicky strolled on, oblivious to the activity half a parking lot away.

Where Renaldo was. Where the man-who-would-be-ghost-king perambulated, shivering in his shorts. No faking a phone call now. He was having enough trouble faking bravery. His toes were twitching, and it was an itch which traveled up legs fixed on run. It took a conscious effort to puppet them to walk mode, so he wouldn't further incite the predators.

Don't—

Don't what? Run over me? Mangle me?!

All those weighty rows of mismatched vehicles.

They're after me.

Stupid, he scoffed. *An electrical disturbance, nothing more.* He glanced at the yellow-orange lights on the parking lot stanchions for confirmation.

It didn't help. They weren't even blinking.

Okay—magnetic disturbance. Electromagnetic. But it was a feeble attempt at rationalization. His knees were shaking.

Keep it cool. Don't let 'em know.

If his pounding heart didn't give him away, those volcano-like clouds of breath surely would. He looked like a chugging steam engine.

There was no denying the “event” was escalating. Things were definitely getting worse. Each crunching step along the asphalt was accompanied by clunks and clatters, as the beasts to each side

squawked, blinked their hazard lights, and generally, went through whatever unlocking sequence was peculiar to their breed.

They're gonna get me.

Ridiculous. Preposterous.

But his objections lacked strength, even in his head.

These are chunks of metal and plastic, with no claims to sentience.

Somehow, all he could think was how lacking in heart and conscience were these metallic beasts. They had no central structure to appeal to, or reason with. All those tons of metal awaiting only the twist of a key, the engaging of a gear.

Stupid as it might have appeared to the others, Renaldo felt more vulnerable than he ever had in his life. In those few moments, when his disorganized thinking processes refused to find a white-light safety sheath to focus on, he was a muddled mass of nerves. Fear addled him to the point where he couldn't think—and then, couldn't move. For the first time in years, his brain was insisting on replaying the past.

His fear of cars was one of his own psychological quirks, and one he liked to claim he'd overcome. As a kid, he'd once witnessed an accident on the road.

Renaldo had been ten—more bravado than brains. That went for his friends, too. He and Sam had walked, run, bashed and bolted their way to school together, every day.

Until the day when Sam had been crunched, under a car. They'd both dashed across the street, a chicken race to beat the oncoming traffic, but Sam had missed. In seconds, he'd gone from an invulnerable unit of cheerful insouciance, to punctured flesh and leaking fluid. Renaldo had stood there, calling him—yelling his name, over and over. Then, he'd screeched at him, while the paramedics did their work, until somebody—he never knew who—dragged him away. He'd wanted to kick Sam's ass because he was stupid—because he'd let himself get hit, and now he was wrecked. He'd wrecked their day, and he wouldn't be there to flick a finger at in the classroom, or draw those dumb comic pictures which would make them both dissolve in wheezing secret laughter. No one to toss a football with, or to stand with against the dumb farts who'd always threaten them at lunch. Sam wouldn't be able to go skateboarding that afternoon, or sneak candy Sam's mom didn't want him to

eat.

Or dodge cars in Myers Lot.

That fuckin' Sam had wrecked everything! Renaldo tried to hold on to the anger—to make it chase away the image of crushed Sam on the road. Sam was there, though, every time Renaldo closed his eyes. And the thought kept replaying in his head: *I never knew skin ripped like that.*

Dead Sam was part of his life for nearly a month. He was the red hash behind Renaldo's lids when the morning sun landed on his face. At night, Sam's white fat layer peeked out at him from torn skin as he dozed off, and Sam's laughter mocked his metallic murderers, even while he replayed his stupid death over and over. The worst had been the After-Sam at the scene, but the sounds of his demise—the screaming of the tires, that thud-thump which had no meaning till Renaldo had turned around....

In his dreams, it wasn't the tires that were screaming.

It was Sam.

Renaldo hadn't known how to excise Sam from his life. All he knew was that he hated him for making everyone around him bleed. That's the way it felt—like Sam had ripped them all into pieces, the way he'd ripped his skin. Sam's mom kept doing the brave thing which made Renaldo want to throw up. Renaldo's own mom said he had to go over there.

Why? So, Sam's mom could fuss over him and pretend Sam wasn't dead?

Maybe if she were having the same dreams Renaldo Parrish was, she would have been glad Sam was gone—maybe even wished him further away so she wouldn't have to think about him any more. Renaldo wanted to tell her, but somehow, when she smiled at him, there was too much Sam in her, and it always seemed—for an infinitesimal lapse of time—like Sam was back.

Then came the night, and Renaldo knew it was going to be one of the worst. He'd put on a video he didn't want to see, but when his mother poked her head in, to tell him to get ready for bed, he'd pretended to be absorbed. New Mom didn't say anything—merely closed the door quietly. He knew she hoped he'd fall asleep in front of the TV. Old Mom would have been herding him and his sister into the bathroom, to make sure their teeth were brushed. New Mom was far too silent, at least as far as Renaldo was concerned, and she never compared him with Sam any more. That ploy of, “I

bet Sam's in bed already", had never worked, even if she thought it had. These days, he hated his mom, too, because she wasn't normal any more. She seemed to think if she was too harsh, he might find a way to crumble himself to fragments under a car somewhere.

Stupid.

It was when he was at the point of hating everyone that it had happened. Maybe he'd finally reached the emotional dew point where angst triggered a response in his brain, or perhaps—overnight, it seemed—he'd reached the age of reactive mediumship. Some of his brain centers, it appeared, which had never been active before, came suddenly online.

That was the way his older, educated self would explain it years later. The truth was, he needed Sam far more at that moment than he'd ever needed him when he was alive.

So, Sam paid him a visit.

It was a memory Renaldo would never forget. He'd been there, not watching the video but awake—he knew he was awake. He faced sleep with such dread these days that "awake" was his preferred state. He'd fart around his room, watch TV, play computer games, stare at videos—anything, as long as it wasn't something he and Sam always did. The plastic dragon collection and the soldiers sat on the shelves. Renaldo never wanted to touch them again.

He'd turned his head, at movement out the corner of his eye. It was Sam, with all his skin on, playing with the dragons. Renaldo had stared at him, then Sam had beckoned him over, impatiently, the way he always had. Renaldo could almost hear his voice, and in a way, it seemed he did hear his voice talking inside his head. "*Get the hell over here, Weasel!*"

Renaldo's hands were shaking at first, but he played dragons with Sam for the rest of that night. At the end, as the sky was glowing rosy-pink-blue, Sam grinned at him. Later, his mother would ask him, "Was it a peaceful smile?", and Renaldo would shake his head and retort, "Naw. Looked like he was ready to raise hell." His mother had been shocked, but Renaldo had chuckled, and somewhere deep inside, he could feel Sam chuckling, too.

That's where Sam had stayed, from then on. He never visited any more of Renaldo's dreams, and he never again visited Renaldo's room. But, he was there, anyway, in that warm patch in Renaldo's brain—or maybe it was his chest—and both he and Sam knew it.

Later that day, he'd done something for Sam. It was easy, now that he didn't hate him any more. He'd taken his best dragon—the one Sam had always played with and the one he'd always wanted—over to Sam's house. Then he sat down, and munched cookies, and told Sam's mom about Sam's visit. He'd been afraid she might be jealous, or wonder why Sam hadn't visited her instead, so Renaldo explained it to her. "I was hating him," he confessed, "and Sam never liked it when I stayed mad."

She'd never wanted him to be Sam again, and when he told her how Sam was still stuck in his head somewhere, she seemed to understand, and it made her happy. And when Renaldo had come over later, to eat all the cookies she made that Sam never would, she'd always smile, with Sam's smile, and they'd both be satisfied.

Sam's death had crippled him, though. He'd forever after had a fear of cars. Yeah, he'd drive one, ride in one, even own one with big bunny ears, but it didn't mean he liked it. Those metal-fiberglass-plastic boxes had a living presence in Renaldo's mind, like the artificially intelligent robots of futurists' dreams: consequence without conscience. There was no means of reasoning with sequenced response. And, as much as he might try to reason with himself, and view the giants as, simply, tools to serve humanity, he couldn't help his aversion. He remained afraid, and he'd be damned if he'd ask one of his psychology colleagues to convince him otherwise. Truth was, there'd been more than a few hints among his coworkers regarding his choice of "hobby". Vehicular antipathy would only confirm what the jesters already suspected.

"Step away from the car! Step away from the car!"

The bellow from the security system was throaty and guttural; commanding his attention.

They can't think! his panicked mind attempted, even while his Adam's apple lodged midthroat, and his skin flecked in minute moguls. Of all the things which could have been used against him—

They know.

And they're using it against me.

He made himself stop, then. It was the bravest thing he'd ever done—braver than facing Sam in his bedroom—braver than confronting the hundreds of misplaced spirits he'd encountered during

his “career”. His eyes were tearing with terror, but he locked his knees and held himself in place. “I’m not enjoying this,” he began, conversationally. His teeth were chattering, but overall, he thought he was handling it pretty well.

“The biggest thing to remember,” he’d always told his clients, *“is that you’re dealing with people. Sometimes, all your visitor wants is a little attention.”*

These visitors had all of his.

“Maybe we can find a better way to communicate?” he began, tentatively.

The raspy bark of a starter motor, then Vroom! Vroom!

Shit!

White light, white light, white light—

He got it—headlamps in his face. At the same time, an engine gunned into scream mode, and then the tires were screaming, too, as they waited their chance. The car directly ahead shimmied and fishtailed.

“Sam!” Renaldo whispered, through stiff lips. He was caught in his own worst nightmare. Couldn’t scream, couldn’t run, couldn’t even move.

Until someone shoved him, hard, from behind. The blow nearly knocked him off his feet. Renaldo took off, then, and didn’t stop until he’d grabbed Nicky’s and Emma’s arms and yanked them out of that lot. He tugged them in through the restaurant door, pulled the door closed, then let out the pent-up breath he’d been holding.

Made it!

Renaldo couldn’t quite control the shiver which shook him then. Even under the artificial ambience, the mirror tiles showed him a face so white he could have passed for one of his own ghosts.

“What’s wrong?!” Nicky asked, concerned. She glanced back at the lot, searching for some sign of threat. “Muggers?”

Renaldo had regained enough of his senses to consider his answer. He’d played this game before. *Pretend you’re not afraid, and maybe you’ll start to believe it yourself.* If he was lucky, he might even find a way to rationalize what had happened down to something he could handle.

Renaldo sighed, then lowered his head so they couldn’t read his face.

Professional. Don't influence the client.

But, he didn't want in on this one. Warily, his eyes flicked toward the parking lot, and the orange-glazed glare of the streetlamps. Almost as if in response, the headlamps on an old Chevy flickered, then died.

Renaldo's muscles tightened. This one had too much of his name on it. He'd be the world's worst fool if he pursued this—after he'd been so clearly warned.

Nicky took his arm, and his eyes met hers. The woman's concern wasn't feigned. She was genuine, which would make her an easy victim.

Renaldo Rabbit to the rescue. "Muggers," Renaldo repeated, through pallid lips.

Harley came over then, and rapidly did his own assessment. His eyes glinted. "I'll make sure you get back to your bike, all in one piece," he offered.

Renaldo hadn't missed the trace of mockery, and his reply surprised even himself. There were times when atavistic skeptics could be damn useful. His lips quirked in a half-smile, and he bowed his head in Harley's direction. "Any offers of assistance willingly and gratefully accepted," he said.

* * * * *

After they'd returned from the coffee shop, Nicky took one look around Emma's all-too-quiet surroundings, and dug a bottle out of her bag. "Thought I might have to resort to this," she muttered. "We could always go to my house, you know."

"If that's what you want." Emma smirked.

"Not really," Nicky admitted, "but you can tell everyone I offered." She plunked the bottle on the table. "Consider this sedation."

"I wondered why the big bag." Emma grinned. "So unlike you." Examining the label on the bottle, she added wryly, "So's this."

"Four years aged—since the time I bought it, that is. I was going through an 'offer-your-guests-coffee-and-schnapps-stage'." She grinned. "The perfect hostess."

"I don't remember that! How come you never played 'perfect hostess' to me?"

"Because, as you so rudely pointed out, it's unlike me. I kept forgetting." She blew dust off the bottle, and rubbed it proudly with her sleeve. "And then, I just forgot." A smile played across her

lips as her eyes grew distant. “But I always knew there’d come a day.... ”

Emma smirked. “Like this.”

Nicky nodded. “Precisely.”

“A ‘drown-your-fears’ session.”

“Nearly precisely,” Nicky admitted. “What I can only see double can be rationalized away.”

She poured a generous sloshing into their lukewarm coffees from the restaurant.

Emma put her hands on her hips. “At least now I know why you wanted the coffees. I couldn’t figure out why you wanted to stay awake.” She lifted her cardboard cup in salute. “Over the teeth and through the—”

“Stop!” Nicola held up her hand. “Have some class. This is expensive stuff.”

“Okaaay. I’ll try to look classy as I drink out of my *cardboard cup*.”

Half an hour later, Harley crept in quietly through the kitchen door and turned off the whistling teakettle. Then, he settled Nicky down further on the couch, stuffed a throw-pillow under her head, and covered her with a blanket.

He picked up Emma. She wrapped her arms around his neck and, eyes still closed, grinned widely. He gave her a quick, chaste kiss on the top of her head, then made for her bedroom door.

He was halfway there when she went octopus on him—all grabby tentacles.

“Emma! Cut it out!”

It wasn’t going to work. He had a feeling his own sense of fair play wouldn’t hold out against her tiddly determination. With a shake of his head, and a gusty sigh of regret, Harley turned back toward her living room, and kicked two cushions off her living room chairs instead. It might not be the most comfy bed, but it would have to do. Harley didn’t trust her—and he sure as hell didn’t trust himself against her persuasion.

But Emma wasn’t ready to let him go yet. Harley couldn’t help but wonder if, in her drunken stupor, she even realized who was holding her.

“*Stop it!*” he ordered, trying to sound firm and no-nonsense.

She ceased so quickly it scared him. She went limp in his arms, then waited for his worried, “*Emma?*” before giggling and grabbing him again, lifting up his T-shirt and kissing his chest with

loud smacking sounds. “Have some control, Woman!” Harley told her, with a worried glance at Nicky. If she realized Harley had broken in here—even with the best of intentions—she’d convince Emma he was another Jock.

Or worse.

Harley disentangled himself from Emma’s exploring hands and dropped her onto the cushions. When he brought the pillow and blankets from her bedroom, he was careful not to get too close. Emma lunged for him anyway, and when he jumped back she sniffed loudly.

He wasn’t fooled. “No way, Emma,” he said, grinning. “But thanks for trying.”

“G’night, Sir Studley,” she murmured, smiling. “Pleas’nt dreams.” The next moment her breathing had deepened into soft snores.

“Pleasant dreams,” Harley whispered. He headed for the back door, then recalled how Forsby had taken advantage of those extra minutes, before Harley had found his way in. He’d nearly throttled Emma.

Harley shuddered, and gooseflesh traveled down his arms. No chances tonight—not while the ladies were both incapacitated. Choco was on patrol in the yard, and Harley?

He set the alarm on his watch. God knows, the one on his phone was too loud. The last thing he wanted was to get caught. Emma would be sure he was both a *voyeur* and an unprincipled opportunist with invasive tendencies.

The truth was, he was neither, but running damn scared. He’d pulled out the files on the Forsbys, father and son. No matter how many times he’d gone over them, he didn’t see how he could have been wrong, in either his personal verdict, or the one made by the jury. The fact that Emma’s manifestation was Forsby could be coincidence.

The most restless spirit in Curreydale?

Harley didn’t think so. There was something else here, and Harley was afraid he knew what it was.

Terence Forsby had been a nasty piece of work. He’d taken delight in torture and mutilation, and the jury had been half-compelled to acquit his father, Daniel. They would have been more compelled if the senior Forsby hadn’t been implicated in some of his son’s crimes.

And Harley could still remember how he'd felt when Forsby's spirit had first appeared—his impression that the ghost man had been there, all along, biding his time, awaiting his opportunity. It could be that Terence Forsby had hopped the first ectoplasmic transit back to Earth—not because he had unfinished business, as everyone, from Renaldo Rabbit to Emma Rathburn, seemed to think. Harley suspected Forsby's intentions were much more basic than that.

It could be Terence Forsby was back for no better reason than to continue where he'd left off. Torture, mutilation, manipulation, death. If so, it wouldn't be for retribution's sake. No, the younger Forsby's arrival, more than likely, had nothing to do with vengeance at all. His damned spirit had jumped at this opportunity for the same reason he'd always jumped on any weakness, any suggestion of human frailty, any honor-bound civil servant bound by civilized behavior.

Terry Boy was here to raise hell because he enjoyed it.

* * * * *

By the time the first pink tinges outlined the clouds on the horizon, Harley was out the door. He'd turned off his alarm an hour before, then waited impatiently for daylight, all the while nervously aware how close he might be to discovery. Once, Emma had rolled over, giggled, and stretched out an arm toward him in her sleep. He could have sworn she'd said something like “Studley”, but he'd stayed clear. It was enough that she was smiling.

Now, he yawned, bleary-eyed, pushed Choco's big paws off his chest, then ignored the playful nips at his heels as he headed out the gate and off for coffee. He should have known there was no way he'd be able to sleep in Emma's house—not after rat invasions and ghostly threats. He'd had a lot of time to think, and half the time he'd been so pissed-off he would have loved it if Forsby had shown his face. The constraints were off, and Harley could almost look forward to another confrontation. But first, he had to arm himself. As irritating as the prospect seemed, he really needed to have a chat with The Rabbit. There must be some way to protect them all. Garlic, holy water, candles, rosaries—whatever it took, Harley intended to find out, and take precautions.

Renaldo had listened to what they'd said last night, but he'd seemed distracted. *Or maybe*, Harley mused, recalling Renaldo's behavior at the restaurant, *he's just plain scared*. Most of his ghosts were, no doubt, as nebulous as a lightning bug's flicker, and just as long-lasting. The

magnitude of this “event” must have been beginning to sink in by the time they’d hit the coffee house, judging from the man’s frightened reaction. Still, Harley wasn’t sure Renaldo recognized the extent of the threat to Emma. He may have seen the bruises, but Harley didn’t think the man was totally convinced they weren’t self-inflicted.

Maybe he’s scared because he’s convinced they were self-inflicted. His profession might be psychology, but maybe he preferred his disturbed people to be dead, rather than living.

Harley knew he hadn’t imagined the envy in Renaldo’s eyes when they’d described the ghost’s attack. The damned ghost chaser had probably been waiting his whole life to capture just such an incident on camera, and here, he hadn’t even managed to get a picture of the dog. That alone probably made Emma’s case worth pursuing, but Harley suspected The Rabbit was interested more in the academics of the situation than in its resolution.

No pest control without classifying the species first.

Harley snorted in disgust. Renaldo would no doubt want to record and confirm as much as he could about the “ghosts”, before he did anything to get rid of them.

If he did anything to get rid of them. He might feel that taking out Forsby was equivalent to wiping out an endangered species.

Harley was looking at things a lot differently this morning. Renaldo might be in awe of anyone’s capacity to manifest himself as a spirit, but as exciting as that might have seemed under different circumstances, Harley was far too close to this one now to appreciate it. The fact that this was Forsby made him feel as though he had a lingering responsibility to deal with the man’s lingering soul. When he’d solved the crime, apparently he hadn’t resolved anything, and the fact that Forsby had responded to his challenge in the yard indicated Harley Chalmers was more personally involved in this than any of them suspected. As such, Harley knew he was duty-bound—hell, honor-bound—to reduce the threat to a manageable level, even if it meant taking on Terry Boy personally.

It was the way Harley justified his anger, and matched his conscience, duty, and honor to his decision. His decision to take Terence Forsby out.

Because things like honor and conscience really only applied to the living. Terry Boy wasn’t living any more, and Harley was no longer bound to take an honorable, and civilized, approach. He’d

come to a lot of decisions, some time during the long night, and most of them involved protecting the woman he'd held in his arms. Whatever her role in helping Forsby find his way back, Harley was sure it was accidental. Someone like Emma couldn't even conceive the evil that was Terence Forsby.

But Harley Chalmers could, and the Ghost Boy knew it. Terry wanted him afraid, but Harley would much rather be angry. It would bolster his avowals a whole lot better than fear.

In Harley's opinion, badass bastards were the same, living or dead. Nor did it seem like Forsby had learned much from his sojourn in the soil. If he'd been in the hot seat, it hadn't altered his outlook. "Dead" had merely given him a few cunning moves he'd lacked before.

It must also place some limitations on his activities.

Harley's grin was positively evil. Maybe it was the product of a sleepless night, but he had a suspicion it was an unsuspected streak of malice coming out. Against all those grim and nasty buggers who'd gotten off, with little or no jail time. The ones who'd evaded confinement on a technicality, who'd thrived on the bad press, who'd made money out of other people's suffering.

He ground his fist into his palm, and hoped that somewhere in the Ether, Forsby was watching. Far better for the ghost guy to be focused on him than Emma. Harley was actually looking forward to a battle, no holds barred. It was a chance to air some of his own grievances on Forsby's worthless hide.

If Terry Boy wanted a fight, Harley intended to give him one.

Chapter Eight

It was a mistake, and Renaldo couldn't figure out why he was so set on compounding it. The hazards he'd encountered were more than symptoms of a disturbance—and to ask his parapsychology group to become involved was to place them in danger.

So, he rationalized, and continued rationalizing, attempting justify it—to himself, anyway.

No one's been hurt. Emma Rathburn's bruises may have been self-inflicted—mental agitation resulting in physical trauma. Despite what Mr. Police had seen, the actual scenario could have been very different. Forsby was unlikely to have as much physical presence as they were crediting him with.

And blaming the parking lot incident on Forsby was ridiculous. Renaldo tried to ignore the memory of exhaust and racing engines, so he could carry on with his rationalizing. *Blame it on the policeman instead. He was there.*

So was Emma.

Even if Forsby had been at Emma's throat, it didn't necessarily mean he was capable of inflicting that much damage. It may have been Emma's fear, combined with an excess of bio PK, which had triggered the bruise response. *Fear of what could have happened.*

That kind of event was subjective; open to interpretation. Harley had recognized the ghost, known the man was a felon in his former existence, and it had colored what he'd seen. He'd expected Forsby to act in character. So, from Harley's viewpoint, he had. Emma's fear may even have been a response to Harley's influence, rather than to any actual threat.

Renaldo wondered how Harley would have interpreted it if the apparition had been a child, or an elderly woman.

He'd have held open the door and offered to escort them inside.

Don't be snide, Parrish.

Try as he would, though, the levity and attempt at diminution didn't work. As much as

Renaldo might resent his own unfortunate acceptance of the policeman's company in the parking lot last night, he couldn't deny his gratitude. Nor had Harley asked for any specifics regarding the "muggers". Mr. Police may have acted as though his fears were negligible, and of little account, but he'd nevertheless followed through, and been there when he was needed.

Truth was, there was no requirement here for anything more than acceptance, by either of them. Renaldo didn't have to enjoy Harley's company, any more than Harley was expected to enjoy his. If they could maintain even their questionable level of mutual respect, they could work together.

Renaldo wondered how long Emma and Harley had known each other, and whether they were a couple. If so, then Harley would be part of her baggage, and he—Renaldo Parrish—would have to learn to deal with it.

If I take the case.

It was back to that again, and try as he would, Renaldo couldn't suppress his qualms. So, he cheated. He phoned up Max Parker.

Parker was the most avid researcher on his team, save for Renaldo himself. His specialty was night photography, and he dabbled with the Kirlian stuff as well. Not true photography, he always insisted, but nearly as rewarding. Renaldo knew if anyone could talk him into this, it'd be Max.

It was against all the procedures they'd developed—all the rules they'd made about avoiding preconceptions and influencing each other's research. In their standard cases, the primary wouldn't tell the others anything regarding the nature of the complaint or the complainant, until after they'd had a chance to examine the site. It was the best way to standardize their results, and form unbiased conclusions. As a group, after taking readings and conducting historical background checks, they'd discuss their next step and interview witnesses.

Renaldo justified his lapse with a reference to the Afghan Hound. If they waited to bring in the big guns—the expensive equipment—they might miss something.

He knew it was unfair, and so did Max. Something else was going on, and Max wasn't buying the dog story. Oh, he believed it all right, and yeah, it was exciting, but Renaldo was holding back. They'd been in too many tight spots together for him not to recognize when he was being misled.

"So," Max asked now. "What else?"

“Cars,” Renaldo admitted with a sigh. Max was probably the only one on Earth who knew about Renaldo’s aversion to vehicular locomotion—and why. Now, Renaldo could almost see his frown on the other end of the line.

“This ‘entity’ used cars? Against *you*?” Max was silent as he thought about it. “I don’t like it. Too specific—”

“You’re getting something.”

Max was a medium. It was his reason for being in the ghost business. Photography merely gave him a reason to justify his presence to the skeptics. The truth was, being able to combat what he couldn’t necessarily control helped him sleep nights.

“No, I’m not—and I don’t like it.” Max could usually pick up some feedback from his “sources”, one in particular. If he wasn’t, there was a reason. “Shielded,” he complained. “I don’t like it,” he said again.

“Okay,” Renaldo agreed. “Neither do I.” Max’s reaction had confirmed his own. Still, even as his own flesh tightened with scattered gooseflesh, he attempted to take a reasonable approach. “The car event was a mind game, Max—pure and simple. No one was hurt, and no threats were carried out.” He waited for Max to retort, and when he didn’t, Renaldo squirmed uncomfortably. Max might not practice the psychology he’d trained in, but he still had some mind games he liked to play. “I credited them with too much anthropomorphism,” Renaldo admitted. “Hell—I was scared. It was your basic fear response.”

“*Now*, you admit a weakness,” Max said dryly. “I’ve been waiting years.”

“Not as long as I’ve been waiting for you to admit you’re a necrophiliac.”

“I resent that.”

“Or, at the very least, a necro fetishist.”

Max was in love with one of his “contacts”—had been for years.

“Criticize if you want, but I’ll bet my relationship will last a hell of a lot longer than any of yours.”

“If I were as ugly as you, I’d only consort with dead people, too.”

It was an old joke, and Max was grinning—Renaldo could hear it in his voice. “Better than

hiding behind rabbit ears and a fluffy tail.”

“I’m not giving it up.” Renaldo had come to a decision, and now that he’d said it, he knew it was the right one.

“I wouldn’t give her up, either,” Max told him. He sounded so pleased with himself that Renaldo knew he’d been leading up to this. Max may not have known about the cars, but he’d heard something else about Renaldo’s encounter, and had only been waiting for the opportunity to tell him so.

“I hate it when you do that,” Renaldo complained, but he was grinning, too.

“Consider it affirmation, you fool. She’s worth fighting for—Maggie says so.”

“Wasn’t it Maggie who had me going out with that redhead last year?” Renaldo reminded him.

Max was positively gloating. “Part of your cerebral development, my dear Boy. Without her, you’d never have been able to handle the one you’ve got.”

It was enough for Renaldo. Max had his back. Now, Renaldo just had to be sure he kept an eye on Max’s. It wasn’t exactly that the man had a death wish, but he wouldn’t be too fussed about meeting up with his Maggie sooner rather than later.

Renaldo hesitated. What he’d just done was grossly unfair. He knew it, and it would haunt him. Max knew it, too, but since it coincided so well with his own schemes, he didn’t particularly care. His concerns were more for Renaldo, and the specificity of his encounter in the parking lot.

“I won’t take it unless you think it’s safe—for everyone.”

Max knew exactly what he meant. There were times it didn’t pay to be sensitive—especially when the nature of their adversary was in doubt. The fact that the contact was adversarial rather than merely “observable” was a problem in itself. They could be dealing with a demon. Max might be in more danger than Harley. Maggie couldn’t protect him from himself.

“It’s really got you worried,” Max noted.

“Yeah. There’s a lot involved, and I’m not totally certain of the source.”

“Is she keeping things from you?” Max sounded confused, but Renaldo noticed his reference was to a female. Maggie would keep him on top of stuff as well as she could. “You think your source

is trying to hide her actions? Conceal information?"

"That's not it," Renaldo admitted. "I think there may be more than one."

* * * * *

"He won't call me." Nicky lowered her voice to a level her aching head could support. "Your Harley emasculated him."

Emma snorted derisively.

"Ya know, you've picked up some nasty habits. That has to be one of the worst."

Emma crawled toward the bathroom. "It is all I am capable of, at this point in time." Her words trailed off in a groan.

Nicky flopped back down on the couch, then wished she hadn't flopped so hard. "Strange dreams," she complained, as Emma staggered back to the cushions.

"Yes," Emma agreed, sighing gustily as she sank down on her makeshift bed. Despite a slightly wan look, she was grinning.

Nicky opened one eye against the subdued morning glare, and eyed her suspiciously. "Methinks you know something." Her face suddenly filled with alarm, and she sat up, grasping her aching head. "It's not rats, is it?!" she asked, grimacing. "'cause I don't think I could take it." One scent of rat and she'd lose her cookies.

"Shhhh," Emma said soothingly. "It's nothing."

"Tell me, damn you, or I'll sing."

Nicky's soprano singing voice was somewhere between a crow's caw and an out-of-tune violin. Emma tried to contemplate putting up with Nicky's customary work warbling of "Oh, what a beautiful morning!" and failed.

"Sing and I'll spew," she admitted honestly. She was silent then, until Nicky couldn't take it any more.

"If you expect me to say, 'Spill it', I have too much sense. Especially this morning."

"Okaaay," Emma said slowly. "We weren't alone last night."

Nicky's expression went swiftly from grouchy to alarmed. "Forsby?" she asked in a whisper, her voice shaky.

“No—Harley.” Emma leaned back against the side of the couch and placed her hands behind her head. She smiled. “I thought I’d dreamed him.”

“You did,” Nicky told her. “He’s too smart to poke his face in here. It’d be ‘breaking and entering’—unless you asked him to stop in.” She prodded Emma with her big toe. “You didn’t, did you? Ask him, I mean.”

“Can you believe that?” Emma asked, not listening to a word Nicky was saying. She sighed happily. Nicky opened her mouth to retort, but Emma held up a hand. “Strictly rhetorical, Nix. Don’t you dare answer! I’m not gonna have it spoiled.”

“I wouldn’t consider spoiling what is, essentially, a *criminal act*,” Nicky replied.

“It was a brave act,” Emma argued. “He didn’t have any schnapps, and remember—he’s seen Forsby in action.”

“Watched him strangling you, you mean.” At Emma’s mutinous expression, Nicky rescinded with a, “Why do we all feel we have to protect you, Ratbag?”

Emma reached over and grabbed her hand. “You shouldn’t, but I’m glad you were here last night. I’m just saying I’m glad Harley was, too. He didn’t try anything.”

“Then how do you know it wasn’t a dream? Maybe you were just imagining—”

“He left the seat up.” Emma chuckled, squinted against the ouch in her head, then just grinned. She flushed slightly. “I remember him carrying me, and—”

“And *what*?” Nicky asked, frowning. “What did he do?”

“He’ didn’t do anything,” Emma admitted, “but I pawed him to pieces.”

Nicky burst out in surprised laughter, interspersed with “Owws” and “Oohs”. She glanced at Emma through tearing eyes, saw the sheepish expression on her face, and it set her off again. She was laughing so hard it took a while to get her breath back. Her snorted, “Don’t feel too bad, Em,” lacked sincerity, and she made an effort to swallow her amusement, or at least tone it down to an irreverent grin.

Emma seemed to be more worried this morning about acting naive and gullible than she was about Forsby. That was a good thing, in Nicky’s opinion. Nicky would have been harder on Harley’s intrusiveness if she hadn’t realized that Emma was right—Harley had her best interests at heart. You

couldn't feign that kind of concern. The policeman was real—Nicky was just afraid he'd prove a real pain-in-the-ass. The problem was, they had Renaldo for guidance now, but it was obvious Harley intended to do things his way. Still, if it comforted Emma...

And it was reassuring to know nothing could visit them in their sleep—not without a confrontation. Besides, Harley was cute—in a dictatorial, policey kind of way. Nicky could understand why Emma liked him. She told Emma honestly, “I have to admit, if Renaldo were to so much as flash his cottontail my way, I'd be after him,” she grinned, “in a heartbeat.”

* * * * *

Harley was hoping it was going to be a coaster—one of those days where overtired irritability would be an asset, and action would keep him awake. Not that he wanted too much action, mind you. The gob of nonfunctional axions in his head was fizzing along at lag speed.

He plastered one of those loosely noncommittal smiles on his face and headed for the coffee room. If he'd been more alert he would have noticed Jock, first thing. But his internal warning system was turned off, and by the time Harley's aversion had clicked in, and he'd gone for the swift exit, it was too late—Jock had spotted him. There'd be no escape now.

Oh ye, of meager brain. He just couldn't figure out whether the Meager Brain was more him or Jock. Since Jock appeared to be much the same as always—a moron masquerading as a functional human being—the meagerness must be on his—Harley Chalmers'—side.

Now he'd have to suffer the consequences. His smile tightened, and he gritted his teeth.

He should have guessed Jock wouldn't go for a quick morning nod of greeting, or mumbled platitudes for a nice day. A Harley-under-the-weather was a Harley who could be used.

“G'morning, Jock,” Harley said, through stiff lips. He didn't even have the option of ignoring him. The man was practically standing on his toes.

“One too many, eh?” Jock chuckled.

Harley flinched. Jock had just implied something that Harley would be stuck living down. Worse still, he'd said it here, oblivious to their audience. It was no secret alcohol was used way too often to drown the day's stresses. The insinuation of a drinking problem would be more than enough to limit Harley's chances for promotion.

Hell, if he can't handle his present job, how will he manage responsibility over a team? Or decision-making?

"Too much of something," Harley replied pointedly.

Jock didn't get it. "Can't blame you after last night." Snigger.

Harley continued to smile, but it was forced, and he figured everyone knew it.

Was Jock totally clueless? Or was he just trying to get the edge—find something to bolster his ego at the expense of someone else's?

Harley narrowed his eyes. Jock's glinted in what could only have been evil-minded amusement.

Ah-hah! Not as clueless as I thought. Jocko was building points any way he could.

Too bad. For nearly five hours—since three this morning—Harley had been inclined to offer Jock the benefit of the doubt, given his relationship to Emma. Even if the fraternal connection was merely nominal, Emma appeared to value her stepbrother—and Harley wasn't above using his supposed friendship with Jock if it meant furthering his opportunities with her. Besides, if anyone he knew was worthy of pity, it was this man.

Harley had had a lot of time to think the night before, and had decided he'd do what he could to break down the barriers between Jock and their co-workers. A little effort, and he might be able to get Jock accepted, if not exactly liked.

Too late now. Jock had just blasted all Harley's good intentions away with a few ill-thought words. The man was an ass, a moron, a boob. His development had stopped somewhere between a football pass and TP-ing the girls' toilets.

And his hacked-up attempts to span the social gap only made him appear desperate.

Harley dumped twice his usual amount of instant coffee into a cup, then used the almost-espresso strength to stiffen his spine. Maybe it was time for Jock Jamieson to hear a few home truths. He'd picked the wrong man to irritate this morning. Harley had opened his mouth to spout when Jock cut him off.

"How's Emma?" he asked, and Harley's knuckles whitened on the cup.

Dammit if the bastard wasn't going for the connection. It was suddenly crystal clear why Jock

had had the balls to take Harley on. He was testing the waters—keen to see whether bartering his stepsister would buy him some points.

“Who?” Harley asked, coolly.

Jock didn’t answer. A quick glance showed Harley the man had lost his knowing smile. His eyes had gone from glinting to smoldering. They had a dark quality Harley didn’t like.

He knows. Knows I went back. Maybe even knows I spent the night there. There was only one explanation: Jock had been playing Peeping Creep again.

And he’d never expected Harley to deny him the small victory. His stepsister was the sacrificial offering to buy him Harley’s friendship; to ensure some small esteem within the department—and Harley had just denied him it.

It’s none of his business—especially if he’s been snooping around. What Emma and I do....

Stupid. He and Emma *had* no relationship ... yet. For an instant, Harley felt uncertain, as though his time with Emma was as nebulous as Jocko’s false hopes. He had one up on Jock, though—he was ready to work for what he wanted, rather than antagonizing everyone he met over perceived slights.

Harley was also able to recognize an item of great worth when he found it. Let’s face it, he thought now, picturing Emma’s smile—*some things are priceless.*

The heated look was still in Jock’s eyes. *Anger? Jealousy?* Not comfortable emotions to live with. Pity stirred, dammit. It was mingled with contempt, but Harley knew if he didn’t acknowledge Jock’s efforts, he’d go through the day feeling petty, and—God help him!—guilty.

He stifled his sigh and nodded in Jock’s direction. “Thanks, Jock—for everything,” he offered sincerely. The small gesture cost him nothing, and he had a feeling it would mean everything to Jock. The man was straining; grasping at straws.

I’m gonna hate myself tomorrow.

Hell, I’m gonna hate myself today.

Harley cleared his throat. “How ’bout I buy you a beer? After work?”

Jock’s eyes lit up. “Yeah,” he agreed, nodding. “That’d be all right.”

There are some priceless commodities which cost in sweat and blood and beer what they can’t

match in cash. As Harley stalked out of the coffee room, he made it a point to include half a dozen others in his invitation. He'd provide the lubrication and the company. Then, Jocko could make it or break it—on his own.

* * * * *

Dammit, if Emma didn't have an inadequate sense of self-preservation. Nicky wondered whether there was some "self-defense against the Ether" instruction Emma could take, beyond the "white light" basics, to get her through this. If there was, Nicky had never found it, other than a few well-worded suggestions from some wise mediums. The truth was, with the scope of Emma's problem, it would be hard for her to focus on just one threat, but—*God knows!*—it would certainly be beneficial for her to have some way of kicking spiritual ass when it threatened.

Nicky gave a wry grin. Easy to say, when you weren't the one under attack. Not so easy to do. Nicky knew—if there were some way of shutting down overdeveloped *psi* abilities, she would have found it.

At the very least, Emma should have had sense enough to run. There were times when coercion shouldn't be faced down.

Maybe she figures she has nowhere to run to.

There are always places. Change of scene, change of climate. Things that might alter her "state of mind", if that's what was causing this. Chances were, she'd be a lot less receptive under a hot sun and swaying palms.

Maybe. Nicky had done the "world traveler" scene for a while. The problem was, as much as you might change your perception, you still carried the basics with you.

And if Emma's ghost visitors were in any way similar to the four-legged, long-tailed kind who usually came calling, there was nothing to be gained by flight. The rats were summoned by the woman, not the location. She'd simply get a different contingent of rodents.

With different parasites, different diseases. Nicky shuddered. Ghost problems suddenly didn't seem nearly so pressing.

Emma noticed the shudder—and misinterpreted it, of course. "Home's where the heart is," she said, with attempted lightness. "Your home. I think I've seen the last of Mr. Forsby. Cycle's

over.”

Nicky flung her paperback on the coffee table. She blamed it for the argument which was about to happen. If the book had been more interesting, she wouldn't have been thinking about Emma's problems so much. “You know I'm a Forsby-groupie.” She managed to instill consternation into her voice. “I can't believe you'd deny me.”

Emma smirked. “You are *such* a fool. I can't believe you ever make it as a scientist.”

“Just ask Chang. He worships my techniques.”

“I'll tell Viv you said so.” Emma grinned, then repeated the phrase she'd quoted four times already: “Friendship's a two-way street—”

Nicky held up a hand to stop her. “Can you elucidate?” she asked mockingly. “I don't think I've got it.”

“Always problematic,” Emma complained. “Damn you.” She averted her face. “I'm not doing my bit, and you know it.”

“Hmmm,” Nicky replied, nodding. “Obscure.” She studied the ceiling as though contemplating Emma's comment. “Difficult,” she added, not specifying whether the difficult applied to the statement, or the source.

It's a no win, Nix. In Emma's stubborn head, this was all going one way: she was the “taker” to Nicky's “giver”. Anything that endangered the people Emma cared about needed to be dealt with, and you didn't do that by endangering them further.

“It's only logical.” Emma's pet phrase, and enough to drive Nicky mad. Enough, also, to make Nicky suspect the ghost episode wasn't over. Emma wouldn't be so eager to kick her out just to spend time alone with Harley—not yet, anyway. She was running scared.

* * * * *

Emma's defenses were down, and she knew it. In the aftermath of all that liqueur, it was more difficult than ever returning to this rather depressing reality where she was the victim of a stalker. Try as she would, she couldn't diminish his presence as some vague mass of ectoplasm. At the moment, she wasn't seeing him as a spirit—he was an out-of-body, out-of-his-mind, intensely evil personality, who for some reason known only to him, had picked her out.

And, Nicky's determination would count little against Terence Forsby's—but there was always the risk it would draw his attention.

Emma's hands were shaking as she picked up Nicky's book and pretended to peruse it. The truth was, she was terrified. She didn't know whether Forsby could change focus, but she didn't want him going after Nicky.

Because Emma didn't know how she'd stop him this time. Her banishing act before had been purely instinctive, but she didn't really know whether she'd had any actual control, or whether Forsby had been lulling her into some kind of false security. After all, he hadn't stopped when he'd been strangling her—and she'd certainly been pleading, begging, commanding, then.

If she had to be angry to make it work, then Nicky's presence wasn't a good idea, either. Nicky was far more likely to bestir her to giggles than righteous anger. The only way to get past their hysterical laughter would be for Forsby to go far enough to make Emma mad—and that would mean Nicky would be, once again, in danger. Emma had already realized that what triggered a fear response in her triggered an anger response when it threatened her friends. Great for dealing with Forsby, but not so great for any friends who got in the way. There was no guarantee she could muster up her anger in time.

Too bad Nicky wasn't going to give her time to finish thinking this out.

“Face it, Emma—you need me. Besides, think how impressed Chang 'n Dale will be if I remain: ‘scene of the almost-crime’, and all that.”

Emma just stood there defiantly, hands on hips.

Nicky glanced her way, then quickly bit her lips.

It was a gesture Emma recognized. Nicky was trying hard not to laugh.

Which, of course, was *totally inappropriate*. Here she was, projecting tough, and Nicky was acting like she was merely "Emma Rathburn, playing The Tough Girl".

Stand your ground. Intractability was the only way she could think of to handle Nicky's particular brand of persuasiveness. Emma added a scowl. *Good for emphasis.* “My suggestion was purely selfish,” she said stiffly, in what she hoped was a cool tone Nicky would buy. “Having you here makes me feel *guilty*—and *scared*,” she added, as Nicky opened her mouth to argue. After all,

Nicky was the one who'd suggested that fear might act as a trigger for ghostly activity. "Twice as scared, and half again as guilty, for stirring up this mess."

"Did you ever think you might not have stirred it up? That it might have been someone else?"

Emma gave her an exasperated smirk. "Yeah, Nix," she retorted sarcastically. "Only one problem—I was *alone*." To take the sting out of her words, she added jokingly, "I did think it might have been the cucumber beetle on the wall, but he refused to own up."

"When the going gets tough, the tough kick everybody else out and try to go it alone," Nicky quipped.

Emma snorted with quickly-suppressed amusement, then averted her head so Nicky couldn't see her face.

"Too late," Nicky told her. "I heard that snort."

In response, Emma crossed her arms and lifted her chin. She wasn't budging—not this time.

* * * * *

It was easier just to go, and Emma didn't ask her whether she was planning on coming back tonight. Nicky knew what Emma was thinking: after that little display of self-determination, any demands, any questions, would be overkill.

Nicky lifted one brow. If she opted not to return, she was sure it would be exactly what Emma wanted.

Emma might not recall how revealing she'd been the night before, under the "influence", but Nicky did. Emma had spoken jokingly about hiding under the kitchen counter, in the closet, under the covers, and then not-so-jokingly about the way Forsby had yanked away her camouflage with excruciating slowness. "Like rape," she'd said, "except it was murder." It was muddled, but it had made sense to Nicky. She just didn't know what she could do about it. How did you stop something which had no "substance"?

Find out what makes it tick—then find a way to disarm it.

* * * * *

Renaldo picked up the phone reluctantly, almost as if he knew what was coming.

It was Merlin, and he didn't waste time on hellos. "She has a record."

Renaldo flinched. *Condemnation*. It was what he'd concluded, but not what he wanted to hear—about her, anyway. “Tread warily, Oberon,” he warned.

“*Ahhh*.” Merlin didn't say more—he didn't have to. He and Renaldo had known each other since their frat days. His given name was Oberon, and he enjoyed the comments from the psych community about how labeling predisposed a child to certain patterns. In his case, it was a life choice, but the “Oberon” his parents had blessed him with was too blatant. He preferred subtlety. “King of the Fairies” was overstating his case.

He and Renaldo had been Shakespeare fanatics in college. Renaldo, at least, could have gone professional actor, and Merlin personally thought his present rabbit role was a pathetic attempt to recapture the applause of the masses, but otherwise, Renaldo appeared to love his work—both psychological and parapsychological.

There'd been a time, long ago, when Merlin had thought of him as more than a friend, but Renaldo had always been flamingly heterosexual, damn him—and Merlin had never mentioned his attraction, for fear of losing their friendship, which was, after all, what the two of them did best. Renaldo had known he was gay, but if he'd been a little intolerant once, his vision had expanded over the years, and he'd been genuinely happy and supportive when Merlin had encountered his life-partner, Adam. Whenever Merlin felt the need to talk about his and Adam's relationship, Renaldo tended to paraphrase his advice with comments like, “If it were a woman, I'd—”, thereby firmly establishing his heterosexuality, while supporting Merlin's choices.

When it came to Adam Sawyer, Merlin had been totally gutless. The attraction was there, but without Renaldo's advice, Merlin knew he wouldn't have had the courage to approach him. Renaldo had reminded him that some people were neither flamboyant, nor blatant, in their life choices. It required a little more discernment and a lot more risk, but “If it were a woman, I'd ask her out, for something non-threatening, like coffee.”

Merlin had, and the rest was history.

But now, Renaldo's love interest was at stake. Merlin had heard the other man's weary sigh. Renaldo was uncertain whether he wanted to hear any more, but he also realized Merlin wouldn't have made a mistake—not with something this important. “Max warned me to double-check,” Merlin

told him regretfully.

“Web source, newspaper, archives, or Maggie?” There were a number of websites around the world which listed paranormal phenomenon. Many of the listings included UFO information, plus some pretty unbelievable and uncorroborated claims by individuals, but there was also a wealth of information, especially if the reports were filtered through a skeptical webmaster, or if they came from one of the “reputable” groups who shared their passion for ghost hunting.

Occasionally, a reporter would document a paranormal event, usually for a local paper, and Merlin’s archives were full of newspaper clippings, letters and emails from individuals about their experiences, newsletters from similar groups, their own research data from past cases, and pertinent information regarding the government’s *psi* research, along with the latest in parapsychology research from universities. The “Maggie” question was different. Maggie seemed to think she’d only be able to retain Max’s interest if she were to feed him information a spoonful at a time. The only time she went for more than minimal disclosure was when Max might be in danger.

Funny that. Max wanted to die to be with her, but Maggie couldn’t stand the idea of watching him die, so she tried to keep him alive.

“Police report,” Merlin told him.

For an instant, Renaldo was stunned, shocked that Nicky had had a run-in with the police.

You’ve had a few yourself. There’d been times when their parapsychological research, and their reasons for being on a site, had been misinterpreted. “What kind of record are we talking about?” he asked tentatively.

“She’s....” Merlin hesitated, then added almost reverently, “*Bones.*”

“*No!*” Renaldo was shaking his head adamantly, even though Merlin couldn’t see him. He felt like slamming down the phone. “It’s just *not* possible.” But, even as he said it, he knew it was. His sensory feelers had picked up something. It may even have been the cause for his interest.

Correction: initial interest. The woman had been too calm, given the magnitude of the ghost dog event. Surprised, shaky, startled even, but there’d been no shrieking and no move to escape. His interest had made him misinterpret her reaction. He’d put it down to fear, but it wasn’t fear of the ghostly canine which had hit her so hard; it was the degree of *psi* energy in the air. Renaldo had felt it,

too.

How can she tolerate working with Emma Rathburn, day after day?

You're digressing. Anything, rather than acknowledge that the source of his interest was also the source of too damn much notoriety.

“Bones” was unique. She’d appeared on the scene sixteen years ago, at the tender age of thirteen, and proceeded to horrify police departments across the nation. The coroners’ offices had used her, of course, because there was no point in ignoring such a valuable tool, but Renaldo could only guess the effects of such gruesome efforts on a young, developing psyche. He’d always assumed—in what he realized now was a rather arrogant, analytical way—that the young psychic would be the one to watch later. Such pronounced abilities, combined with early exposure to human malevolence, might well flaw the girl’s ethical constructs. Warped development, psychotic results.

And she doesn’t have much respect for the law—or maybe that’s just Harley she doesn’t respect, he thought now, cynically. “Refresher,” Renaldo demanded.

Merlin’s voice was all business now. “‘Bones’: a nickname for the psychic’s pronounced ability to locate human corpses. Original cases included the recently-interred, but the psychic’s aversion—”

“No wonder,” Renaldo murmured.

“Her aversion diminished her usefulness to local police, and she now limits herself to the long-dead or ancient. Speculation suggests that the diminution of her abilities was self-induced, possibly as a result of biofeedback. She’s worked with paleontology and anthropology departments at several prominent universities, but prefers to offer her help anonymously. Her assistance has led to the discovery of several tombs in Abydos, and a new species of dinosaur last year in Montana.”

“So she’s not limited to humans?” Renaldo wanted to confirm it. This was an aspect he hadn’t considered. Emma had admitted Studley was buried in the yard. Maybe Nicky’s abilities had somehow magnified her own.

Merlin sighed. “Apparently not.”

Moldering bones wherever you looked.

There was a trace of pity in Merlin’s voice as he added, “That kind of ‘gift’ could drive you

mad.”

Renaldo was remembering the bruises on Emma’s neck. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* “Let’s hope not,” he replied grimly.

Chapter Nine

Nicky was silent as she drove home. Ridiculous for Emma to be worried about her—she wasn't the one at risk. Her "insight" was under control. Whereas once she may have been barraged by a constant stream of unwanted images as she drove, now she was so accustomed to the view that she no longer saw it, except by choice. Other people might close their eyes and see patch-splodged grayness behind their lids—Nicky saw shadow pictures which gained resolution the more she focused on them. When it had all been new, and terrifying, her fear had focused her internal vision on them continuously. The only relief had come through concentrated effort. Fortunately, her parents had accepted, if not exactly understood, her problem, and it had been her mother who'd noticed the lessening of tension when Nicky was actually "performing". It was as though dwelling on a singular tragedy put all the others into proportion. With every successful exhumation, some of her fear would go, too.

Not like Emma. No ghosts to chase Nicky through her sleep, making demands she didn't know how to fulfill.

After a while, Nicky became accustomed to her mental, sub-visual patterns, the way other people did to patterns on the draperies or the upholstery. Human tragedies were enacted every day, and teenage self-centeredness made Nicky demand that she be allowed to live out her own human drama. It had saved her, in the end. She'd been able to leave her daymares behind, and focus on the future.

But, she'd gone into science because it was more cut-and-dried, more mathematical and precise, than the arts. She wanted to continue to categorize her abilities into manageable, disciplined exercises in logic and research. She'd enjoyed her paleontology work far more than she'd ever expected. Recently, she'd even thought about changing fields.

Until the day Dale had made a comment about paleontology being a dead field. He'd been aiming the slur at Emma; had even commented to Nicky that she was too good a researcher to join Emma in the "morbid" arts. It was a joke, and Emma had fired up the way Dale had intended.

Emma knew what she was, of course. Nicky doubted whether she could have kept it from her even if she'd tried. There were times Nicky had been tempted to tell Dale and Chang—times when there'd been something resembling a plea in Emma's eyes to take the pressure off her—but Nicky had never had the guts. She hated herself for the small cowardice, but excused it by saying, "If they think I'm normal, and that I still want to hang out with you, Emma...."

At this point, Emma would always say wryly, "Think how many more points it'll be worth." The truth was, Nicky would have been the first to admit her psychic ability would gross out most people. Nicky and Emma together would be too much for most ordinary types to take.

Interesting that we know each other.

It wasn't the first time Nicky had thought it, and it always made her wonder: did psychics gravitate toward each other? Or, were they all so screwed up that they could no longer detect the "norm"?

At the moment, Emma was the one who was continually attracting trouble. It inexorably headed her way, whether in the form of wayward rats or wanderlusting spirits. Nicky was hoping there was some way she could help—that the biofeedback methods which had seemed to work for her could have a similar application for Emma. Peace of mind was one of those priceless commodities which could neither be bought nor given away. No one could endow you with a restful night, or bequeath solace to restless energies. Still, it positively pained Nicky to think of her friend Emma spending the remainder of her days constantly placating either rodents or vengeful specters.

The determined manner in which Emma's plaguing visitors approached reminded Nicky of electrophoresis. It was a test they ran frequently at the lab—with an electrical diode playing attractant to molecules and ions in a gel. Turn on the power and everything would migrate that way. It seemed to Nicky there were some reasonable comparisons to be drawn here between Emma's problem, and a strictly bioelectric resolution.

Renaldo might not welcome the theory. Theories which disrupted a person's individual beliefs—*i.e.*, took away his fun or source of mystique—were generally moued or derided. It was obvious that despite his efforts to scientifically catalogue and index paranormal events, the man was a paranormal junkie. Take away the mystical, and it would rob him of his opportunity to be afraid—

cheating him in the most fundamental sense, considering how much time he'd dedicated to his "hobby" over the years.

Like taking away a model railroader's toy trains.

She sighed. Despite her own attraction—electrical or otherwise—to Renaldo, she had no plans for any revelations. If Renaldo returned her interest, she wanted it to be based on her as a person, rather than a paranormal performer. She was in this strictly as Emma's friend, to stand by her until she was out of danger. Whatever Emma's subconscious might be doing, none of this—from rats to apparitions—were from conscious effort. If anything, she'd done her best to stopper her rat visits. Whenever things were "imminent", Emma was as pained as someone attempting desperately to contain a mortifying blast of flatulence.

But she'd always claimed there were times she was more "receptive". That meant this Forsby thing was, more than likely, temporary. Positive thought as that might be, though, it didn't provide shielding in the present—which Emma definitely needed. Those bruises weren't self-inflicted, and Emma had no need of further claims to weirdness. Her rat migrations were enough to contend with.

Nicky couldn't imagine her own paranormal problems being compounded by rat invasions. It would be enough to drive her over the edge. In that respect, Emma seemed much more well-adjusted than she. Nicky didn't know how she did it.

Renaldo might think his "self-inflicted" theories were a reasonable attempt to bring Emma's problem up to an objective level, but it disappointed and antagonized Nicky, who was determined to protect her. It appeared to Nicky as though Renaldo was invalidating—or, at least devaluing—Emma's experience in order to keep the paranormal stuff within justifiable levels. Forsby's violent reaction to Harley's goad had exceeded Renaldo's paranormal threshold. Now, Renaldo needed to reconcile it with his conscience, which meant he needed either to lessen the threat, or turn Emma's case over to someone else.

Don't gripe. That means she'll have somebody else to help.

Somebody who might be able to do what you can't.

And it beats Harley. Renaldo, at least, had experience with the undead, and his help came with fewer entanglements than Harley's. It was great that Emma finally had a love interest, but Nicky

wondered what Harley was telling Jock about all this. If they were friends, then Emma had a problem. Jock had no class, and no character. He was “scary” in some fundamental, don’t-be-alone-with-him kind of way. And Nicky knew she didn’t trust her own reactions when Jock was around. Something about him sent her own electrical fields, or nerve impulses, or whatever they were, twanging—an alarm bell of sorts to the initiated. Nicky avoided the man as much as possible.

She just wished he had a similar feeling of aversion. Even if Emma wouldn’t admit it, her world would be a better place if Jock were no longer a part of it.

* * * * *

Emma pushed off from the wall, wobbled slightly, then found her footing. She was no good at this—probably never would be—but it was her outlet. Other people found solace in scuba diving, jumping out of an airplane, or at the end of a bungee line, but not her. The concentrated effort, physical demand, and sudden change in ambient temperature did it for her. Whether she’d been seesawing erratically along, or slamming the ice with her rear, she always felt reborn—all the angst and pressure and guilt frozen out of her. When she finally left the rink, with numb extremities and bruised posterior, she was pink-cheeked and fresh, raw and new.

It was Chang Avery who’d first introduced her to ice skating. He was a former pre-Olympian who’d never made the cut, but was, nevertheless, a damn fine skater. It had stunned her to watch the transition of this man from the rather ordinary being she’d thought she’d known to this flexible, swirling, agile, whirling, precise and inhuman creature on the ice. It was impossibly impressive—impossible because no mere human could do those things—not without the help of weird camera angles or special effects. Impossible, too, because this was Chang—someone she actually worked with down at the lab. Chang, doing all those leaps and incredibly fast spins, swoops and gymnastic bends and arches.

It was a phenomenon, a feat, amazing, bordering on the miraculous. Chang had gone outside himself ... somehow stepped beyond. And she could remember thinking, with a trace of awed envy, how much she’d like to do that, too.

She also remembered, with a trace of shame, her skepticism. No way Chang Avery could perform stunts like that.

Because he was Chang.

How many times had she seen him break glassware, or spill chemicals on the lab bench? Her brain couldn't correlate the two versions: klutz and accomplished.

On the ice he was a different man altogether.

And Emma could see how much he loved it, what passion he had for speed and precision on that slick frozen layer—and she suddenly knew why Chang had never made it very far in his science career. The ice was his passion—science, his means of support. If he could have made it as an ice skating teacher, then he would have been the best.

But the supply of trained, semiprofessional ice skaters surpassed the demand. As good as Chang was, there were a lot of Olympians whose bronze and silver medals upset the equation.

It had been Emma who'd first suggested they all go with Chang to the rink. He had this annoying habit of dropping heavy hints about his ice prowess into the conversation, but she'd always considered it idle boasting – his way of claiming something greater so they wouldn't focus on his sometimes bungled efforts in the lab. She'd never wanted to embarrass him by taking him at his word, but he'd just spilled his second flask of the day, and had been riding her about the rats. So, she'd confronted him.

She'd never been skating and neither had Nicky. Dale had come along, kissed the concrete-slab surface of the ice with his rear, and spent most of the evening nursing a sore tailbone. Nicky had been moderately good for a first-timer, and Emma had been terrible. But, it was Emma who'd absolutely loved it. She hadn't wanted to leave, and the next day had pleaded with Chang to give her lessons.

Dale knew her too well, even then. “You're not doing it for him,” Dale had said—rather rudely, she'd thought. “So, lose the attitude.”

He was right, of course. There was nothing noble about her request for lessons. She was hooked, pure and simple. “I must have an addictive personality,” she'd said, somewhat surprised at this tidbit of self-revelation.

“Duhhh. Ya think?” Dale had retorted, but he'd ruffled her hair like a kid sister's. “Nothing wrong with an outlet, Emma. In fact, in your case, it's probably a damn good idea.” He'd sniggered.

“I’d like to see those rodents try to run across the ice.” His eyes had glinted. “Seems like we outa stick you out there whenever you get in one of your ‘moods’.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about PMS,” Nicky had interrupted. “Sexist bastard.”

“Not sexist—rattist. Wait—” Dale did a quick search on the Net. “I’m a Rattophobe. It’s a small, but devout group of rodent-haters established in the twenty-first century.” He considered it. “Make that the twentieth century. Emma’s been around to bug me for a while.”

“Not bug—‘Hemipterrorize’,” Nicky had reminded him.

“Technicalities. Begone, damned Rat. Take thyself to the rink, and loosen up.”

So, she had, and did. She went down there two, three times a week. At first, Chang gave her lessons, until he became too frustrated. By the time he’d given up, though, it didn’t matter. Emma was so hooked she didn’t care whether she had a tutor or not. She and the ice had an understanding.

And there’d never been any interference with her—not out there. It was as though her psychic centers were frozen. Recently, it had been the only place where she’d actually found peace.

She didn’t fall down very often any more, but then, she really wasn’t much of a stunter. She’d been able to pick up some basic spins, and the rest was imagination. Since her first ice skating experience, she’d watched every old movie ever made about skating. Now, when she wove in and out, or spun in lazy circles, she was Sonja Henje, dancing in graceful leaps and pirouettes. It was magic, and her escape. It was the place she went whenever her life seemed to be getting out of hand.

Like now.

She was right in the middle of her dance number when she tripped over a fallen skater, and slammed the ice. When her eyes refocused, she discovered she and the other skater weren’t the only ones here.

There was a face, lying beneath the frozen layers. Stiff, almost mummified; certainly frozen. Dead, beyond a doubt. The skin was holed in places, with bone leaching through suppurated flesh.

Beside her, her not-so-agile ice saboteur screamed, a shrill shriek of terror. There was a gasp, and thud, as the other woman clawed and scrambled to her wobbly feet, knocking Emma down again in the process. Beneath the woman’s skate-clad feet, the ice vibrated, shivering the corpse into a gruesome parody of movement.

Emma reared back, frantic, but the ice was just too slick. This time it was her chin that hit bottom first.

Don't look. Don't look. Don't look. Don't look—

Too late.

The almost-mummy in the ice opened its eyes, to stare directly at her.

* * * * *

Harley had managed to stay clear of Emma for nearly three days now. During that long night, when he'd stood guard, he'd had too much time to think. Add to that the days which followed and he'd very nearly convinced himself that even though he and Jock were vastly different—emphasis on the “vastly”—Emma would be far more likely to notice their similarities. After all, Jock was someone she knew, and trusted.

No one else would.

But Harley Chalmers' “friendship” with Jock was also the reason Emma was willing to trust him. He may have earned her personal regard now—to some small degree, anyway—but it was sandwiched in there somewhere with family loyalty.

A bad place to be. Harley had problems feeling any loyalty toward Jock Jamieson, even as a fellow officer. The man lacked respect for the system, which wouldn't have been an issue, if he'd managed to stay within the boundaries. Harley didn't feel a whole lot of respect for the system himself, but it was a means to an end—to saving lives and setting limits, so kids could play in the parks and women could walk, inviolable, on the city streets. What worried Harley was Jock's lack of respect for other human beings—whether victims, malefactors, or co-workers.

The original grudge holder: never at fault, but damn good at payback.

Harley guessed that, in Emma's view, he was probably tainted, like Jock. It was a forgivable, because he'd done the brave thing; his faults diminished by actions.

Plus, he was Jock's friend. As tempting as it might be to dissociate himself from the evolutionarily-forgotten Neanderthal crowd—to prove to her he was more than a boast and an act of bravado—Harley wasn't willing to lose that element of trust. He wouldn't play it, to prey on her the way Jock did, though. Emma already had one obsessive stalker in her life, whether she knew it or not.

She didn't need two.

Harley was more worried than he'd admit, even to himself. He didn't want to offer Jock any ammo to use against him with Emma, but at the same time, he kept recalling Jock's threats. Emma might not take them seriously, but Harley did. Jock didn't need more provocation at this point. He needed a cooling-down period. Anything to keep him from evolving from brute Neanderthal to sly, if not exactly cunning, psycho.

Harley had done his best. He'd bought Jock a beer, and shown great restraint in keeping his reasons for the gesture to himself. When Amos and Charlie had given him shit, over this new camaraderie with Jock, Harley had neither qualified it with a brusque "sorry for him", nor squee-gily referred to Emma as "just cause". It had been the best he could do to show tolerance, if not exactly acceptance, and he didn't think Jock or anyone else would notice the difference. If he'd left after one game of pool, well, hell, it was obvious he was tired.

Now, at this short distance from Emma, Harley hoped he was blowing her situation out of proportion. Her ghost problems might not be standard, but her domestic ones were.

The trouble was, despite his efforts with Jock, and his pity for the adolescence which had brought him to this, Harley didn't trust him much more than he did Forsby. Forsby might have the edge on evil, but Jock had a grudge to drive him.

Forsby might even need her, as conveyance.

Jock was unlikely to get anything more than rejection from her. Somewhere deep inside he must realize that. Unless he were to undergo a gigantic change in outlook and attitude, Emma's tolerance would only last so long—especially if Jock were to treat her friends the way he treated everyone else. If she were to confront him, Harley suspected Jock would react the way most narrow-visioned people did—with no tolerance at all.

Of the two monsters at Emma's throat, Harley wasn't sure which one frightened him most.

* * * * *

Jock was on a stakeout. It was far from his first one, and he'd come prepared. He stood there in the shadows, munching on a crusty pastrami-and-cheese-on-rye sandwich. The cheese was hot and drooly, leaking down to burn his chin. He swiped at it impatiently with the back of his hand, caught

the grease dribbles, then crunched a big bite of the kosher dill to sharpen his taste buds.

The skating rink was a busy place, so he didn't need to worry about silence—any more than he needed to worry about strong-scented food. He slurped at his mocha latte.

Cold, fuck it. The sandwich had held its temperature longer than his damned coffee had.

It was gonna be a late one—he knew it as soon as the last police unit arrived. When the headlights swept his alcove, he took a wary step back into deeper shadow, slopping coffee as he went.

The slosh marks, dark stains on his navy blue, left him feeling both ill-used and resentful. It was somehow in keeping with the way his life always went—had always gone since high school. Every opportunity with a down side; every chance to get ahead riddled with holes.

He'd heard some of the slurs, the inferences of “improper conduct”, and he'd really made an effort to appraise his own response pattern; his own reactions. It was hard for him to get past the fundamentals, though—that some people seemed fated to be winners, despite the equipment they were born with, and others were destined to be losers. His life experiences had only reinforced the foul role of Fate, and had frequently made him wonder if there wasn't something to star signs—whether some out-of-touch star really *did* control his destiny. Hell, there were guys who could, quite literally, get away with murder, while others were hounded for using a heavy fist now and then.

There was no such thing as justice, even for cops—maybe, especially for cops. What the hell did they expect a man to do, when someone was pounding him? Read him his rights and ask him “please”?

Jock was drawn out of his resentment by the sound of crunching gravel. He'd let himself get sidetracked; lost his focus. His gut clenched, and his legs went wobbly. He was gonna pay—big.

The first piece of gravel was little more than a chip. The sharp fragment bit his cheek, then dropped to the concrete in a crackling rattle. The sudden silence, as it stilled its motion, was the trigger. Gravel rain pelted him, stinging, bruising, wetting; clattering against the wall at his back, pounding his head, bouncing across his shoes, forcing him against the wall in a battering deluge that covered his boots in broken stone.

It ceased, nearly as suddenly as it had begun—a short-lived squall, violently vented, then exhausted. Jock cowered there, uncertain. *Hiatus, or—?* He waited, tensely, body wracked by shivers,

fingers shaking as they plucked gravelly bits out of his ears.

Should have known.

He should never have allowed himself to become distracted—never stood here, lost in thought, nursing his resentment. He knew better.

Caring too much was a curse.

He tentatively lifted one foot.

No reaction. It was over.

Teeth bared, he viciously booted the stone, sending it splaying across the parking lot, and heard with satisfaction the ping and tinkle as it hit metal and glass. *Fuck the cars, and fuck the people in 'em.* The adrenaline moment passed, and he scuffed out of hiding, dust-covered and disheveled. He was still shaking, but this time, he liked to think it was anger, rather than fear. He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand and it came away damp.

Not sweat—blood. He stood there, staring at the stain darkening his skin. *If I'd died....* His sinuses were aching. He sniffed and fought against the wetness filling his eyes. His gut tightened again, with apprehension.

It's wrong. The whole thing was wrong. He rubbed his brow again, unwilling to accept what was staring him in the face—what had, moments before, been pelting him there.

Maybe destiny wasn't really controlled by the stars, or Fate.

Maybe it was controlled by karma.

* * * * *

Harley knew, as soon as the call came in. There was no particular reason; just a gut response. Maybe it was because he'd been thinking about Forsby, and Emma. Or maybe it was because the entire scenario was so bizarre.

A corpse in the ice.

In an ice rink where dozens of people had been skating for hours, and no one else had noticed.

Except—suddenly—two female skaters. One was hysterical—the other, silent. In denial or in shock. A practicing non-involvist.

Unless, of course, that second female was Emma. Then, it wouldn't be shock. Denial, maybe,

but Emma was more likely to feel guilty, resigned, embarrassed.

When Harley arrived, Emma was sitting, her knees drawn up, the abandoned skates tossed on the floor below the bench.

Like broken wings. Feathers scattered across the ground.

Harley ordered his brain back on track. This wasn't the time for lame metaphors. He attempted to eye Emma objectively as he headed determinedly her way.

She was pale as the scored ice at her back, but she wasn't frightened. Nor was she embarrassed.

Nope. Harley swallowed an inappropriate flash of humor. Emma wasn't in denial—because she was too damn mad.

She didn't look exactly approachable, either. The ice maiden image was marred somewhat by the quick, distracted pat of commiseration she gave the weeping woman at her side, but the truth was, Emma didn't look like she needed either support or police assistance. "It's okay," he heard her tell the red-nosed weeper. "Everything's under control."

There was no mistaking the frustration in Emma's face.

Pat. Pat. Pat. The weeper head-banged in response to Emma's vigorous sympathy.

Irritated, at being shaken out of her hysteria, Weeper said curtly, "Cut it out!"

Emma glanced at her and a flush momentarily brightened her pallor. "Sorry," she said.

For everything. Harley could read it in her face.

Emma looked up then and saw him. She dropped everything—the blanket they'd wrapped around her, her unsuccessful pose of confused victim, and jumped to her feet. "Harley!" she gasped, grinning. "You're *here!*"

His own smile was resigned, but she wasn't fooled, and neither was anyone else. He opened his arms, and then she was there, nestled against his chest.

"Of course, I'm here," he whispered, a trace of amusement rasping the tones. "Was this a ploy?"

"Devil man," she hissed back, burrowing further into his grasp. The uniform must have felt scratchy, but it didn't faze her. Damn, she felt good. His grip tightened. *Safe.*

“Was it Forsby?” he asked her, ignoring his fellow officers long enough to brush a kiss across her temple.

“No, dammit,” she replied.

“You *wanted* it to be Forsby?”

She drew back, to look at him with some asperity. “I can handle Forsby.”

“But you couldn’t handle this guy.”

For the first time, a trace of fear glinted in her eyes. “He took me by surprise.” She shook her head. “He has no right here, Harley! He shouldn’t have come!”

Harley nodded, and closed his arms around her once more. “This your special place?” he asked quietly, his lips just brushing her hair.

She sniffed. “The only one,” she admitted. “He had no right....” Her voice trailed off and Harley tightened his grip.

This was Emma’s hideaway—the place she went to vent her fear and anger. It seemed ludicrous now that he’d once wondered whether it was a bar, or a nightclub. Emma vented through action, and the skating rink had always been safe for her before. Forsby, or someone else, had violated it. She was no longer secure—anywhere.

He ignored the sniggers in the background, but picked up the “It’s gone! The body’s gone!” from Charlie Sneed.

“Why am I not surprised?” he said dryly, and Emma stiffened, then shook with silent laughter. “Hold that thought,” he told her, giving her another quick squeeze. “I mean it,” he whispered, then left, to take a look at the hole they’d chipped in the ice. The manager had emptied the rink, and Harley’s fellow officers had worked for nearly half an hour with the coroner in order to extricate the corpse. Harley suspected they’d have no physical evidence now other than photos.

And names. Emma’s would feature prominently.

He sighed. It was a minor disaster, but nothing that a few layers of ice wouldn’t fix. He strolled back to Emma, his face shuttered, but his eyes glinting. He shook his head, his stern tone belied by the exasperated amusement in his voice. “You sure do make a mess,” he said.

* * * * *

Alas, for the land of the ante cell. Renaldo stared at his cell phone as though it were a snake.

There's no privacy any more. His rush to ensure financial prosperity, social camaraderie, and avocational propinquity had ruined him. There was no fleeing into oblivion to mull over a problem. The days of think tanks and philosophical musings were gone. He'd have no opportunity to dissociate himself, and decide how best to handle this.

Because she wouldn't leave him alone.

Flattery warred with irritation. She knew, or had guessed at his interest, and he wasn't surprised. Nicky MacPherson knew he was attracted to her, with reservations—and she didn't want to give his reservations time to solidify. There was no escape, either, because he couldn't pretend he hadn't received her messages.

Two messages in three days didn't exactly constitute a barrage. She'd been very businesslike, too, especially in that last recording.

Maybe I misread her intentions. Could be she's not interested in me after all.

He frowned, his brow furrowing. Nothing she'd said had been more than polite chatter. It wasn't her fault he was intimidated by her talent. Renaldo had already analyzed the situation—not that it made things any easier. He was intimidated because he was accustomed to knowing more than his clients.

I like being center stage. Worse: Center Sage.

There. It was out. He wasn't scared about Nicky stealing the applause, though—he was scared she'd find fault with his soliloquies, especially in front of his team. That she'd find fault with him.

Whenever he'd considered it, during the last three days (which was, unfortunately, quite frequently), he'd quailed at his self-image—that of a *psi*-nut chasing ghosts and poltergeists. It was little like a kid with a passion for scary movies. Only slightly worse was his rabbit guise, and that didn't bear thinking about. Suffice it to say he'd tucked Renaldo Rabbit into the closet, and there he was going to stay, despite the sudden demand for his services.

He could curse the efficiency of the advertising executive who'd talked him into a billboard. Now, there was no way he'd earn back the money, unless he resurrected his pink alter ego, and the truth was, with the advent of Nicky, he didn't have the nerve.

He might have had a shot at convincing her he did the bunny birthday gig out of good will and a sense of camaraderie, but he had a feeling Nicky would never buy his claim that he did the *psi* stuff simply to help people. There were just too many ways to offer assistance that didn't include photographing their houses, or running EM tests on their kitchens and bathrooms. Even by his own diagnosis, he was deluded.

He sighed. Considering the magnitude of Nicky's "gift", she was a lot better adjusted than he.

But that didn't alter the fact that he was in on this one, and his team wanted in, too. He just didn't know whether he could be objective enough to watch Nicky for signs of influence. If she was the one undermining Emma's well-being, there might be a subconscious reason, but Renaldo didn't know whether he wanted to be the one to find out what that reason was. He didn't want her to be the source of negative energy—the villainess, so to speak—any more than he wanted her to be a victim of someone who was.

If she's not the transmitter, she could be a recipient.

Which meant, with her level of receptivity, Nicky could be in a lot of danger.

"Fear is merely a torquing of attitude." It was his equivalent to a prayer. He used it every time he went out on an "investigation". Torque your attitude enough in one direction and you'd have the physical symptoms to contend with; incipient hysteria to magnify things out of proportion. So, he always made it a point to torque it back. To go in well-grounded, calm, collected.

Nicky made him feel anything but.

Unless you were cool and controlled, if there was a demon involved, it would eat you alive.

But then, there was the flip side—the very human attraction he felt, which had nothing to do with Nicky's talent or abilities. He considered how she might, even now, be utilizing her well-adjusted psyche to interact with someone much saner and prosaic than he.

The frown was back.

Renaldo determinedly picked up his cell phone, and punched in her number.

* * * * *

Harley accompanied her out of the rink. If his escort was more embracing than bracing, no one said anything. This one was personal, and the sooner everyone knew it, the better.

It meant Jock would find out, but Harley knew he'd have to handle that sooner or later.

Harley smirked as he considered how Jock would take the news. Jock wouldn't be too happy about having his suspicions confirmed.

So, I was a little evasive.

He doubted Jock would understand his reluctance to talk about it; to make any admissions. Jock came from the Try Hard School of Underachievers. He bragged about every bit of flesh that came his way.

But Emma's his "sister".

That hadn't stopped him from making suggestive comments. At the memory, Harley's jaw tightened, but he kept his cool.

Give the man a chance.

Sometimes a person played the fool out of a desperate need to impress. Jock was one of those, and Harley was sure Emma must realize it. Still, Harley's definition of provocation was bound to be countered by Emma's demands for more patience. Harley smiled, then lowered his head to brush a kiss across her crown. He was wise enough not to press for more, at this point. There were issues to work through, and he had a feeling Jock was going to prove a major one.

However he and Jock resolved their differences, though, concerning Emma, it would have to be with wits, rather than violence—which meant he wouldn't be getting any help from Jock. "Wit" was not the man's dueling weapon.

Harley may have been lost in thought, but he could still sense her withdrawal. Emma shifted in his arms as though she'd only just realized she'd allowed herself to depend on him, if only a little. When she pulled out of his grasp, and tucked a hand rather primly through one arm instead, he wasn't surprised, and knew better than to react.

"How's it going?" she asked, with false brightness.

It took all his self-control not to burst out laughing. It was so incongruous, given the moment—if it hadn't also been so apparent Emma was embarrassed as hell. The realization did a lot to sober him up. He'd just seen her perform another paranormal stunt, but that wasn't what was bothering her. She was upset because he'd seen her angry—furious, in fact. She didn't like to think

he'd caught her so close to being out of control.

"It's going fine," Harley told her mildly. If the words shook a little from the force of his suppressed laughter, neither of them said anything.

Harley had to admit he was disappointed when Emma burrowed almost frantically in her bag as soon as they'd cleared the exit. "I need to make a call," she told him apologetically, as she moved away, out of reach and nearly out of earshot. Her expression was guilty and he couldn't understand it. Was she feeling that bad about scaring the other woman at the rink?

It didn't take long to find out. Emma was disturbed, over the lapse in time. He guessed, from her first hesitant words, just as he guessed how little she really wanted to make this call. She'd put it off as long as possible, but the truth was, she couldn't relax until she'd done it.

When she'd finished, her eyes were distant.

"You okay, Emma?" Harley asked her. He wanted to put an arm around her again but didn't dare. It wasn't only her eyes which were distant. Some part of her had retreated from him; from contact.

"Sure," she said, but it was more sad than sarcastic. She lifted her face and offered him a smile that was friendlier than before, but still held a note of reserve. "Thanks for the rescue—again," she offered.

Even in the dim light, he could see she was blushing furiously. She felt like a fool for the reference to rescue.

Harley grinned widely. It seemed as though Renaldo was having an unfortunate effect on them all. In his mind's eye, he could picture Rabbit Man's bow. There were some situations which called for a little chivalry, though. Harley had just never encountered any before.

Until he'd met this woman. Now, he couldn't get enough, of chivalry or anything else. Hell, he'd wear her hankie into battle if she wanted him to.

Harley bowed, and he swore it was as elegant as anything Renaldo had done. For good measure, he took her hand and brushed his lips across it, too. As he lifted his head, he offered her a slow smile. "If you need me again, you have only to ask," he said.

Chapter Ten

Harley looked from Dale Iverson to Chang Avery to Renaldo Parrish's *psi* associates. Yes, he could recite all their names now, and there was a whole lot more he could guess from their intros.

Like a Mensa meeting.

Harley knew, because he'd been to a couple, and he wasn't proud of it. It had made him feel like a hybrid, trapped somewhere between the selectively brilliant, and terminally stupid.

He'd figured out a long time ago that genius as a "gift" was generally bestowed on only a few aspects of your intellectual development. It didn't ensure that you were brilliant at anything else, and he'd gained nothing but a feeling of inferiority from associating with similarly "gifted" individuals. Now he associated with everyone: good and bad, moral and amoral, practical and impractical, intelligent and unintelligible. He selected his friends based on how a person acted and treated other people, rather than what he owned—IQ or otherwise.

Now, as he studied his companions, Harley's lips began to twitch and he quickly averted his gaze to a dirt smudge on Emma's wall.

Geeks.

He wondered whether "geek" qualified as a life-choice. If so, it was one he'd decided against, years before.

Max, one of Renaldo's *psi* squad, squatted to adjust a knob on his EM equipment. It was a welcome distraction, until Harley realized this wasn't the first time they'd met. He recognized him, and it wasn't from a Mensa meeting. He and Max had both attended last year's SF convention.

For an instant, Harley's self-assurance wobbled. Then he remembered, and his tension faded. He relaxed, and went back to the nonchalant, but helpful, pose he'd adopted for this little charade. There was no way Max could recognize him—he'd been in Chewbacca costume the last five times he'd attended.

Just then, Max looked up and caught his eye. He grinned, and Harley tried to pretend he

hadn't really been staring, but he had a feeling that Max somehow knew who'd been in that Wookiee outfit.

Damned psychics!

Renaldo would be interested in hearing about it, Harley was sure. Rabbit Man didn't want to be the only costumed crusader in their midst. Despite any excuses he'd made, or had pointedly avoided making, that pink-eared getup was a lot to live down, and it was eating heavily at his ego. Renaldo would be quick to jump on what he considered a sign of weakness in someone else, even if his friends regularly went to conferences and conventions garbed in costumes, too.

What he wouldn't like, Harley guessed, was for Harley Chalmers to come across as anything but undereducated and banal. If Renaldo had known about the Mensa connection, it would have thrown him, and the prospect was so tempting Harley had to bite his lower lip not to casually drop some mention of it in his face. It was only the fact that he'd hate himself for bowing to pettiness which stopped him.

And, the truth was, he had no wish to antagonize either Renaldo or his team any further. Theirs was a valid contribution, and it wasn't as though they were getting paid to lay it on the line.

Harley appreciated what they were doing for Emma, but the lack of preparation worried him. It wasn't a lack of machinery (they had loads of gadgets) or any deficit in background research (the laptops and stacks of paper attested to their efforts in that, too), but more a matter of emotional preparation; of readiness for battle. In Harley's view, all of them—from Renaldo on through to their cataloguer, Reisha Forsythe—saw this as an intellectual exercise. That much had been obvious from the moment Merlin had opened his mouth, and remarked with amused enthusiasm about “Forsby's motivational techniques” and his “quick turnaround time”.

They weren't prepared to deal with evil.

Oh, they'd read about it, all right, but none of them had ever touched the gritty; ever seen the coal face at the blood and leaky guts level. Consorting with the Ether and dalliance with gallivanting ghosts didn't cut it. It was all too metaphysical; too estranged from reality. Harley was willing to bet they'd never actually interviewed, or even seen, anyone with a true capacity for evil; never had any kind of intercourse with the type of inhuman monster who could actually take a life. Renaldo had

been right to hesitate, and Harley hoped he'd made the right decision. If this was a demon, or even some devilish homicidal maniac, neither Renaldo nor his ghost hunters would be prepared to decipher truth from fallacy. They might not even recognize evil if it wore a good enough disguise. Terence Forsby, who'd maimed for pleasure, and murdered for convenience, had been very popular in some groups, including his local church.

Would any of these people have the emotional callus to withstand an assault? Harley studied them from under half-closed lids. Renaldo's paranormal group included Merlin, Reisha, and Max. Small group, but loyal to each other, and dedicated to the task at hand. Harley appreciated the fact that Parrish had kept the numbers low, because he no doubt had a dozen more interested parties he could have called on to participate.

Besides Parrish, the paranormally-affected participants here were, of course, Emma and Nicky (*and me*, Harley recalled, his eyes widening slightly). They'd all seen the dog, and both he and Emma had seen Forsby as well.

Emma's coworkers, Dale and Chang, were here for "moral support". The *psi* guys didn't seem too happy about having so many observers in the room—*sleight-of-hand being what it is*, Harley's cynical side supplied.

The emotional climate was charged, ranging from clearly nervous to clearly excited.

Harley sighed. *Not at all what it should be*. If their common sense had matched all that brain power, they'd have already concluded they should be terrified.

Even Emma had exaggerated ideas regarding the degree of safety and protection he and Renaldo's team could offer her. She seemed to think that she could handle Forsby, but in Harley's opinion, she'd been damn lucky—and plenty angry. From what he'd seen, fear and guilt were more likely to dictate her actions than fury.

And fury hadn't affected the corpse in the ice. Emma had been livid, but that hadn't made it vanish. Eventually, it had gone, but it wasn't because Emma had ordered it away.

And I can't protect her. As much as he might want to, he didn't have a weapon to use on Forsby. Research on the Net hadn't helped much, either. He tried to picture himself calling down a white light of protection around Emma, and failed.

He had holy water in his pocket, and it was going to stay there unless things became too frantic. He had a feeling it would have about the same effect on Forsby as a string of garlic.

There'd been a couple of other online suggestions Harley had read, about group prayers and chants, joining hands and demanding that the spirit leave, but those had been mostly about possession. Another protection activity called for dredging up a positive thought and bracing yourself with it, in the forefront of your mind, much like a shield. That smacked a little of Peter Pan, searching for his happy thought, but Harley had already decided that when the moment came, he'd toss holy water, chant, dance around and deluge them all with happy thoughts if that's what it took to send Forsby packing. Whatever shame or embarrassment he might feel doing so was nothing compared to the ignoble compulsion to fill his pants whenever Forsby was present. Nobody would be finding fault with the means when the bastard bled all over the walls during his departure.

* * * * *

"You need to tell him." Nicky had been adamant that Renaldo needed to know. "It might give him some idea why this is happening to you—and why it's getting worse."

Emma flinched at the last. There was no use denying it. She'd been deluding herself into thinking that the ghost appearances were counteracting the rat visits, but it wasn't true. If the last rat onslaught was any indication, both things were getting worse.

It was the kind of admission she would hate making to Renaldo or his team. She could imagine their gleeful reactions, which they'd try to conceal behind scientific curiosity. She could understand it—she'd felt the same excitement-laced curiosity herself, every time she went to a plant pathology conference, or discovered some novel result in a lab test. If you were hooked, you were hooked, and Renaldo's people wouldn't be doing this in their off hours unless they enjoyed it. Those glints of enthusiasm behind Max's horn-rimmed glasses weren't feigned.

It was then she realized how much harder it would be to tell them about Jock. She didn't want to bring him into this—didn't want him anywhere near her or the situation. It might make him worry, which would justify his further intrusion into her life. What was worse, though, was the opportunity it would give him to offer his version of events. She was afraid he might say something awful about her to Harley or Nicky or even Renaldo.

What could be worse than the truth?

Jock's version of it.

Emma, lost in thought, chewed her lower lip and stared absently at Nicky, only to see her shift uncomfortably. Her face was flushed, and she was having trouble meeting Renaldo's eyes. It occurred to Emma that Nicky might be on the verge of one of her own episodes. She gripped Nicky's arm and looked a question at her.

Nicky responded with a quick shake of her head.

Not that, then. Emma, distracted from her own problems, caught an odd look on Renaldo's face. He was watching Nicky, but there was something other than romantic attraction at work here.

Uh-oh. He knows.

Nicky shifted again, her blush deepening. It was the first time Emma could recall seeing her at a disadvantage. She'd always been amazed at the degree of self-assurance Nicky displayed, and had frequently wished she had even half as much. She'd always assumed that confidence was the difference between someone with control over her psychic ability, like Nicky, and someone who played a perpetual victim to her "gift". It was almost painful now to see Nicky so discomfited. Emma reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze.

Was there ever really such a thing as control?

* * * * *

Nicky was beginning to think there wasn't. She'd come *this* close to believing she'd carved out a normal life for herself, but she had a feeling she was now *this* close to blowing it.

All because of one cute guy who likes to deck himself out as a rabbit.

You wish. She was still waiting for The Rabbit to make his move. So far, all she'd seen were a few intense looks, and a phone call. Very businesslike.

Nothing personal. He might as well have said it. Either she'd misread the signals, or Renaldo was as cautious with romance as she.

Besides, life was rarely simple—Nicky's life, anyway. She never went out with men who knew about "Bones". It made things far too complicated, and always left her wondering whether there was a true attraction, or if her date was searching for "signs". Kinky on the prowl—and she had no

intention of dating it.

Another reason for Emma to watch out. Harley had been showing her so much interest that Nicky questioned his motives, even if Emma didn't. She didn't want to see Emma hurt by some bent bastard with a fetish for the dead.

Like Renaldo?

For the thousandth time, Nicky wished her life was as normal as she tried to pretend it was. Going for the norm had taken guts and determination, and she had been afraid—really, truly, and almost unbearably afraid—for years.

I never want to feel like that again.

Then, what the hell am I doing here?

The truth was, the only reason she was here was because she knew Emma needed her—needed someone who could understand what she was going through. As much as Nicky tried to disregard the past, she could never forget those feelings of horror; of fear so intense that her muscles locked up and her mind went blank. Times when she'd wet herself in terror and not even realize it.

Overwhelming.

There'd been terror-dredged days and weeks, when there'd been nowhere to go but down. Heaven had held no promise, then, and her future had been a graphic panorama written in yellowing bone.

She'd had to learn to cope, and she'd done it by discounting what she could, and attempting to overlook the rest. The struggle, and her meager mastery over the nagging revelations playing on her internal viewing screen, were what had drawn her to Emma. Emma was as much a victim as she—maybe more. She couldn't internalize what appeared so blatantly to others; couldn't hide the way Nicky could. There were nagging reminders, jokes, stories, exaggerations, and lies to contend with.

She can't even pretend....

But Emma, like Nicky, was a survivor. She also had the gutsy determination it took to carve out a life. She'd had to, to get through her "episodes". Better still, she retained her sense of humor. Sometimes it was dimmed by frustration, but her ability to laugh, despite shame, despite embarrassment, had taught Nicky a lot.

With Emma, Nicky could relax. If the odd skeleton appeared outside the closet, it didn't matter, because Emma didn't judge.

Nicky twisted her head, only to find Renaldo studying her. This examination was far different from his interested, and rather gallant, perusal of several nights before. This one made her feel like a bug, about to be squashed.

First, they gas you, then they pin you, wings splayed, so that all the anatomical structures are revealed. Everything which made her tick. Only, in Renaldo's case, since he wasn't an entomologist, it would be a psychological breakdown, as he attempted to determine what structures in her brain gave her a vision beyond the norm.

Her eyes flashed, and Renaldo's calm expression faltered, just a little.

Good!

She switched her gaze to Max, and then to Merlin, who was ogling her in a way which suggested adulation, but had nothing sexual, or even sensual, about it. She narrowed her eyes, but Merlin was a little dense.

"It's not an intellectual failing," Harley whispered, behind her back.

It startled her. It seemed the policeman was more intuitive than she'd thought.

"Professional geek," he continued knowledgeably. "I'll take care of it."

Nicky didn't know what he did, but whatever it was, it brought a nervous chuckle to Emma's lips. Merlin, for his part, glanced over Nicky's right shoulder, and his eyes widened. He swallowed almost convulsively, and quickly averted his eyes to his equipment.

"Damn, you're good." Nicky disguised her whisper as a cough.

"Damn right," Harley retorted.

* * * * *

It can't be us against them. Nicky was agitated, Emma was nervous, and Harley knew he'd just alienated Merlin, if not Max, who was standing, glowering, in the background. To counter what may have been a stupid show of antagonism, Harley smiled and nodded to Renaldo, then extended a hand toward Merlin. "So after we get the interview process over with, maybe I'll get to see one of those cathode ray magnetometers." Harley's grin widened. "Tell me you've got one—*please.*"

In the background, Max sniggered. “Oh, gawd. Not *that* again.”

Merlin’s grin was now as big as Harley’s own.

“Don’t get him started—*please*.”

But it had, nevertheless, been the right thing to say. Of all the people on Renaldo’s team, Merlin was the one most accustomed to alienation. He recognized an olive branch when he saw one, and extended his hand to shake Harley’s. The last thing he wanted was to blow this investigation, especially since it involved ... Bones. “Sorry,” he offered gruffly, his voice trembly.

Merlin was nervous, and it read like the excited qualms of a fan encountering his idol. Harley lowered his head so the man wouldn’t see the amusement in his expression, and misinterpret it. Obviously, this was a case of mistaken identity, and in his enthusiasm, Merlin had gotten carried away. He had the ladies mixed up—had mistaken Nicky for Emma—but he’d figure it out soon enough, once introductions were made.

There was something naive, yet contagious, about that kind of enthusiasm. Harley tried to recall the last time *he’d* been that excited about something—so much so that he’d let it overwhelm his good sense.

It didn’t take much recollecting. The answer was standing nearby and he grinned at her silhouette. He’d been overriding his good sense ever since he’d met Emma Rathburn.

She glanced at him then, almost as if she sensed his uncertain mood. Harley nodded reassuringly. No point in Emma knowing he was nearly as tense as she was, maybe more.

The uneasiness stayed with him as the group drifted into Emma’s lounge. If this was going to be a simple, very basic, question-and-answer period, fine, but he didn’t like the idea of being subjected to any kind of in-depth psychological evaluation. Since that was Renaldo Parrish’s specialty—he even taught it, for God’s sake—it seemed likely the man’s questionnaire would be just as in-depth and personal. Normally, that wouldn’t have bothered Harley much—he had nothing, really, to hide—but he had the uncomfortable suspicion he was somehow on trial. He was, ostensibly, the only one with any real connection to Forsby’s case. He was a policeman. Ergo, he must somehow be responsible. Violent behavior to summon violence.

Payback. The vicious policeman who’d helped indict Forsby’s father. Even if the father was

the one responsible for his son's early demise, the ghoul wanted vengeance against the man with the badge.

Vendetta beyond the grave.

Harley pondered it briefly, then shrugged at the lunacy. It would certainly limit his job prospects if every arrest he made had payback beyond the pall. Besides, revenge only made sense if Emma had known Forsby, too. The ghost had turned up on the scene before Harley Chalmers ever had.

What about the Ice Man at the skating rink? It hadn't been Forsby—Emma had admitted as much. Had she known who it was, though? Harley hadn't pushed her for an ID, and after the body had disappeared the identity hadn't seemed all that important. Now he recalled that Forsby had been a stranger to her, too, until Harley had put a name to his face.

These were the kinds of questions Renaldo wouldn't be asking, because he and his team hadn't had the privilege of a close encounter at an ice skating rink. At this point, they'd be assuming one ghost person, and one ghost dog. Harley was beginning to feel the way he sometimes did on the streets—outnumbered. Between ghost canines and ghastly ecto-psychopaths, this part of town was getting far too crowded.

Harley opened his mouth to ask Emma the identity of the Ice Man, then quickly snapped it closed again, as he realized how much grief it might be letting her in for. So, she was a medium, and he, for one, could testify to the “realness” of some of her apparitions. But to let these people know....

He looked at her, their eyes meeting. Maybe Renaldo's team *had* to know. Maybe it was the only way to get her some help—to give her a chance to live a normal life.

It's up to her. Harley had leaned over, to whisper his question in her ear, when she cut him off.

“It was Forsby,” she whispered, her eyes moist with remembered fear. “Off the porch—but it wasn't him at the rink.”

Gooseflesh danced down Harley's spine again. Damn, if they weren't getting awfully good at mind-reading around here. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Forsby, or any one of a dozen other nasty ghouls, would have no problem at all selecting this moment to make an appearance. There was

apparently a surplus of e.s.p. in the air.

Danger. Danger. Danger.

The tingling of the hairs on his nape was warning. It was the same one he had when a gun was aimed his way. Deliberately, he made his face expressionless. “Are ghosts ‘timeless’?” he asked aloud. “Or are they subject to chronology?”

Renaldo’s somewhat suspicious “What do you mean?”, wasn’t any more helpful than Max’s “Some of them don’t know that they’re dead—”, or Reisch’s added “—which means they don’t know time has passed.” Merlin began babbling about some theory, regarding light and time, and being able to exist in two places at once. Since Harley had read the same article several months before, he didn’t find that particularly helpful, either.

He was beginning to understand, though, why Renaldo was their team leader. He was the only one to pick up the undercurrents.

“I see,” Harley said vaguely, careful to keep any traces of sarcasm out of his voice. These people were volunteers, doing the best they could despite the fact that they were, as yet, working in the dark. “Explains a lot.”

Renaldo took it wrong. Harley knew it from the quick flash of his eyes and the firm set of his jaw. “What’s your point?”

The man could look positively pugnacious when he wanted.

“No point,” Harley attempted. He held up his hands in a gesture meant to pacify.

Renaldo still wasn’t buying it.

Harley tried again. “Okay. Are they working on the same timelines we are? Or do they sometimes make mistakes, and ‘follow up’ on something they’ve already seen but that has yet to happen?”

“Eternal vision—precognitive, only because it has yet to happen on our timeline.” Max frowned, as he considered it. “Interesting question, Chalmers.”

Renaldo was much more blunt, and his next words were enough to make Merlin elbow him. He’d never seen Renaldo so aggressive with a client before.

Because Renaldo now crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “You just want to know

whether it's you, rather than Dr. Rathburn, who's responsible for Forsby's appearance," he said.

* * * * *

It was awful. Harley and Renaldo were openly hostile, which was both pointless, and absurd. Emma recalled their last encounter at the restaurant. Granted, they'd had some kind of friendly rivalry going, but they'd managed to act civilized—none of this strutting and flexing.

Now? Dicks. They're acting like dicks.

Emma glanced over at Nicky to see if she'd actually said it. Real or imagined? Whatever the source, it was apt. Emma bit her lips to suppress a nervous giggle. *Power of association*. She'd been hanging out with Nicky so long she was even beginning to think like her.

Renaldo's glower deepened and Harley stiffened, then took a stauncher pose. Any amusement Emma had been feeling fled.

Absolutely ridiculous. Irritation puckered her brow, and when she glanced over, she could see Nicky felt much the same. The tension in the room was so thick it felt like a dense cloud. It was also growing colder.

Dale shivered. "Get out your skates, Chang," he muttered. "Cold as a witch's tit in here." He smirked at Nicky. "No offence, Nix." He and Chang had been quiet till now out of "deference to the situation" (Chang's words), but the truth was, Chang wasn't really that sensitive to feelings or atmosphere. He'd just wanted to be sure the big PI-Paranormal Investigator man wouldn't kick them off the scene.

Chang would have had to be thick as a brick, though, not to notice the "atmosphere" this time, and one glance told Emma the story: Chang was white, but the glitter in his eyes was more enthusiastic than fearful. Like some skydiver, river rafter, or bungee jumper, he was in it for the thrill. And what was a thrill without an element of danger?

But it doesn't mean he's not scared.

Emma frowned as Dale unsuccessfully concealed a chuckle behind a cough. Dale and Chang were both enjoying this far too much, but for different reasons.

Emma wasn't enjoying herself at all. Her skin was waging a war between gooseflesh and shivers, but—*dammit!*—if she was going to let any sign of weakness show! It would be just what

Forsby wanted—just what he was looking for. She had the horrifying suspicion that all the anger and angst in the room would give him more than enough reason to show his face. *Food for the emotionally unstable.* The idea was unfounded, but that didn't stop it from being terrifying. Her hand, as she reached out to grasp Dale's on one side, and Nicky's on the other, was ice cold.

Only to find that Nicky's hand was even colder. "*Do something!*" Nicky pleaded, her whisper hoarse in Emma's ear. She sagged slightly, but Renaldo was there the next instant to boost her up. He pulled her back, away from Emma's side.

It was as good as an accusation, in Emma's view—one that, unfortunately, she couldn't help but agree with.

It's my fault! Whether you considered it metaphysically or metaphorically, Emma knew she was the cause of this debacle. She was responsible for bringing these people together, and, in some manner she couldn't define, for the way it was going wrong. Maybe it was a product of synergy, or the wrong combination of psychic energies, but something terrible was about to happen. They all knew it, and it was the reason tempers were rising out of control, even as the temperature was plummeting.

And guilt is a fuckin' waste of time, Emma thought toughly. Disempowerment of the feeble-hearted.

She took a staunch stance, determined to end this. Their eyes were all on *her* now, which made the tune-out harder, but she persevered, with scrunched-up eyes and a dare-you grimace.

It took more than determination to stabilize her tumbling thoughts, though. Fear couldn't always be out-staunched. It was at the point when she was ready to give up in frustration, as internal quavers met external shivers, that she felt the warm grasp of Harley's fingers on hers. He'd stolen the hand which had been gripping Nicky's, and she knew without looking who it was. Her relief was unfounded, but for some reason, the contact made her feel sheltered, if not exactly safe. Better still, it gave her the confidence she needed. What happened next she couldn't begin to describe, or figure out. Later, she could never recall exactly what mindset she used—all she knew was that it worked. The tension weighing them down cracked, with an audible sizzle of static. Gradually, the iciness fled, and the room warmed, to ambient temperature.

There were sighs, “pew”s, and smirks as everyone began to relax—everyone except Emma. “Damn!” she muttered. The eyes which squinted open, to meet Harley’s, were apologetic.

“Uh-oh.” He knew, God help him. Harley’s scabbed-over scrapes from his last close encounter ached in anticipation. “Can’t you *stop* it?!”

Emma shook her head, shame and misery in her expression.

Nicky overheard. “Emma!” she complained, frustrated. “You *didn’t*—!”

Dale smirked and nudged Chang. “She did.”

The last of Chang’s edginess broke on a snort of laughter.

Renaldo heard the byplay, but so far, no one had bothered to fill his people in. He lost some of his stiffness and became intent on watching Emma. It wasn’t easy—Nicky, the woman who kept invading his dreams (dressed in a low-cut red dress and siren heels), was still half-nestled in his arms.

Max was listening now, too. What had the woman done? Judging from both their tones, and their looks of distaste, it could have been anything from a fart, to a rude comment. When Emma nodded in miserable admission, and Dale groaned, then grinned, the other guy, Chang, began laughing like some kind of loon.

“And not a tree in sight,” Harley muttered whimsically, and Dale shot him an amused look. “Would a chair help?” Harley inquired.

“No,” Nicky snapped. She couldn’t help but be annoyed. However negative the feedback from her would-be lover, Renaldo, she’d dressed for this occasion carefully—“dressed to impress”, so to speak. It might not be the red, low-cut number of Renaldo’s dreams—

How did I know that? She looked up at him then, stunned by the realization.

He shifted to stare at her full on.

A meeting of eyes. More—a meeting of minds. Nicky shivered. In that moment, she felt raw; exposed. Her next action was defensive. *Don’t let him know.*

She turned back to Emma, hands on hips. “Don’t you *dare!* You said it didn’t react to tension.”

“It doesn’t—it didn’t—I don’t know.” Emma shrugged, tears in her eyes now. “Dammit!”

Nicky knew what it was like to be the centre of unwonted attention, and she was filled with

remorse. She was doing to Emma the very thing she was hoping, at all costs, to avoid for herself.

“Sorry, Emma,” she whispered. “I’m *so* sorry.”

Emma barely heard it over the growing din: an underlying, rumbling vibration, that was rattling the cutlery in the drawer, tinkling the cups in the cupboard, and setting the floorboards creaking and cracking.

“Shit!” Merlin hissed, his eyes on the swinging lamp overhead. “Earthquake!” he bellowed. “Get in the doorway!”

“No!” Nicky shouted. She twisted in Renaldo’s arms. “It’s not her fault!” she spat out, defiantly. There was no point holding back now. Her narrowed eyes focused on the other parapsychologists. “Better than *bones!*” She shrugged out of Renaldo’s loose grasp and placed one arm protectively around Emma’s shoulders.

Emma couldn’t believe it. Nicky wouldn’t allow her to be alone in this, but she was taking herself down, too. Emma’s eyes misted, but she was too snuffly to say the words of thanks. The last thing she wanted to do was break down and cry. Not now.

They were close. There was no mistaking the thuds and thunks; squeals and patters.

Harley stiffened, trying to steel himself against what he knew was coming. Emma’s confused reply to Nicky—the “I don’t know” regarding the rats’ appearance—was more than alarming—it was terrifying. He wondered whether Emma even knew what it implied. If the tension, which had been thick as a knife, had been redirected into this rat avalanche, they were in trouble.

Did Emma really have any control? Over the rats’ habits—particularly, their eating habits?

As the noise levels upped, to match the roar and rumble of the earthquake Merlin had predicted, Harley saw the looks of horror on Renaldo’s team members. They had no idea what was coming, but they were doing their damndest to take it in stride. Reisha’s hands were shaking as she tried to record the sounds, and Max was quivering as he adjusted a dial on the magnetometer.

Renaldo was torn, but one glance at Nicky told him she could handle this—whatever it was. At the same time, he felt some resentment that she hadn’t bothered to tell him; to warn him and his team so they could be prepared. He moved, at the same time Harley did.

It shocked him a little to see Harley put the research team first. The man was white-lipped and

tense, but his face was expressionless, and his demeanor, composed. His eyes flicked back once, toward Emma, but apparently whatever he saw there was enough to reassure him.

Renaldo looked in that direction, too, but at Nicky. Like Emma, she could handle this—whatever it was. She was resigned, rather than fearful.

Harley, for his part, knew he had to act. The memory of his own “first encounter” was still too fresh. *If Dale hadn't been there, to buck me up with humor....*

He moved faster than Renaldo. The next second, he'd drawn all of the team, including Renaldo, into a huddle. “Brace yourselves!” he shouted.

“Against what?!” Renaldo's eyes were as wide as Max's. The difference was, his jaw was set in anger. “Not an earthquake.”

The windows exploded as hundreds of furred bodies assaulted the glass. Over the crash, the roar, the squeaks and squawks of complaint, the screams, thuds and bashes, Chang Avery's elated “Hot damn!” went almost, but not completely, unheard.

* * * * *

Reischa had seen whale beachings, studied bird navigation, and had once done an essay on forager migration in the northern hemisphere. Her bio degree had covered a lot of generalist territory—but nothing like this.

She was a biologist first, and an amateur psychologist second. The psychology stuff she'd mainly picked up from Renaldo and Max, and Merlin would have provided a case study for a lot of disciplines, but nothing she'd seen in any of their research had prepared her for this. She felt raw, like someone had opened a hole in her chest. Her eyes flicked to Renaldo in hopes of reassurance, but what she saw there inspired panic, instead. Renaldo was scared, and confused. He wasn't screaming in terror yet, but the tremor was there. Reischa could read it under his skin, like the carbonation in a stoppered drink. Renaldo was ready to explode, but whether it was in anger or hysteria Reischa couldn't be sure.

Merlin was blanked, like a sheet of unmarked paper, and was nearly as pale. She had a feeling he was on the verge of blanking out entirely—he wobbled as she watched—and she pinched his forearm to bring him back.

Max was screaming, but no one on this plane could hear him. He was screeching for help; begging for intercession.

Like a worshipper plying a bloody saint.

As the noise swallowed her thoughts, detaching the rest of her concentration from her reason, it was only Harley's voice which kept her together.

Voice of authority.

Don't want it. Don't need it.

As her world shook and shattered, under the weight of a thousand little feet, the policeman was the only stability she knew; the only grounded force in their small circle.

For the first time that night, Reischa was really glad the "useless" voice of authority was there.

* * * * *

Whatever they'd expected, it hadn't been this. Merlin's knees were buckling under the onslaught, and it was only Reischa's determined pinching which kept him alert. It could have been worse. A couple of them were real edgy, but so far, none of the researchers had succumbed to it. They'd done nothing to stir the little rotters into baring their teeth, or chomping on exposed tissue.

Parapsychologists, Harley reasoned. Accustomed to the bizarre.

Psychologists, accustomed to observation—and long, boring hours of listening to people talk.

He shook himself out of his reverie, and fought to keep his feet still. His fear had faded substantially when he'd realized that an out-of-control Emma didn't necessarily equate to ravenous rats. He knew in his own way he was lucky. He was doing what he did best, what he'd trained for, and it gave him the edge over his panic.

As long as there's the public to serve— The last was so coated in caustics it left a nasty flavor in his brain. He couldn't, for the life of him, figure out why he'd disparage himself right now. Not when he'd been struggling so hard to shield himself—and anyone else he could—with damned happy thoughts.

Thank God, I didn't bring Choco!

There was a happy thought when he needed one. The outcome of that kind of encounter didn't

bear thinking of.

But he could also understand some of Choco's endless need to run off his energy. The adrenaline in Harley's blood was hitting his feet, and he was getting really impatient playing statue. His desperation—to rid himself of the stink, the fleshy moisture, the weight of hot-bodied vermin—made his toes twitch in his boots. He wanted to kick, stomp, lash out, crunch.

No! They're victims, like us.

Where did all that come from?

But it's so fuckin' repulsive! Enough to deter anyone. Enough to keep anyone at a distance.

He sucked in a quick breath, which he instantly regretted, then sharpened his eyes on Emma's expression. There was distaste and embarrassment there, but not enough revulsion, to Harley's way of thinking. Could anyone become so accustomed to this—to this grotesque feces-ridden threat, of mauling and voracious hunger? Inured enough to overlook it—to “take it in her stride”? How sick *was* she?

As attractive as he found her, he suddenly wondered why she was doing this to them—to herself. *For attention? There was enough psychological data here for a hundred papers—to fund a dozen studies.*

Harley shook his head to clear it, and the rat weight shifted perilously, as some of the slumberers came awake.

Not my thoughts.

He couldn't entirely close them out, though. There was too much truth in the objectivity. Why would anyone subconsciously resort to this? It was enough to repulse total strangers; more than enough to deter acquaintances, friends, would-be lovers.

His eyes met hers, and he knew there was a question in his he couldn't hide. Doubt, he couldn't suppress. *You shouldn't have made it so obvious, Emma. A casual “no” would have sufficed. You didn't have to scare me, nearly to death.*

She averted her eyes, and he could sense her hurt.

Not the first time.

He also knew, in that moment of keen insight, that this was the reaction she'd expected. He'd

been too perseverant, though—till now. For a while there, she'd actually allowed herself to hope.

It's not her.

He knew it as clearly in that moment as he knew that *this* thought, with all its clarity, was his own. Nicky's "*It's not her fault!*" had been based on more than defense of a friend—it had been based on some internal vision. Emma might be part of this, but she could never have stirred this much angst on her own. It just wasn't in her. To do this to people—to subject them to this hot-furred, fleshy-stinking, urine-reeking, feces-ridden mortification—required a vindictiveness Emma didn't possess.

"Emma!" he whispered, slowly extending a hand in her direction. Fast moves were out. Waking up the beasts wouldn't win her any points.

But, he wasn't about to win any points, either. That small gesture of support was the final condemnation, as far as Emma was concerned. She didn't read it as the placatory apology he'd intended; she saw it as a stone cast in her direction.

Blame, pure and simple. Harley had seen it before, for the most part in innocents, caught in some minor felonious indiscretion. Many of them were so ready to accept the guilt, to take on the blame for their activities, that they needed to be dissuaded from clearing their consciences by tossing themselves behind bars. In Emma's mind, the policeman had found her guilty, and was ensuring that all the others in the room realized it. He'd no doubt arrest her next. It was no more than she expected.

Harley knew it then—he could read it in her eyes. He'd tossed her to the Rats, and it was too late to tell her differently.

Chapter Eleven

After the last rat had exited, with a low squeak, and a four-footed nervous patter, Merlin dug a pair of forceps out of a dissecting kit in his pocket, then bent down almost reverently and picked up a rat pellet. “Incredible!” he kept muttering, over and over. The fact that the word was muttered through white lips, and the hand with the forceps was shaking like a palsy victim's, didn't diminish his awe.

“Shovel would be easier,” Dale remarked, before following Emma into the kitchen. She'd scurried out of the room almost as quickly as the rats. “Hey, Emma!” he bellowed. “Where's the vac?”

Reischa was shaking, and Nicky guessed she was near tears. She took the woman's hand and led her towards the bathroom. “It's not really that bad,” Nicky was saying. “It's the surprise, more than anything. And tonight,” she continued, in a resigned voice, “I dressed up, too—wanted to make an impression.”

“Y'all did that.” Reischa's sigh was gusty, her shudder heartfelt. “I'm impressed.”

Nicky gave a wry smile. “And of course if it had been depressed I was going for, I'd really be getting somewhere.”

Harley was listening to the interplay, clearly pleased that everyone was in control once more. Max dug out his laptop, and flipped up the top. “This has happened before?” he managed.

Before Harley could answer, Renaldo interrupted. He tapped the lid on the laptop, then as Max jerked back, popped the lid closed. “No more,” he said, tensely. “I think, Max, the interview's over for tonight.”

At Harley's nod of thanks, Renaldo bowed slightly—again, with that arrogant tilt to his head which should have looked ridiculous, given the amount of rat urine he was wearing—before picking up some equipment and heading for the car.

Max was arguing with him, something about PK levels and missed opportunities. “—should do the interview *now*, while it's fresh.” And then, “Hell, Renaldo! It's *Bones!*”

Harley, who was trailing them at a distance, arms full of cameras and lights, heard Renaldo's odd answer. "Just because *she* can see inside graves, Max, doesn't mean *I* want to."

"You're way too literal for a psychologist," Merlin griped, from the background.

"Nevertheless, I must admit that after tonight, you do have a point."

A few minutes later the team had departed and Harley was beginning to realize he'd worn out his welcome. That wasn't exactly hostility in Chang Avery's face—it read more like he and the others had closed up ranks against Harley the Policeman: protective custody of their wayward friend. If he wanted to talk to Emma, he'd either have to go through them, or talk to a crowd. Neither option appealed. How could he explain to her what had happened—about that weird invasion of his thought processes? Denial wouldn't do him any good, and neither would adopting Dale Iverson's light patter.

He'd never before had trouble with romance, but then, he'd never met anyone like Emma. He'd always figured the right words would come to him when and if needed. He'd acquired what now appeared to be a misconception: that most "romantic" strife could be resolved without discussion. The rare situation which couldn't be resolved by physical contrivance, could be defused by quick wits and a nimble tongue.

It was obvious that this time, no contrivance (physical or otherwise) was going to work. He'd abandoned quick command of the spoken language somewhere in Emma's lounge, and he was too rattled to come up with a clear set of thoughts he could call his own. What the situation *didn't* need was for him to open his big mouth and spout anything he'd have to take back later.

So, he attempted to mend things, at least a little, by quietly helping to rub stains out of the furniture. Tomorrow, he'd order her a new couch and matching chairs as a gesture of support. She'd send them back, of course, but at least she'd know he was thinking of her, and the trouble it took to turn away the delivery people might not exactly endear him to her, but it would make him foremost in her thoughts.

Maybe I'll even deliver them personally.

On the short trip home, though, he knew it wouldn't happen. He wouldn't do any of it—furniture or delivery. His decision, there at her house, had been more one of those wish-list things than a practical plan for action. Something to satisfy his urge to do something; to help take some of

the pressure off.

She would never understand his motivation. She wouldn't believe he'd still want to know her, just for being Emma. She'd think he was obsessing over her for the "uniqueness" of her abilities. Given his abhorrence only hours before, she'd wonder why he wanted to stay in the game—whether this was actually some undercover mission or maybe just a weird compulsion. She'd be convinced he was trying to buy her off—to pacify her anger and hurt with gifts. To belittle her feelings by belittling his own—as though those few moments of resentment and anger, that he'd cast in her direction, could be negated by some baubles or furnishings.

And she'll think I'm taking over her life.

Hell, his inner voice growled, doesn't she get it? I even loaned her my dog.

Who'd promptly attacked the wheels of the only guy who probably *could* help her out.

Good going, Chalmers.

Face it: she doesn't need you. And if she ever had, he'd wrecked it. Now, whatever he did to fix things would only make her think he had an "agenda"—some hidden reason for courting her. She didn't have enough self-esteem to believe that he'd go to so much effort, simply because he liked her.

But did she honestly believe he would loan Choco to just anyone?

Not everyone likes to be crunched and slobbered on, his cynical side retorted.

And not every one likes gifts. Emma already had one obsessive bastard in her life. She didn't need two.

It was no good, and he might as well admit it. Gifts and protestations of admiration and affection wouldn't get him anywhere. Emma would never be convinced—not while her rat problem was foremost in her thoughts. To her way of thinking, no one could like her that much—expensive-purchase or stick-your-neck-out-for-her-sake much. She'd be sure it was guilt, for his rejection; his own self-esteem suffering because he'd shown himself as less than easy-going, broad-minded, tolerant, *self-controlled*.

And, it wouldn't change the way she hated him for his lack of trust—for his inability to discern the truth. Most unforgivable, though, would be the way he'd looked at her. It made him cringe now to admit that had been distaste in his expression. Impossible to convince her that it hadn't been

him reacting—that the detached distaste wasn't his—that he hadn't owned it. Any revulsion he'd felt had been for the situation—

No, Chalmers—be honest, at least with yourself.

It was true. He'd been absolutely revolted—but it hadn't meant that he didn't want to know her. What had caused his almost-rejection was the invasion of objectivity, which had made him question her motives. It was only afterwards he'd realized he knew her too well to doubt her. It wasn't *her* motives which were suspect. Not any longer. Not in his view, anyway.

Because tonight he'd been the recipient for a lot of thoughts that weren't his own. It hadn't been Emma doing it, either. She'd been far too busy and far too disturbed by the rats' impending arrival to play ESP Pipeline. If those had been Emma's thoughts he'd been receiving, they would have been tinged with far more embarrassment. That wasn't mortification he'd been hearing—seeing—thinking. It had been condemnation. As much as she might condemn her own actions, she had also, more than once, exhibited a strength of will which kept her going. Rats might wreck her day, but she'd never allow them to wreck her life. That condemning voice in his head had been more detached analysis than self-derisive mortification.

Not Emma at all.

Which made the Pipeline Theory all the more worth pursuing. If Emma hadn't been projecting or magnifying all those brainwaves, it meant somebody else was. And Emma was no more resistant to manipulation than the next person. Intuitiveness didn't negate naiveté.

Could it have been one of Renaldo's people? That kind of insight would be a valuable tool for a psychic researcher, and even better for a psychologist. *A mind probe into the subconscious.*

Somehow, though, despite his flamboyance, Renaldo gave the impression of being cautious. He'd repeated several times how the “interview” would go—how all their statements would be documented and compared.

Why would he need to bother interviewing, if he could tap into their brains?

To see whether they were lying?

Waste of time, when the object of your study was a dead guy. Get a medium, and be done with it. Renaldo hadn't known about Emma's little rat trick. If he had, he would have given it away.

Harley recalled the bunny suit and grinned. The guy wasn't that good an actor.

Which meant there was something more to this, and Harley reckoned he was on the verge of figuring it out. Emma had lured in more rats this time than ever before—he'd picked up as much from Chang's flippant remarks. Not only was there an increase in numbers, but she'd blown it in front of a bunch of clinical psychologists and bio-researchers, a policeman, and her co-workers.

To say nothing of her would-be lover.

People with power, of sorts—the kind of people who could reject her, label her a freak, or have her jailed as a public nuisance. The kind who could lock her away in some institution, depending on how they perceived her activities. *Criminally insane—eat thy enemies?*

To say nothing of co-workers who may, finally, have been driven to the ends of their ropes. Who might stop placating and start protesting. Who might be at the point where they'd put self-preservation first, or determine the price of friendship wasn't worth the price of mortification and revulsion.

This was no accident, and it had very nearly cost Emma everything. Someone was playing them against each other. Against her.

And I very nearly fell for it.

It was painful to a man's ego when the obvious came up and smacked him in the face. This was one of those times, and it was no use denying it. Harley's lips quirked in a rueful smile.

It ain't gonna happen. I'm not gonna let it.

And I sure as hell won't make the mistake of falling for that crap again.

Why? Harley's eyes glinted. There were times admissions like this were nearly as painful as being played for a fool. He was glad he didn't have to make it to Emma yet. Rejection hurt like hell, too.

Why won't I fall for their crap again?

Because I'd rather fall for Emma first.

* * * * *

It wasn't the end. For the first time in years, Emma was letting down her guard—allowing her conscious mind to focus on all the dreaded conclusions her subconscious mind wanted to downplay.

The conclusions which could rob her of sleep at night; the scenarios in which, like nightmare, she was rooted in place while they came on. *Rats. Dead men, stalking her.*

It's worse for Nicky.

Maybe. Why did it seem, then, like Nicky had so much control? Like she could handle anything?

She wasn't handling it last night.

Emma suddenly wanted to know whether Nicky blamed her. If she didn't, she sure as hell should. Emma's fingers clenched, though, as she reached for the phone. She wasn't strong enough right now, to face rejection.

You could always call Harley.

He'd take her call; she was sure of it. Last night, after his glaring accusation, he'd stayed on to help clean up.

Almost as if he regretted his outburst.

Her mood lightened briefly before she cast that hope aside. Harley had been right to accuse her. Whatever perverted energy was generated by her personal angst or dissatisfaction, she had no right to inflict it on other people. It was both sad and sick. Harley's job was to defend and protect. It made her feel like dirt that he'd had to work so hard at protecting everyone else from her.

Emma sniffed, then bit her lips to stem the tears filling her sinuses. Allowing Harley any more access was akin to asking him to violate everything he believed in. Didn't policemen swear oaths to do those very things: protect and defend? The last thing he needed was to protect one Emma Rathburn against situations of her own making.

She'd called in sick to work today. It had been easy to avoid speaking to anybody but Stan Kreasy, her supervisor. Dale and the others wouldn't be surprised: they'd all been exhausted last night.

Otherwise, there would probably have been a confrontation.

It had never happened before, but then, things had never been this bad. Emma had no doubt that Dale and Nicky were thinking the way she was, given the company last night: that she needed help. Emma just didn't know, after that little display, whether Renaldo would be willing to give it.

He'd rushed his people off to a position of safety as quickly as possible.

It's what I would have done, if I'd been in charge.

That was her problem, pinpointed. *I'm not in control any more.* Her life was going mad, and maybe she was, too.

I need to take charge. Anger alone wasn't going to cut it this time. She needed to be able to manage that anger so it would do some good.

* * * * *

Nicky didn't leave her long in suspense. When Emma's answering machine persisted in picking up her calls, Nicky gave it till lunch, then drove over to her house. There was no point in allowing any more time to elapse. The longer Emma had to dwell, the harder it would be for her to face them all.

She has to know.

Nicky blithely pushed in past when Emma cracked open the door. "No rats," she assured Emma brightly. "Just me." Nicky wandered into the lounge, sat down on the sofa and picked up a crunched ice cream lid, obviously left there from the night before. "Tsk, tsk."

Emma grimaced.

Whatever response Nicky had been waiting for, it wasn't that one. She eyed Emma pityingly. "I meant 'tsk, tsk' in a sensible sort of way. Get over it, Ems." That said, she reached in her bag and pulled out a half-wrapped chocolate bar, from which she very deliberately bit off a big chomp.

"Amazing what Snickers and gelato can do for one's state of mind." She pulled out another bar for Emma.

"No thanks." Emma gave a resigned smile, bordering on the sheepish. "Got it covered." She pulled out the open can of chocolate frosting she'd hidden behind the chair. "If I'd known it was only you," she admitted, spooning out an enormous dollop, "I would have left it on the table."

"You didn't want Renaldo to know you've added bulimia to your list of psychodramas."

Emma nodded. "Too true. Yum," she managed through chocolate-lined teeth. The next was a little harder to understand, but Nicky took it for something like, "Gweat sthuff."

"Sad to need crutches," Nicky began, gesturing with the now partially-eaten candy bar she'd

previously offered Emma. “Butterscotch schnapps, chocolate. Just pathetic.” She eyed Emma a little sardonically, nodded firmly, then latched onto her arm and pulled her out of her chair. “Lunch is almost over—” she began.

“Good thing. Otherwise, you wouldn’t fit through the door.”

“Thus speaks the envious chocoholic. If you let all this psychic shit get to you, Em, you’re doomed to a life of pimples and fat.”

“All the wisdom I can take this morning.”

“Hey, at least, I’m here. You didn’t even bother coming to work, so I could berate you in public.”

Emma’s “Might be better that way” was slightly wistful. But she hightailed it into her room to change when Nicky opened her mouth again.

Nicky plunked down in the chair to wait. “I’m driving!” she shouted. She knew how Emma would read that one: *There is no escape*. Sooner or later, they’d be talking this through.

So far, so good. Emma wasn’t the only one who shouldn’t be left to ponder this alone. By the time Nicky returned, “The Rat” in tow, Dale and Chang could decide whether they were over their rather stilted reticence regarding the night before.

Shellshock, and then some. No point in waiting until Emma sprouted big ears, whiskers, and a tail in their minds’ eyes. *Better to talk it over now*. Mentally, Nicky consigned the experiment she’d been planning for today to tomorrow’s list.

Emma came out of her room and scurried for the front door, looking a lot more like a mouse than one of her rats. “Ready,” she whispered.

Nicky gave her a smirk. “No, you’re not.” She shoved her forward, on through the front door. “But that’s okay, ’cause I am.”

* * * * *

When they reached the lab, Emma lifted her chin determinedly and led the way. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to face down a situation—merely the first time in a while it had been with people she cared so much about. Nicky had saved her butt by hauling her in here like this, and they both knew it. There were some situations time couldn’t heal. Allowing things to fester would only lead to

scar tissue.

The first thing she did after hitting her lab bench was pull out the can of chocolate frosting. Dale shook his head sternly, and Chang loudly tsk-tsked.

Emma donned a sickeningly sweet smile.

Chang shuddered. “Must be all that sugar,” he muttered loudly to Dale.

Emma ignored it, dug out a big dollop of frosting and munched it contentedly. Then, she reached in her bag and pulled out a matching can for Nicky. “Many thanks.” She tossed it to her.

Nicky snatched it like a junkie on her last needle. “You didn’t hit the kitchen. Where was it—hidden behind another chair?”

“Bedroom,” Emma replied, with a shrug. “Midnight snack.”

Dale was looking a little taken aback.

“Don’t go holier-than-thou on us, Iverson,” Nicky growled. “I’m sure you drive Marie to chocolate *a lot*.”

“Maligned, misunderstood, and—“

“—maladjusted,” Chang interrupted, “if you have to resort to comfort food.” At Emma’s glare, he held up his hands defensively. “It’s not the principle of the thing I’m worried about—it’s the carbs. Though,” he added with a quick grin, “the way you skate, maybe you *need* a bigger landing pad.”

Emma gasped, overplaying her outrage. Damn, but it was good to be joking around again—after last night.

“Why do you all assume I’m so judgmental?” Dale complained. “I’m not the one dating a policeman, or some upstanding bastard—oh, pardon me, I meant ‘bastion’—of society.”

Chang sniggered.

Nicky rolled her eyes.

Dale shook his head. “I’m complaining because you damn feminists don’t even think of the rest of us. I have needs, too. I’m,” he paused for effect, then raised his tone an octave, “emotionally shattered.” His look was both plaintive and recriminating. “Where is *my* frosting?”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Nicky muttered.

Emma, for her part, was actually remorseful. “I’m being a sexist prick,” she said woefully.

“Always knew you had it in you.” Chang reached over, grabbed Emma’s spoon, and stole a bite.

Nicky grimaced. “Yuck. She’s not eating off that again. Germs, meningitis, and who knows what else. Disgusting!”

“You’re sitting here munching away with three plates of fungus less than two feet in front of you, and you’re complaining about a little spit? Hello,” Chang said, knocking lightly on Nicky’s head so that she shook him off angrily. “Anybody home?”

“I agree with Nicky,” Dale remarked. He grabbed the half-eaten can from Emma’s grip and the spoon from Chang. “You’re too damn worried about consequences, and what we’re all going to think, Em, but risk’s a part of life. Risk of causing problems; risk of getting caught.” He dipped the spoon, and took a giant gob. His mouth full, he managed, “At the ‘risk’ of sounding pompous? No one’s taking *this* risk—” He spooned out another dollop and licked it cheerfully. “—but me.”

* * * * *

Renaldo was too distracted to focus, and his *id* lay trapped somewhere between the remembered soft squishiness of Nicky’s breast when he’d held her up, and Emma’s bizarrely incomprehensible rat rousing.

He spared a moment of pity for the poor bastards he’d interviewed at the psych ward today. They hadn’t had half the attention they deserved.

Before he could immerse himself in a soul-satisfying dose of guilt, he decided it was time to put up and shut up. Today’s errors would only be compounded by dwelling. Chalk it up to standard deviation of error—one of life’s mini tragedies, which he couldn’t do a whole lot to amend.

He shrugged off his annoying and tedious conscience, but it didn’t help much. He kept remembering the hasty departure of his second-years from the lecture theatre today. They, too, had been impressed with the “new” Renaldo. Gone was the cheerful rapport which had interrupted many a lecture, and always left a few lingerers to chat after the session.

Maybe it’s permanent. Sweat beaded his brow. Maybe yesterday’s shock treatment had rendered some modification to his personality.

If you're worrying about it, you must have lost some of your detachment already.

That rather rational thought helped some, but it didn't banish his almost ludicrous compulsion to blurt all his concerns to Max or Reischa—someone who'd understand.

Who'd analyze you, ya mean. Therapy for the eternally stupid.

And he already knew what Reischa would say. "If you stay 'detached'? You'll make a bundle in a private practice somewhere."

Just what I've always wanted.

Not any more. He'd changed. Somehow, in the space of a solar rotation, he'd changed his life goals.

His sigh was hidden in the roar from the motorcycle. He wasn't a therapist—he was a teacher. A pedant. A source of knowledge for enquiring minds. His heart just wasn't in clinical work. He'd much prefer performing, be it as a singing greetings delivery boy, or capturing a hundred bored students with an enthusiastic lecture.

Therein lies the true test of psychological mastery.

It was the kind of shameful admission which would have appalled his colleagues. It would have been much better couched in some blather about "bettering the world" or "molding the enquiring mind".

He wondered what Nicky would think. At this point she, no doubt, hated his guts, but all things could be rectified, given sufficient persistence.

And flair. Don't forget the flair.

He'd get her on the case study bit and go in for the kill. Flowers, wine, a tango, the theater.

Woed and won.

She's Bones.

We all are, underneath the skin. Get over it.

Renaldo squealed the bike around a corner, and pulled up at the florist shop.

Only to find that Harley Chalmers and Choco the Wretched Mongrel, were already there.

* * * * *

And they hadn't talked—really talked—about it once. Emma couldn't believe it. There hadn't

even been the discomfort of The Great Unsaid, which would have been more speaking by its silence. Dale, Chang, and Nix had left it in that limbo land, where raw feelings were lightly masked over with sarcastic asides. All things considered, Emma knew she'd gotten off lightly. Better than she deserved, but at a level she could handle. She'd ended the work day feeling slightly tougher for the experience, and far more able to cope. It was definitely an improvement, considering how at dawn, she'd been ready to weight her feet down with ice cream and mud cake, and fling herself off the end of a pier somewhere.

It went to show that confrontation—and interventions which forced confrontations—were grossly overrated. Overkill was easy with sensitive issues. If they'd pulled this one apart, there may have been far too much to explain. Far too much which couldn't be explained.

I know I don't have any answers.

Nicky seemed to have a few, but Emma didn't particularly want to hear them. Once she'd discovered that Nicky would be neither offended nor wounded, Emma felt quite happy tuning her out. There were times you just wanted to skate on top of the ice, for safety's sake, and not run the risk of dropping through. Focusing on her problem didn't seem to be helping much these days, either, so she opted not to.

Besides, this was Nicky. Emma didn't know how many of Nicky's answers were bluff, how many real, how many excuses to cover a friend's ass, and how many invention to salve a troubled conscience. It was easy to ascribe a wisdom to Nicky that she didn't necessarily possess, merely on the basis of her self-possession.

Experience. Don't forget her experience.

Locating bones for the authorities was a lot more positive than locating rats for them to clean up after. Emma couldn't, for the life of her, think of a good use for rat acquisition. There were lab rats enough in the breeding programs, and the "Pied Piper" scenario was vastly overrated. Doubtful it would be too popular, considering the concentrations she tended to make somewhere else.

No holes magically opening in mountains to swallow them up.

So far, Dale and Chang appeared willing to tolerate her, if not exactly endorse her actions. She didn't think after last night there'd be too many enthusiastic descriptions of her escapades to

family or friends.

And the last thing I want is to field a call from Marie. Marie had been a good friend for years now, but Emma was pretty certain the support would stop if there was any chance of harm coming to Dale. Emma had no idea what he may have said to her last night, but Marie was generally pretty astute at reading between the lines. Emma wasn't ready for that kind of confrontation—*especially*, she thought, with a trace of the morning's misery, *since I'll probably agree with everything she has to say.*

Nicky dropped her off with a friendly warning. "See ya tomorrow—unless you need me tonight!"

I don't need anyone.

It wasn't quite true, but it was safer. It was time to take responsibility. Call down the White Light for protection before it was needed. Say her prayers. Be logical and cold and not let the goddamn sickness in. That's what it was: an illness, undermining her life. A mental illness, and if she didn't get control of it, it would take away the life she'd fought so hard for – the one she'd etched with sheer determination out of would-be disaster. *Time to stop this thing, this invasion, here and now.* If she could win an hour, a day at a time on this narrow front, it would make her tougher.

Tough enough to handle it, if Terence Forsby comes calling.

No sign of weakness.

Emma banged the door closed with a determined thunk, not allowing herself to recall how blood had poured out of it some nights before. *I am not going to be afraid, ever again.*

Ever!

She didn't realize it would be read as a challenge.

* * * * *

Harley twisted a little frantically when Choco gave an almighty howl.

Earsplitting affection. Renaldo grimaced and dodged a lunge which would have knocked him down. The dog was, apparently, desperately glad to see him. A brisk pat on its head turned out to be a mistake, yielding a quick swipe from an abnormally long tongue, and a determined sniff of his coat pocket. At that, Renaldo yielded, too. He unwrapped the Nashi bar he'd been saving for himself,

before Choco's perusal moved on to his pants. The bar was gone in one swift gulp. He'd moved out of reach before Choco could come in for seconds.

Renaldo looked up, catching the startled expression on Harley's face before the man could squelch it. *Good*, he thought. Unworthy sentiment, perhaps, but nevertheless gratifying. *Touché*.

Round One. I win.

"Poisoning my dog?" Harley asked flippantly, as he pushed open the door to the florist's shop, and ordered Choco rather futilely to "*Sit*."

"Only a matter of time," Renaldo retorted, in the same vein, "before someone does. Why didn't you leave him in the car?" The last came out more harshly than he'd intended, but hell if it wasn't in keeping with the irritation which had been haunting him all day; the mood he'd been determined to abandon. Dammit, if dog slobber and leashes wrapped around his ankles weren't enough to rouse it again.

Let it come.

"He would have howled." Harley, self-possessed once more. He was wearing that subsmile which was so damned annoying; demeaning, even.

Challenging me to state the obvious. It made Renaldo feel like growling—the way Choco was now—as the creature worried the post Harley had him tethered to. "Nice to know you have the situation under control."

Harley merely nodded, but his eyes narrowed.

Renaldo held his breath, counted to ten, recognized all the hostility was absurd, then nearly lost it when Harley remarked, "Funny how you turn up when a man least expects you to."

It was very nearly an accusation. *Either I'm following the bastard, or putting myself in a position to "run into" him.* Renaldo tensed. If he'd had the sword he frequently envisioned himself carrying, he'd have run Harley through.

Non-violent, passive aggression. Counting. Counting.

All right then: a cane. To pummel this lout. Hell, to beat him to a pulp.

Harley surprised him then. He shook his head in something which looked remarkably like exasperation, but Renaldo had a feeling it was directed at himself, rather than anything—or anyone—

external. “Look,” Harley said, with a rueful smile, “how ’bout a beer? On me?”

“I came here for flowers.” Renaldo’s stiff lips barely managed the words. He flushed, regretted the rudeness, and nodded curtly. “Yeah. A beer.”

“Let’s get this over with first.” Harley walked back into the shop. “Just toss in some roses,” he told the florist impatiently. “And-And some of those—” He pointed at the daylilies.

“What color roses?” The florist looked nearly as impatient as Harley now. It was obvious he thought a fight was going to break out at any moment.

“Red,” Renaldo cut in. When Harley turned to him, with lifted brows, Renaldo shook his head. “Never mind.” He caught the florist’s eye. “Pull some red ones for me, too, while you’re at it.” At the man’s enquiring look, Renaldo explained, with some asperity, “For a bouquet, you f-”. He cleared his throat, forced a smile, and said calmly, “I’m next, you know.” He added, “Just trying to save you some time.” Considering the latter was issued through nearly-clenched teeth, it didn’t come out as pleasantly as he’d intended.

The florist hesitated.

Harley stepped into the gap. “Want some of those lily things, too, Parrish?”

Renaldo gave him a narrowed-eyed and knowing smile. “You can cut the act, Chalmers.”

Harley actually chuckled. “*Two* bouquets: each with four *Homerocallis*, a dozen red roses, and a decent quantity of *Gysophila*.” His eyes glinted as he crossed his arms, and smirked at Renaldo.

“Marked similarities,” Renaldo remarked. “Not exactly coincidental.” He didn’t think Nicky would like the idea of any blatant interaction between enemy camps. Even the presence of two floral tributes, given the same night, would smack of collusion. It was too much to think that Nicky and Emma wouldn’t talk about it. Consorting with the policeman wouldn’t buy him any points. Nicky would merely assume he’d sought out that source first.

“Put it down to ‘great minds’.” Harley grinned. “I know I will.”

Renaldo offered him a nod of agreement, which was reminiscent of his sometimes bow. “If you’re expecting gratitude for including me in that description, don’t.” His tension broke, in an unwilling grin. “So good we all know where we stand.” He tossed his credit card on the counter. “Drop the mutt at home, Chalmers, and the beer’s on me.”

Chapter Twelve

Take responsibility.

That was her new credo, and it meant more than owning up to past wrongs. It meant management of her life, her relationships. It meant talking this out with someone who might be able to help her, as a mature adult.

She flung the rest of the frosting can in the trash.

It also meant structuring ahead of time—at least as much as any experimental procedure she'd ever performed in the lab—exactly what to tell Dr. Renaldo Parrish.

Directing the show? Maybe. There were some things which he'd probably be better knowing, but that she'd prefer to keep to herself.

Things like Jock. She could guess how Jock would react, if Renaldo came around to interview him. Could guess what he'd say.

"She's never been stable."

"But she's my sister—"

"Not her fault—"

Somehow, she didn't think Renaldo would be particularly impressed with excuses, and he'd probably read far more into them than what was actually there.

Besides, she determined, Jock's not involved. It was *her* fault; it always had been.

A small decision, but she couldn't believe how much better it made her feel. Leaving Jock out of the equation helped diminish any importance he had in her life. Stupid, really, and grossly unfair to Jock, but at the moment, she didn't need the complexity of their relationship to interfere with what was already a crappy situation. Besides, wasn't there an overabundance of people out there blaming everyone from their mothers to their Great Uncle Alberts for their adult problems? "Adult" indicated a certain level of maturity; of responsible behavior.

Ergo, there is no need to mention Jock to Renaldo. She could keep this simple and

straightforward. Include the people present, and omit any others. Reasonably speaking, if she were to include all the people who'd ever been affected by one of her rat migrations, they would have had to interview half the people in her neighborhood, not to mention those in the other places she'd lived.

Better to keep it simple.

Nor could Jock be blamed for the Ice Man incident. That was one event she wouldn't have mentioned at all if there hadn't been so many witnesses, including Harley. Not that he would tattle, but she couldn't very well ask him not to say anything.

Dutifully, she wrote it on her list. A recent event, well within the time frame.

And the weirdness just keeps coming.

She rolled her eyes in mock despair. Lovely, what her crooked brain could dredge up, to while away the boredom. It made her sick to continually be victimized by her own psyche.

It had been that way ever since she could remember. Oh, she knew she'd had a life before she'd gone to live with Jock and his dad—been a normal kid, her mother had always claimed—but everything which had happened since was so “life”-shattering that she couldn't recall the safe times.

The corpse in the ice had been Jock. It wasn't the first time she had seen him like that, but she hoped, every time, it would be the last. It was precognitive, she knew, and it killed her. Dead Jock, but—because some part of her couldn't accept it—didn't want, in any way, to be responsible for it—he always came to life, briefly, to look at her.

Long enough to blame me.

She'd been scared for years; scared that he was going to die and she'd be responsible. It was the reason why she always phoned a little frantically after the fact. It was forced, because she didn't really want to know that this time, it was real. Didn't want to know that he was dead, yet could still follow her with his eyes.

It's you, not him.

And it meant she was, at least partially, insane. Dysfunctional in some basic sense, because she couldn't let go of it. Precognition of death was one thing—instilling a dead thing with life quite another. It crippled her, and she knew it. She couldn't kick her stepbrother out of her life because she'd killed him somehow.

Jock had been there for years, usually in mirrors. The first time it had happened, Emma had been ten. She'd already been traumatized by two rat invasions, and her parents had begun the minor battles which would later escalate into open warfare. Emma had been crying, sobbing; wondering why just wishing it all away wouldn't make it better. And then she'd turned around, and Dead Jock had been hovering in her mirror.

She'd screamed, but everyone, including Jock, had thought it was another rat attack. There'd still been doubts in those early days regarding the source of the rats, but her mirror phobia had sealed her fate. After the theories about one trauma leading to another had fallen flat, and the rats had followed Emma to a grocery store, there was only—Emma. Jock's reflection in the glass was just one more symptom of a disturbed mind. Explanation: her mind had been “disturbed” by the psychokinetic intensity of adolescence, and she'd manifested the rat influx the way other preteens and teens manifested poltergeist activity. Jock's reflection? No one had ever seen it, other than her.

Until the Ice Incident, that is. Emma sighed.

The therapist had had an answer for the ten-year-old Emma's visions: obviously, she was feeling guilt, and anger. Her anger was misdirected. She didn't want to accept the blame—didn't want to accept responsibility for what her anger was doing to her family. Jock's teasing had been the trigger for some of her episodes, so this was her own way of blaming him; of transferring guilt.

And then they'd tried to make it, at least partially, Jock's fault. He was the elder—had he done something to traumatize her? Something which could take away the sweet child her parents adored and replaced it with the freak they feared? Despite his denials, his avowals of innocence, his anger, he still bought some of the blame.

For being there.

In her mind.

It was something Jock had never been able to forget—or forgive.

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Harley had selected a bar which was noisy enough to fill any gaps in the conversation. Silence might be golden, but an overdose of it could be construed as a deliberate tactic, designed to maximize the other person's discomfort.

Renaldo wasn't finding this easy. He knew Harley was expecting him to try just such a move.

In reaction, Renaldo found himself gabbling like a fool. Not that his conversation was vapid or a drain on the air pressure in the bar, but it was irritating, nevertheless—to Renaldo.

Harley, for his part, was impressed. He'd figured he'd have to work harder at this. He'd never expected Renaldo to let the conversation flow. It would have been much more in keeping with the mental picture Harley had of him to drop some bombshell of a comment, then pull back, leaving it in the air. *Set off the loaded gun while you stand back, avoiding blame.*

Instead, the man was actually making sense. Furthermore, Harley found himself losing his edginess. If Renaldo was setting him up, he was doing a damn good job of it. And a few things he'd said might even have been construed as setting himself up first. Overall, Harley got the impression Renaldo wasn't on top of his game – a situation he could sympathize with. After last night, with all those mangled thoughts eating at his brain, Harley had been suffering from both an overload of opinionated input, and an overdose of exposure.

“Big expenditure of energy, trying to be something you're not,” Renaldo was saying now, his eyes fixed on his beer froth. The glint in his eyes gave him away. He was wondering how the policeman would take it.

The policeman can take it just fine. “That the voice of experience?” Harley drawled.

The smile in his voice brought a corresponding grin to Renaldo's lips. “Yeah,” he nodded, his smile widening. “But I prefer to call it ‘acting’.”

Harley stared intently at some bubbles rising through the amber liquid in his mug. “Acting implies a certain facility with deceit,” he said slowly. It wasn't what he wanted to say. *Maybe, it's time for a little honesty.* “I don't think any of us were doing too much hiding last night.”

Renaldo put down his mug with a thunk. “That wasn't my impression.”

“Facility with deceit,” Harley reiterated. He smirked. “Denials will fool no one, including yourself. What was that phrase you used? ‘You can cut the act’?” He shook his head. “Frankly, I think the situation would be better for the odd explanation or three. After all,” he went on, waving the mug in Renaldo's direction, “you're the expert. Let's see some of that expertise.”

Renaldo fingered his mug, watching how his thumb marks cut dark patches on the frosty

glass. “This ‘expert’ has never encountered anything quite like it before,” he admitted. “Neither have my people. That makes this interesting, but necessitates a degree of caution.” His frustrated sigh gave him away.

“You’re stumped.”

Renaldo nodded. “I tallied our experiences.” He wondered how best to put it. “In a group of researchers, drawn by paranormal phenomena—”

Harley grinned. “Quacks, weirdoes, freaks, crackpots?”

Renaldo fought to hide his smile. “Far be it from me to criticize—”

“That’s all you psych boys do,” Harley countered. “Go ahead: admit it. You were going to tell me how your *peculiar* group of ‘specialists’—”

“I believe the word you were looking for was ‘particular’. We’re a very *particular* group of specialists. That means we usually don’t take on cases like Emma Rathburn’s.”

“But you found it irresistible.” Harley held up his hands with mocking innocence. “The case, I mean.”

“Pretty much,” Renaldo concurred. “I’m responsible, and it’s supposed to be a judgment call. My judgment is telling me to bail.”

“Understandable,” Harley said slowly, idly fingering the frosty mug. His, “Was it the same for everyone?” came out more bluntly than he’d intended.

Renaldo shook his head. “Uh-uh. There were exaggerated incidences of telepathy and clairvoyance. One of my people is a medium—”

“Max.”

“Yeah, Max. He couldn’t hear himself think.”

“What does it mean?”

“You want to know if it’s safe.” Renaldo’s eyes met Harley’s. “I’m not so sure it is—for sensitives, anyway.”

Condemnation. Harley’s brow furrowed. He’d heard it from an expert—of sorts. Any move he made now had to be done cautiously, with public safety in mind.

Dammit. Harley nodded slowly, reluctant to give anything away. How could he ever phrase

his doubts now, about Emma's role in this? Given the circumstances, it seemed preposterous to suggest she was a minor player.

Gut instinct alone wasn't going to win him any points. No matter how inexacting Renaldo's realm of study, he and his team still prided themselves on "gathering the facts". Protests about Emma's innocence, based on less than logic, wouldn't get him anywhere.

Harley sat there, silent, and Renaldo didn't push him. The transparency of this tactic irked, but at the same time Harley appreciated the fact that whatever he said, the guy's training wouldn't allow him to laugh in his face.

No, he'll wait till he's sitting around, shooting the bull, with his psychic buddies.

Harley cleared his throat. He'd just opened his mouth to blurt when Renaldo spoke. It took Harley a moment to realize that the man hadn't been psychoanalyzing him at all—he'd been trying to come up with a way to phrase his own doubts.

"I'd like to run a few tests on the site," he offered, with a *faux* nonchalance that fooled no one. "Just as some areas have higher concentrations of magnetic ore," he proposed hesitantly, "it may be that her location has more psychic energy."

"Uh-huh," Harley retorted, but there was an undertone of the adamant which undermined the casual tone. "'Location', yeah—but *no* witch hunts. There's reasonable doubt regarding her role."

He waited for Renaldo's reaction.

Interesting. No equivocation. No arguments.

That meant Renaldo had some questions about Emma's role, too—or maybe he was just inveighing all this with what he considered an appropriate degree of skepticism.

"I'm not so sure—" Harley began, hoping he wasn't about to lose ground. *Keep it logical, or if you can't do that, at least reasonable.* "Most of her psychic 'energy' was directed elsewhere."

"The rats," Renaldo stated.

Harley shrugged. At this point, he knew better than to make any admissions which could be used against Emma later. Renaldo had a certain degree of authority, whether he intended to exercise it or not. Harley didn't want to add to the body of circumstantial evidence with eyewitness testimony. "Could be she's far better at multi-tasking than the rest of us, but I'd say she was pretty preoccupied

at the time.”

Renaldo lifted one brow, a little elegantly. If the gesture was a trifle overplayed, Harley put it down to the beer. It wasn't the beer affecting his expression, though. The eyes which met Harley's were dark with concern. “Understood,” he agreed, with a sigh. “Just so long as you understand that a situation this potentially ... ‘problematic’ won't condone much interference.”

“Right.” Harley thought idly about the bouquet, stinking up his car. *Better than Choco*. He gave a wry smile. “Would have been a wasted gesture anyway.” Renaldo didn't ask what, but Harley had a feeling he already knew.

His next words confirmed it. “Yep,” he agreed, his shrug accompanied by a smirk. He lifted his mug. “Meet the king of wasted gestures. Floral tributes be damned and all that. I think the only way to really make points—in this instance—is to rectify Emma's little ‘problem’.”

“A gift for understatement.”

“Some things may be better for being overstated,” Renaldo admitted. “That being the case,” he added slowly, all the while watching the policeman to see how he'd take a proposal of breaking-and-entering, “I'd really like to run those tests, when Emma isn't there.”

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Emma plunked the phone down firmly on its cradle. *Don't think about it*. “Dwelling” was soul food to incapacity. She'd earn nothing by either kicking herself for taking action, or cursing her timing. The truth was, Emma knew she would never have found a “right” time to phone Renaldo, and putting it off till business hours would only leave her talking to an answering machine, or interrupting his office hours.

He gave you his cell phone number for a reason.

She didn't have to look in a mirror to know that her face was bright red. It didn't help to try to rationalize it, either—her pride was like a raw wound, and she'd felt horribly embarrassed bringing her stupid problems into his private life. She'd been able to tell, from the background noise, that Renaldo was out for the evening.

A guaranteed downer, having clients call you in the middle of a date. It followed closely on *I wonder what Nicky would think, knowing her current interest is out on the town with someone else*.

Unless he's out with her. If so, Nicky would applaud Emma's guts in ringing.

Applaud them loudly, no doubt. Emma sighed. More embarrassment.

I haven't even offered to pay him. If she'd been red before, she knew she must be incandescent now. Here, she'd rung him up, asked him to come by, with nary an offer of compensation or explanation for why she needed his services.

Duh. He'll know what it's about.

Still, she'd sworn to keep this businesslike. Distance herself enough from her own phenomena to be objective—*so I can describe it with clarity, rather than with horror.* She only hoped Renaldo would feel free enough to tell her if he didn't want her business—maybe even give her some recommendations regarding where to turn.

The hot feeling in her skin went to chill so suddenly that she shivered. She couldn't explain why, but it was urgent that she know what to do next. Events had escalated, as though heading towards some denouement, and she had a soul-shriveling sensation of scrambling to catch the last few sliding grains of sand in an hourglass. Was it her imagination, or was time really running out?

Now—or never.

It was what had prompted that call.

Live with it. God knows, she'd lived with the rest of this long enough. Shame and crunched pride were states of mind.

She crossed her arms and turned away from the phone, decisively. *Finito. A done deal.* She'd made the call, and Renaldo could psychoanalyze her, write however many papers he wanted on her bizarre behavior, and, generally, rob her of her peace of mind. Hopefully, he'd also be able to restore it somewhere along the way. It'd be a good trade-off, if she could just find a way to get on with her life—a modicum of normalcy, lurking somewhere in the void.

An end to fear. Take charge, and don't let it take over.

Her new credo.

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Renaldo was smart. He'd dumped his proposition on the table while sucking down his third beer, so it may or may not have been the alcohol talking. Harley rolled his eyes now at the

recollection. Romance out, reconnaissance in.

Even so, he wondered whether The Rabbit had been as slow to toss his damned bouquet as Harley Chalmers had. Technical glitches and minor setbacks aside, it still seemed to Harley that flowers could do a lot of his speaking for him.

His lips curved in a wry smile. Obviously, where Emma was concerned, he'd joined the ranks of the seriously disturbed. Renaldo and his psych friends would have no shortage of material to work with.

And neither will I, if I do my job. No shortage of people to arrest.

Of course, what Renaldo was proposing was illegal, besides being stupid as hell—which meant Harley Chalmers was destined to go along with it. Deranged rashness seemed to be his *modus operandi* since meeting Emma Rathburn.

It was more difficult to accept The Rabbit as Renaldo Parrish, Purveyor of Risk. Maybe the man was into burglar mode this week, though to give him credit, he hadn't suggested stealing anything except "vibes". Harley supposed that would come later—and only in the most tactful way, of course.

He had to admit Renaldo's tactics did spark a certain degree of admiration, though. Unless he was totally delusional—and Harley had never checked to see what percentage of psychologists were in therapy themselves—Renaldo must realize his own risk in this endeavor was greater than Harley's. If they got caught, Harley could probably cover his ass by reporting all that surreptitious activity as a break-in. He wondered whether Renaldo had thought this through to its logical conclusion. A "break-in" required a "breaker-in", *i.e.*, Renaldo.

Methinks he plans to outwit me. Harley's grin widened. *Implicate me, and he's halfway there. I'll end up covering both our rears in order to extricate my own.*

And he probably assumes the Boy Scout in me won't hold for bald-faced prevarication. Harley smirked. *He probably assumes right.*

Then, of course, there was Jock. The eternal jock with too many eyes on his sister. Harley buried his face in one hand and wondered how low he was sinking. Jock might well supply an excuse for him and Renaldo, but it would cost. There was the resentment factor to consider here, too—how

much would Jock resent Harley's interest in Emma's well-being? How much more for Harley's taking it into his own hands, without so much as consulting her "brother"?

Maybe Jock would be gullible enough to fall for the "professional interest" line—helping out a fellow officer's family.

Not likely. Jock already knew he was interested, and didn't like it one bit.

The truth be known: *no woman is worth this.*

Harley wished he could believe that. Emma had done a better job of invading his head than all those voices he'd heard in her lounge. More to the point, she'd stayed there, and he couldn't even say he was unhappy about it. It was a new sensation for him, tempering his days with someone else in mind. And, as much as he might try to source it to *psi* activity, and some invasive mindset which had lingered, there was no ESP involved. Emma got to him in a way no one else ever had, and he liked it.

But Jock was her excess baggage. If Harley had to ask the man for help in covering up this little escapade, it wouldn't come without some strings. Jock would use it, every chance he got.

But he owes me, at least a little. It would have worked better as an excuse without the inner cringe. You couldn't request a favor, let alone demand payback, from someone like Jock—mostly, because by the time you finished helping the guy out, he would be totally convinced it had all been his doing in the first place—which would mean any favor to you placed you totally, irrevocably, in the "Jock Club".

No place to go but down.

Harley resolved to bring Jock into this as a last-gasp, final, hell-freezing-over resort. Glossing over the worst of Jock's habits, and setting him up with a group of companions either patient or oblivious enough to tolerate him, didn't exactly qualify Harley Chalmers for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Unless they've developed a new category for "Patience in the Face of Inanity".

As for Renaldo, having made his decision, and compromised The Law, the man was now planning madly—"madly" being the operating word, in Harley's opinion. Renaldo had had a call from Emma, and had arranged to meet her Friday evening, at "The Restaurant". It had taken Harley a few further questions to realize this "Restaurant" was the coffee shop they'd gone to that first night. Renaldo had acted as though it were the only eating place available in terms of their plan. When

Harley had suggested it might be far more sensible to select a site slightly further away, where traffic and travel time could influence Emma's return, Renaldo couldn't hack it. There was a flicker of something in his eyes which Harley read as panic. If the plan wasn't followed, this would all go to hell.

"Five minutes late, then I send the text," Renaldo said firmly. "An emergency," he went on, licking his lips nervously, "asking her to wait." He avoided meeting Harley's eyes. If his plan was a bust, he obviously didn't want to know. In his mind, it was already too late. The wheels of Fate were in motion.

"The 'go inside, have a coffee and by that time I'll be there' scenario?" Harley summarized flatly.

Nod. "Should buy us twenty minutes to half an hour," Renaldo told him toughly. It was spoiled slightly by the worried, "Do you think it'll work?" which followed.

Amateurs.

Harley lifted one brow, skeptical despite his efforts to appear calm and unflustered. "If you can manage those tests in that short a time."

This was firm ground, and Renaldo's voice deepened to a growl which made Harley's lips twitch. "No problem. You get me in, and I'll take all the readings we need."

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Harley awoke Friday morning certain he'd left something undone. Part of the urgent feeling included Emma, but then, she always had that effect on him—the moment he was away from her, he wanted back by her side.

Stupid, when you barely know the woman.

Stupider, when what you do know tells you that you don't really stand a chance.

The rest of the stuff bothering him had to do with preparation. It seemed Renaldo and his group had done their homework, but Harley's now seemed paltry in comparison. He'd checked out Forsby, to the extent of rereading the psych profile, the arrest record for Forsby's father, and his own notes regarding his conclusions. But he hadn't interviewed Daniel Forsby again. Nor had he done any more than a cursory search for any connections Forsby may have had to Emma, or her home.

Why?

Try time....

But that wasn't it, and both he and his gritty conscience knew it.

Forsby had never lived at Emma's address, nor had anyone else on his list of connections and relationships. Harley had stopped digging after that because he didn't want to delve—didn't want to discover, beyond reasonable doubt, that Forsby had had no good reason whatsoever for choosing that particular spot and that particular person. And he couldn't cop all the blame himself, since the ghost had made an appearance before he had.

Was there such a thing as precognitive mediumship?

It was more likely that the arrival of Harley Chalmers on the scene was incidental, even if coincidental. The overlap owed more to a police callout than to any deliberate move on Terence Forsby's part. The Ghost Man was there solely due to ease of entry. He'd chosen Emma because he *could*. Because she was vulnerable.

And because she would *always* be vulnerable. It was as good as saying her life, from this point on, was always going to be a mess, despite Harley Chalmers' interest, his efforts, or the very best of his good intentions. No one could help her: not Renaldo, not the power of prayer, not all the combined analyses and entreaties of police and psychiatric facilities. Emma Rathburn was destined to be a loser, but if the world wasn't wary, she wouldn't lose alone.

And Harley was having trouble taking it. His attitude was stupid, and against any of his plans for his own life, regarding advancement, or even self-preservation.

So, he'd skirted the issues, kept his searches cursory, and downplayed any connections, even in his own mind. He'd tried to put things in perspective—a skewed perspective, he could admit now—but one he could live with.

Maybe even one he and Emma could live with.

Stop it. You're obsessing.

Maybe that was another of her talents: making men obsess over her.

Not all men. Policemen.

Harley snorted in exasperation, and buried his face in one dog-slimed hand. *Not all*

policemen: only you and Jock.

Oh, God!

Another reason for playing this down. Anything which would lump him with Jocko was surefire disaster. Harley's feelings were too damn intense for this woman with whom he had but a casual acquaintance.

We haven't even been out on a date!

But disaster tended to telescope relationships. Hadn't he heard it a million times? Seen it a million more? Denials were all very well, but if he wanted to sleep nights, it was time to take his role in this more seriously, and do the kind of information ferreting he'd been trained to do, especially since he intended to break the law in order to see this through—to all its unnatural conclusions.

His admissions made it easier to admit that he'd also had a superstitious fear that digging deeper, or visiting the father, might somehow summon the son.

Choco, spotting Harley's face hidden in his hand, thought it was a new game. He broke into this reverie by jumping on the bed and lapping at Harley's jaw, then proceeding to gnaw on Harley's chin, like it was one of his squishy rubber toys.

"Enough!" Harley shoved him back, so he toppled onto the floor with a noisy thump.

"Dammit!" Harley swore, instantly contrite. For an instant there he'd forgotten Choco wasn't exactly the most agile of canines. "Sorry, Chocman!"

Choco took it as a sign Harley wanted to play and dropped his ball—and his paws—right on Harley's chest.

Hard to think that a ghost—even one as malevolent as Forsby—could find its way in here. The bastard had appeared to feed on anxiety and fear, if ghosts did that kind of thing. Hard to inspire anything but amused frustration with Choco around.

And slobber, ya damned mongrel, he thought, rubbing Choco's jaw.

The ball hadn't worked, so Choco tipped his squeaky rubber rabbit onto Harley's legs. Harley had bought it after his first encounter with Renaldo. Harley tossed it now, so it bounced off the far wall.

I'm being used. That was the other thing which was bothering him, but he lacked any proof

that he—or Emma—was being manipulated.

Choco was using him, but that was to be expected. The dog had tried one method, with the ball, and it hadn't worked, so he'd gone for the surefire. Harley *always* threw the rabbit, AKA Renaldo Bunny, for him.

Granted, Renaldo was using him for both access and cover, but that—surprisingly—wasn't bothering him, either. Harley couldn't figure out what, specifically, was bugging him, but it was something which had come to him in his sleep. Now that he was awake, dammit, he couldn't figure out what it was. Did it have to do with the ghost? *With Daniel Forsby?*

It's something else—someone else.

One of Renaldo's people?

Hell, they're using you, too, but you've already accepted that. No biggie.

If he relaxed, it would come to him. If he gave it a little time, and avoided nudging it, it would eventually fester and, like a splinter, pop to the surface.

Choco growled and dropped Renaldo Bunny onto Harley's lap.

One thing was sure: Forsby wouldn't have a chance with Choco around, especially if the ghost man was relying on fear to lure him in. And if Choco wasn't daunted by Emma's ghost dog, there was a good chance he wasn't going to be fazed by Forsby's slimy ass.

Insufficient brain, Harley thought, as Choco nudged the rabbit, hard, against his arm. Then he stared into his dog's cocoa-brown eyes and realized brains had nothing to do with it. *Choco has heart*, he decided, as he tossed Renaldo Bunny through the doorway into the hall, *plus definite likes and dislikes. No equivocation or confusion*. Choco liked Harley, he liked Renaldo Bunny, he liked his ball, he liked Emma, he even liked Renaldo, but he didn't like Jock. Harley was certain he'd react to Forsby's presence in the same way: with teeth bared and muscles tense. The difference was, Harley could allow him free rein to tackle Forsby, any way he could.

Once again, Forsby's fingers encircled Emma's neck. The horrifying image played out, behind Harley's eyes. Those ectoplasmic fingers had applied enough pressure, ghostly or otherwise, to make bruises. Could spirits actually extinguish the living? Poltergeist activity being carried to some kind of culmination?

It suddenly occurred to Harley that he'd made way too many assumptions here.

How did Studley die? Harley had assumed the dog had expired of old age, or had come to an untidy end on the road. The latter was what he always feared for Choco, and Studley—ghost dog or otherwise—had appeared nearly as unruly. But, Harley realized, he'd never actually asked Emma how it had happened.

I have my homework cut out. There was no way he could let this go any longer. Whatever happened tonight, with Renaldo Parrish, Harley resolved to be ready. Emma would have his protection, whether she knew it or not.

And if she doesn't want anything to do with you? It was obvious she didn't want him around, but he'd blamed it on hurt feelings, because it suited him to make it temporary. Still, it'd be stupid not to wonder how she really felt. He'd been an idiot, but he'd had a good reason for acting like one. If anything, Emma would agree with his reasoning, which would make reasoning with *her* worse.

Harley rubbed behind Choco's ears, experiencing a moment of remorse. He loved Choco. Maybe his innocent brainlessness would be enough to protect him.

Because, if Emma wouldn't accept Harley Chalmers' protection, she might still accept Choco's.

Harley's sigh was more than a little regretful, and he buried his face in Choco's silky fur. There are times you can't win for losing, and others, where you have to risk losing in order to win.

He could admit it now, since he was admitting everything else: he'd never been so scared in his life.

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Emma was curled up on the big chair in her lounge once more—the one which used to match the sofa, before Jock's knife play and her scrubs with bleach had demolished the pattern. The tape patches crinkled behind her back as she pulled up her feet and curled them beneath her. She shivered and switched on a light, doing her best to ignore how cold and dark the room had become.

It was so quiet the creasing of duct tape filled the void.

The foreboding hit then, but she refused to submit. Outside the newly replaced glass panes, beyond the drawn curtains, sunshine lurked. Normalcy and sunlight, mere meters away.

Excuses rose like shields. *It's not sunny. It's dark because clouds have moved in. Storm clouds.*

And, *we've had a bunch of surges lately. The lights are flickering, dimming, at partial power. No problem.*

The truth was, she knew what was happening, and she didn't think he'd stop this time—not with his rotting fingers at her throat; not with any backwards shunt through the door.

He's out to get you—because you're out to get yourself.

Emma whimpered, the way Studley used to, before he turned up dead in her room. Old age. Infirm canine meets its Maker.

Only, Studley hadn't been that old. He'd been in his prime.

Like me.

Emma shook her head in despair. Her skin rose in icy gooseflesh but she let it stay. She had it coming, all of it. She'd lured him in and he'd killed her dog. It was only a matter of time before he killed something else.

Or someone.

Her breath made regretful puffs of white vapor—the only light patches in the swiftly darkening room. It was time to have this out. To end it.

Her first steps were halting, and she felt as though she were battling uphill to reach the bedroom door. As she extended her hand toward the knob, it turned, of its own accord.

She stared at it numbly, neither shocked nor deterred. *No more than I expected.*

She pushed against the door, and contrary to her expectations, it swung easily. There was a rushing of wind in her ears now, buffeting her drums in odd puffs and pops; defeating any hope of hearing the phone pealing in the background.

He was standing there, waiting. For a moment, Emma could see him clearly. He was dressed tidily, as he must have been dressed at his funeral, but his clothes were already beginning to show some wear, as was his skin. The former flesh was drawn tight and withered over bone, and the eyes had lost all their liquid content.

Soon, the bacteria and fungi won't have anything to eat, her scientific side reasoned. Not

enough fluid matter to sustain them. Half-rotted mummy, lying in his best.

Only, he wasn't lying down. He was standing there, wizened eyeholes peering in her direction; hatred heating his presence as his metabolism no longer could.

"*Emma!*" he whispered, huskily, through lips no longer whole. *Odd*, she thought, her brain so frozen it felt detached. *I can't hear anything else.*

She took a step forward, and her world tilted, as though the icy wind had just hit her eardrums. Gasping, nauseated, she dropped to her knees. And looked up....

It wasn't Terence Forsby—not any longer. She blinked, and, objectively, knew she should be feeling relief at rescue. Instead, she felt sicker. A deep nausea in the pit of her stomach. Sickness mingled with dread.

For, it wasn't Forsby grinning at her now. It was the person in the world who knew her best. Maybe, even, in this world and the next.

It was Jock.

Chapter Thirteen

You're a fool if you do...

Like life was ever that simple. Lost pride wasn't a valid excuse for avoiding risk, and Nicky knew, somewhere inside (in that warm, cozy spot she reserved for dreams) that she'd be a fool if she *didn't* take a chance.

But if he were really interested, he'd have been at your door. He's not shy.

He can't come knocking—it's the Bones thing. He doesn't want anything to do with you because he sees you as a client—a case. Worse still—a case study.

There it was. There was no way she and Renaldo could ever have a relationship, because there was no way she could ever be an equal in his eyes. She was of interest only because of what she could do, rather than for who she was.

I'd settle for being unequal, if he'd just see me as a person, rather than a tool.

Don't be so damn judgmental. Could be he hasn't made his move simply because he's not interested in you, period. End of story.

And, for all she knew, Renaldo Parrish might have a long track record of failed relationships.

Which only failed, she thought with a trace of anger, *because he couldn't find the motivation for follow-up.*

The displaced—and misplaced—anger didn't help. Nicky knew all too well what she was, and it wasn't the first time a promising encounter had been thrown by newfound knowledge.

The detective in Chicago, the archaeologist in Damascus, the prof in Rome—all dead and buried relationships, and all vanished before she'd even had a chance to get them together. Emma might think she had a wild social life, complete with one-night stands and party-party-party, but “wild” was the only kind she could get, because “stable” didn't like the introduction of unstable elements.

You dreamer, Emma. I'm no more “safe” than you are.

And no more daring. Emma had faced down a lot of situations which would have made Nicky MacPherson hide in a closet. The difference was, society had found a use for her bone-spying ability, but they hadn't yet for Emma's "talent".

And Renaldo? Nicky guessed that if it wasn't her abilities which had soured him, there was every likelihood Renaldo had taken the "childhood trauma" scenario to its natural conclusions, and was wondering whether such constant exposure to the dead and buried had tainted her personality. It was what most people thought. How could they help it?

So, he'd use her, like the rest. Just one more Tool of the Trade. Nicola MacPherson, Queen of the Sepulcher, Mistress of the Dead. Who would never be able to see a man for anything other than the shape of his skeleton. Who would have made a gifted phrenologist, because her assessments could be performed *sans* benefit of a tactile probe.

Renaldo would want her, she decided cynically, but not as a date. He ran a team of fairly gifted parapsychologists. If her own abilities hadn't scared them away, it was only reasonable for them to expect she'd have an interest in joining their numbers—in playing consultant to such avid purveyors of dead people's lore. Strictly business: a home for her "talents", where she could express herself freely without fear of condemnation or reprisal.

And just think how much time it'll save them.

Most *psi* teams pieced together the sometimes patchy details of an investigation from historical info and witness reports. Nicky could eliminate the skeleton in the closet by locating remnants in advance. No more lost corpses, being unearthed from ancient murders. No exhumation. The judgment calls could be based on physical evidence, rather than surmised from historical references or ancient angst expressed by lost souls in the *now*.

Yes, it was only a matter of time before they asked her to play hunter—their GPS guide for poorly interred victims.

Nicky caught sight of herself in the mirror, and was disturbed by the grimness of her expression. Cynicism would only sour any hopes for a future relationship—with anyone. It had been years since she'd allowed her brain this much rope to hang herself. It wasn't pleasant.

I know better. Insecurity allowed to fester could ruin her life.

Unfortunate that Renaldo had that effect on her. She'd been confident in her own until he'd obviously done his research.

A trait I'd admire in anyone else. Her sigh was loud enough to come back at her from the corners of the room.

It was the first time in years, too, that she found herself wishing there wasn't so much about her for the dedicated researcher to uncover—and that the damned research “framework”, could be anything rather than skeletal.

* * * * *

There was no hope of rejecting him: not in this world, not in the next. Because he was her brother—had always been her brother, had always been there for her.

He's there for you ... still.

In that moment, she wanted to believe this wasn't Jock—that it was Forsby or someone else masquerading in his form; a flesh-like echo to insinuate a path into her most vulnerable places.

The places where Boy-Jock yet lurked. The brother who'd loved and protected her, who could draw affection in her darkest moments from somewhere deep inside her.

Because I love him.

Only, Jock wanted her to love him in a different way; a way which revolted her. In her imagination, when she heard him talk about it, some part of her curled up and withered, like a limb going gangrene, or a smooth length of skin erupting in pustules and boils. She'd always fought her revulsion, because this was Jock, and professions of love and ardor should never be greeted with hatred. It was wrong to react, wrong to feel the gag impulse rising in her throat. So, she'd always tried to keep it from him—to find her escape in excuses and *faux* stupidity—to let him think something else was causing her nausea. He didn't deserve her revulsion. His sins against her were minor, petty, sibling things, but her sin against his pride, his self-esteem was immeasurable. If he'd known the extent of her aversion, he would have been crushed.

And, because she loved him, she couldn't bear to do that—to crunch him. It would mean the end of their family tie, and Jock needed it. If she'd followed her natural inclination, she would have severed their connection—cut it clean so Jock could heal. But she couldn't, because she didn't know

if he ever would, ever could—heal, that is. He needed her.

And I hate him.

She'd been hiding it from him for years, ever since the first time he'd tried to touch her in that way. She'd stopped him then, and only once in the intervening years had he gotten any further. She'd been drunk, but even then, she'd held him off. Stopped him from the final, revolting culmination of their relationship, which would have made her his, and made her want to kill herself.

He'd been trying to reach that plateau again ever since. She'd sensed it in their most casual moments, and she'd never given him any reason to think she'd welcome his advances.

Always, always, she'd referred to him as “brother”. How many times had she spoken the words, “You’re my brother,” always with those traces of affection—sisterly devotion and love. God help her, though, if it hadn’t been a form of seduction in itself; if it hadn’t sealed with bonds forged in steel those damned ties between them.

Hadn’t made it impossible to break in family what she might have broken in dispassion.

Even now, as Jock’s cold form lingered in her bedroom, did Emma find it impossible to blurt the words—to tell him how the love he’d once owned had curdled and shriveled. Because the insinuation was already taking place—wheedling in on the needy look in his eyes. He owned part of her, had always owned part of her since they’d been kids. And Jock was ready to do what he’d always done to anything he’d owned, from toys to video games to cars: use them up. Abuse them to the point where their only value lay in fodder for the fire.

As she stood there, her body felt as ice-cold as the corpse-Jock which had lain under the ice.

But you didn’t give in to Jock—at least not completely. It only made him worse. She could fight this, the way she always had. After all, this was no corpse, and no ghost. This was only Jock, pulling one of his stunts.

And this was just one more of his cheap tricks—frightening her this way—and so like him. It wasn't his fault that she'd seen him so graphically as something else—someone else. That was her sick mind at work.

But he should never have sneaked in here this way.

It didn't stop some part of her from ridiculing her own foolishness; her gullibility in allowing

him to scare her.

He was just being Jock. I should have known.

I did know.

Tell him. What? To stop it? To leave her alone? She couldn't—because of the hurt, the guilt. *Her* guilt. She'd ruined his past, but it didn't seem she was willing to stop there. Recently, she'd seemed hell bent on destroying his present.

I'm so damn sick of the guilt! She knew it was how Jock manipulated her, but to avoid the onus, the blame, the culpability, she'd also have to avoid him.

If only....

But she couldn't, because disowning him, ignoring him, dissociating herself from him would be the same as destroying him. He needed one positive person in his life, who would accept him despite his failings. Emma couldn't condone his actions—had never been able to condone his actions—any more than she could agree with his frequent outpourings of martyr-inspired rage.

But what would it be like—if just this once—she allowed herself to see the truth? To admit it, *to see it like it is?*

Jock is a loser. His boasting turned her stomach, especially when he'd go on at length about the way he'd made an arrest or taught a prisoner "who was God". She'd always taken his conceited bragging with a grain of salt, figuring (as you had to with Jock) that the truth quotient was two-thirds exaggeration to one-third perspiration. For a long time, she'd even enjoyed the boasting, as long as she could put it in perspective. It had been funny: a not-quite-endearing eccentricity, interspersed as it was with his anachronic claims to high school glory.

Jock. That's Jock, she'd always thought, accepting him, with dutiful, if not exactly fond, regard, because that's what you did with the people you cared about—who cared about you.

But not any more.

I can't.

If she were honest about it, it had been several years since she'd been able to glaze over his excuses. What she'd been doing for months now was as good as lying. She'd been hiding her aversion beneath remembered affection.

Not good enough. Not any more.

He knows.

Her sisterly devotion had become a facade since the first time he'd played with knives—in her house. It had been three years since he'd taken a knife to more than her sofa. He'd practiced biofeedback therapy then as well. He'd started with a trail of rat corpses marching across her bed.

But she'd forgiven him, even then, because he'd insisted it was vermin control. Other people used traps, but Emma needed a quicker fix—something the rats could see, smell, *fear*.

God knows how she'd found forgiveness in Jock's amused claims of “temporary insanity”, and his macho insistence that the only good deterrent was a dead deterrent.

Let the Fuckers see what they'll be getting.

It had been wrong then, and she'd cried as she'd buried the little corpses, all the while feeling guilty, and oh, so very much like a fool, for not being able to see it his way. It had seemed that her unwillingness to see things from his perspective was just one more admission that she actually wanted the rats to come in; that she enjoyed the power trip—the control she held over them. Crazy thinking, skewed and twisted, but he'd convinced her, so she'd borne the guilt of that, too.

After all, Jock was a policeman, accustomed to dealing with violence all the time. If he didn't know how to handle a threat, who did? His life lay under a Damaclesian blade, comprised of threats and reprisals, guns and clubs and knives.

And, in this very house, it had been knife, slicing sofa, and fingers, compressing her throat.

That wasn't Jock! That was Forsby.

Was there any difference?!

The truth appalled her now, and she realized it was the first time she'd seen it—the first time she'd allowed herself to see it. It had always been couched within what she'd wanted to believe.

But not any more.

There was too much in Jock's eyes which had never been there before, as though he were a stranger with whom she had no common ground. As though he'd forgotten the years they'd lived together, in his boyhood home, as innocents. As though there was no memory of innocence at all.

Emma had a sudden sensation of being on the ice. The chill, already powerful, was starting to

invade her body in the same way—beginning with her extremities. Only, it had never hurt like this—not even when she’d been so frozen she’d needed heat to bring the feeling back. Not even then had her toes cramped up and slicing ice shards traveled up her nerve endings.

Her knees were locking up, the muscles spasming, so she couldn’t run. She stood there, shuddering, her eyes trapped by Jock’s. God help her if there wasn’t a trace of something, almost like satisfaction, in his face.

She knew it then. This wasn’t a casual encounter, with man or ghost, which was “accidentally” encompassing them both. It was Jock’s design, but this time, the animosity was directed at her. She’d caused him too much grief and this was feedback, to make her stop.

Not feedback, Rathburn. Get smart. See it like it is.

Not feedback, then. Payback. Jock had always liked it when he made them hurt. And tomorrow, he’d be bragging—about her. The last of the barriers had broken; given way as something in Jock’s soul fractured.

Now, his intent, his dedication, his goal in this life, was to fracture her, too.

* * * * *

Chang Avery sat there, proud and poised. It was the way he always felt when he went to the rink—his inner vision rerunning past dreams of Olympian glory.

He’d mentioned it once, to Dale, in an off-the-cuff manner which had nevertheless caught him grief. Dale seemed to think that reliving hopes and dreams was just one more form of negative thinking, like asking for frustration. The only dreamer Dale seemed patient with was Emma, and half the time that was because Marie made him. She pumped him full of “if you were in her position”s and “can’t you remember what it felt like to be ridiculed?”s and “didn’t you see the look on her face?”s in an attempt to invoke her version of a Sensitive New Age Male. Not that Dale wouldn’t have been patient with Em, anyway—hell, they’d been friends for years—but his delivery would have been sprinkled with a lot more “why the hell did you do *that*?!” emphasis if he hadn’t been under the influence: *i.e.*, Marie’s.

Emma, as far as Chang could remember, had never complained about his preoccupation with past glory. She probably would have, if it had made him as morose as her damned brother. As it was,

Emma no doubt had a few dreams of her own that she didn't reveal to anyone, not even Dale or Nicky. Chang guessed they had to do with "normal" and "family", or even some kind of decent but casual heterosexual relationship, which didn't involve a rotter or incest. He also personally believed she didn't have a prayer of either, as long as Jock was in the picture.

Better than birth control. With Jock in the background, guys would look at Emma once, but not twice. Her baggage was more than most of them wanted to put up with, and there was always the question of ties, and genes willing out. They didn't stick around long enough to discover that Jock was a stepbrother. It was enough that he was *there*.

Not the biggest, but probably the best reason why Emma was non-judgmental, regarding dreams or anything else. Chang had found that as long as he kept it light, and treated his little escapades on the ice as "acting out", Emma never said anything except, "Healthy."

He couldn't help but wonder who she pretended to be when *she* was out there.

Nobody who can skate well, that's for sure.

The only time she'd ever come up with a suggestion, it had been about using his talents for something positive, like teaching. He'd disabused her of that notion pretty quick with a, "the way you use your rats?". It had been both mean and more than a little petty, but the truth was, Chang couldn't have borne seeing one of his students succeed where he had failed. If teaching them had taken them to the next level—to a *winning* level—Chang wouldn't have been able to stand it.

Emma had never mentioned it again, but he'd guessed it wasn't hurt feelings, at least after a while. She understood because she inhabited the dark side, and appreciated the breath of clean air skating gave her.

I did that for her.

Damn straight. It was probably the best thing anyone had ever done for her, including that obsessive bastard of a stepbrother.

Chang watched the chill off the ice form his breath into small clouds of white vapor. This was the way it always started, and he'd played it out so many times that he knew exactly how the dream would go, and he rarely let anything interrupt it. He fastened his skates, then stood, his inner screen already playing. Only then did he look out onto the glassy surface. At this time of day, the scoring

from the skate blades was pretty bad—almost enough to trip a skater up. He always waited for them to run the ice-resurfacing machine, so he could opt for speed.

There was someone out on the ice, who refused to get off for the resurfacing. They were trying to catch her, but she was too fast for them. Her moves were all darts of sharp, swift energy.

She's better than me.

He'd never seen anyone here, at this rink, who was better than he. For a moment he felt snubbed, almost as if it were a personal assault. Anger was quickly succeeded by the jaw-tightening sourness of envy. Envy and yeah, jealousy.

She has no right. Not here, at his rink. And, damn it if she hadn't chosen a time when she knew he'd be here.

It almost worked. He didn't care who the hell she was, but in that moment he hated her, at least a little. Hate was a strong word, and he felt stupid as hell for investing a coincidence with so much negativity, but it was the dream—his dream!

Chang's nostrils flared, and the more stupid he felt, the more his ire churned. When he plunked down on the bench again, his lips were a thin line of tight anger. With shaking hands, he began unfastening his skates. *I don't need this.*

He didn't know what made him look again. Maybe it was the shouts, as they tried to catch her. He had a sudden urge to assist them—to curb those swift feet and beat her down, any way he could.

At her own game.

No, at my game!

He stood again, and tromped squishy divots in the rubber matting as he headed for the gap to the ice.

The skater swept by, in a twirl which would have done an Olympian proud. Then, she posed, for just an instant, her face triumphant as her eyes met his.

Only, they weren't *her* eyes, and Chang sucked in a deep breath of cold air that made him cough. The body might be the same, but not the person inside. Chang was rigid now, but it wasn't with envy. He would have known this person anywhere, despite her new “moves”. He also realized

he'd been wrong, all this time. If this particular student had ever reached her current level of mastery, he would have been cheering, as loudly as the rest, because there *was* a certain satisfaction in reflected glory.

Emma would have been the first to tell him so.

Except she wouldn't—not today. Because the mastery wasn't hers, any more than that dark glimmer refracted in those eyes was.

Fuckin' hell! He shuddered, but held her gaze. It wasn't easy. His voice was shaking as badly as his body when he put through the call. "Dale," he murmured, ignoring Dale's quips, "we have a problem." He hesitated, then plunged in. "Emma's here—only, she's not."

Dale didn't believe him. He was laughing now, in-between stupid comments which would have set Chang's teeth on edge if they hadn't been chattering. "Shut up!" Chang hissed.

"Okay," Dale said slowly, obviously humoring him. "How do you know it 'isn't her'?"

"Because she can skate like a fucking Olympian," Chang told him.

Dale was silent, then cut in with, "Maybe she's been practicing?"

"Dale—I'm serious! She can fucking well—" He gulped, and later Dale would say he knew how hard it was for him to make this admission, "—skate better than me."

* * * * *

A few minutes later he was saying the same to Nicky. "It's not Emma!" Chang's teeth were still chattering so hard that Nicky had trouble understanding what he was trying to say. Cell phones aren't conducive to breathy bouts of near-hysteria.

"When and where?" she asked concisely. She guessed he'd been expecting skepticism, or laughter. He wasn't prepared for matter-of-fact and businesslike.

He doesn't know how many years this crap has been your business. She had to admit that his revelation filled her with dread. Her resigned sigh broke Chang's surprised silence.

"The rink. She's out there, on the ice."

Nicky nodded absently, as she ran the list of suspects through her head. There was one who headed the list, of course: Forsby. If it was him, confrontation would buy Chang more trouble than he could handle. "No point in trying to deal with this alone," she said practically. It was one way to

dissuade him which would satisfy his need to act, but not offend his manhood.

* * * * *

He snatched at it. “Good idea!” He eyed “Emma”, shuddered again, and watched as a chilling smile curved her lips.

No humor, and no goodwill.

That was the kind of smile he’d seen on TV, on psychopaths’ faces. He didn’t know how close it was to the real thing, but he really didn’t want to find out. He averted his eyes to stare blankly at the clock on the far wall. His next words were more of a mutter. Not only did his lips feel stiff as cardboard, but he had this terrifying feeling “Emma” would try to read them. “You calling Renaldo Parrish?”

* * * * *

Nicky took the phone away from her ear while she deliberated. Chang apparently knew her well enough to recognize what she was doing, because he gave her nearly a minute, before he ventured a tentative, “Nix?”

Either that or he’s scared that if he interrupts I’ll leave him to it.

“Wait—” she murmured. This bore thinking about, and there might be other experts she could consult, in the field. God knows enough of them had interviewed her over the years. Her inclination was to go with Renaldo, but she was sensible enough to realize that might reflect more her feelings, than a wise course of action. After the events at Emma’s house, this might be enough to get Em committed, and Renaldo, with his connections at the hospital, might be the one to do it.

Can I trust him?

To do what you say, or what he thinks best?

She didn’t have to think twice about the answer. Renaldo might dress like a rabbit, but he was tough enough to take on Harley. She recalled how he’d pulled his people out, abruptly, after the rats. That wasn’t fear—it was leadership. He was acting in their best interests, even when his natural inclination, given his fascination with this stuff, must have been to linger and gather more information. Nicky had met enough parapsychologists to know that very little would dissuade them, once they were in the “zone”.

On the plus side, Emma—wherever she still resided—would trust Renaldo over a stranger.

And she was the one who originally summoned him.

At the “summoned”, Nicky gave a shiver. Summoned was the name of the game tonight. On the other end of the line, Chang nervously cleared his throat. “Yeah, I’m here,” Nicky whispered.

“Look, don’t confront her, whatever you do—”

“Yeah? Then, *what?*”

“Observe, from a distance.” Nicky thought hurriedly about his course of action. If Chang considered it safe, he’d be tempted to ignore her advice. He was nervous as hell and needed something to do. Something that would help.

She knew how he felt.

“Watch her, and take notes,” she told him firmly. “I’ll handle the contacts.”

“Wouldn’t it be better—I mean, after all, she knows me. Maybe I can call her back or something....”

Obviously, Chang was aware of the implications of calling Renaldo in. He was offering to tackle this first, rather than take the risk of having Emma committed.

Only, he can’t.

We both know Jock. He wouldn’t hesitate to sign the papers if he thought it would give him an edge—make him just that much better than his successful sister. He could do it, too. Emma’s mom had been unwise enough to legally adopt him. Emma had only discovered it last year, when Jock had tried to insinuate himself further into her life. For better, or worse, Jock was legally her next-of-kin.

I always thought he was faking it. Too bad neither parent was around to ask.

Emma hadn’t bothered following up on it. The news must have been a blow at a time when she was trying to distance Jock from her life. There’d been a shadow in her eyes, but she’d known better than to complain—hell, she could have had no family at all.

She’d be better off.

There was a buzz of static as Chang nervously cleared his throat.

Nicky attempted to order her thoughts, and his actions. She hoped he was still listening.

“Don’t make any contact with her,” she said firmly. Anything to discourage Chang from winging it.

“We don’t know how she’ll react.”

This time, he sighed with relief. “To tell the truth,” he whispered, “I wasn’t all that sure it would be conducive to my health.”

Phew! Chang could be a bit impulsive at times. Nicky was glad this wasn’t one of them. “Possibly not,” she agreed, “but try to track where she goes—from a distance.”

“Gotcha.”

Chang didn’t hang up, and Nicky could picture him, fingers clenched, clinging to the phone like a lifeline. “Chang?”

“Yeah?”

“You can hang up now.”

“Yeah.”

Nothing happened, but Nicky didn’t have the heart to leave him hanging. She said kindly, “It’ll be all right, Chang—I promise.”

Nothing.

Nicky finally got impatient. Every minute Forsby, or whoever it was, was inhabiting Emma’s body, would give him or her that much more familiarity with it. Given enough time, Nicky feared they might not be able to bring Emma back—in any state but seriously disturbed, that is. God knows where she was lingering at this moment, or what she was seeing. What would it be like to be aware that someone else was possessing your body, and had been strong enough to take control? To oust you, if only temporarily?

Nicky said a silent prayer, then spoke with mocking sweetness into the phone. “Hear that, Skater Man? That’s my teeth grinding. I’m going to hang the hell up now, so I can give Renaldo a call.”

* * * * *

A short time later, Nicky wanted nothing more than to slam the phone back on its cradle. She and Renaldo had been sidestepping and second-guessing each other for the last fifteen minutes. They’d both been trying to leave so much unsaid that neither of them was really saying anything. Nicky had been trying to hint—strongly—at Emma’s problem, because she’d already guessed that

rumor and innuendo tactics would get her nowhere. Claiming the source as Chang, whom Renaldo barely knew except as the author (she looked pained at the recollection) of that elated “Hot damn!” as the rats came racing over their feet, was unlikely to stir much support for the possession theory.

It’d be different, she thought, a little bitterly, if “Bones” had borne witness. Bones had seen enough grave matters to be considered a credible source.

She wanted to be delicate, subtle, and persuasive, but she was so nervous she was finding it difficult to fend off her feeling of impending doom. Familiarity with the grave didn’t make you any less afraid of it. Her gorge rose the way it always did when she considered what fate awaited them all. She’d already resolved her bones would never lie beneath concrete or earth. Hers would be fed to the hottest furnace they could find, so that nothing but mineral ash would be left to sprinkle on the landscape. Never, never, never would she lie there and molder.

Sidetracked, damn it. The truth was, she hadn’t been this scared since she was thirteen, and her world had gone to hell. It was then her “alternative vision” had taken over so strongly that the here and now were sometimes lost beneath specters of rotting humanity.

She realized that was what frightened her most: that either she, or her best friend Emma, would succumb—that one or both of them would be back in that “place”, which had been so difficult to escape.

We can’t afford to wait.

But, neither could they afford to corner their quarry. Confrontation might only result in Emma’s “visitor” taking her body for a walk.

So, how to handle this? Renaldo kept repeating how he was meeting Emma that evening, as though by verifying it with Nicky twenty times, he could assure her it was true. She attempted to tell him it would not be prudent to wait, but Renaldo reacted with more asperity than the situation deserved, in Nicky’s opinion, as though a premature move would upset all his careful planning. It infuriated her, and her fingers had clenched on the receiver with impatience. Did he actually think that Other Plane operated on the same time frame as he did? That it would wait until he was ready, or had assembled his team? Didn’t he understand what was happening at all?

No. The truth was, he didn’t. “Chang’s keeping an eye on her—” she began.

“Good!” Renaldo interrupted, sounding relieved.

* * * * *

Hell, he *was* relieved. Renaldo, for his part, didn't want Nicky to realize just how frantic he was actually feeling.

Which meant, of course, she'd find his behavior totally inappropriate to the situation. Renaldo was ready to tear out his hair. And when Nicky confessed that Chang had his eye on Emma Rathburn, all Renaldo could think was, Good. Two less people to keep track of.

“I think we should meet,” Nicky told him abruptly.

Renaldo thought fast. He didn't like to admit it, but he suspected he might not always have the guile, the talent for subterfuge, he might have wished. If he were to meet Nicky today, face-to-face, he'd give the game away. “What about tonight?”

The minute he'd said it, he regretted it. Nicky would be with Emma when he stood her up, therefore, she'd know about it, and therefore, she'd never forgive him. He needed to explain himself before the situation was tainted by Emma's outrage. Renaldo grimaced and buried his head in his hand. *Think. She won't be too happy with you for breaking into Emma's house, either.*

He was still deliberating when Nicky blurted, “We have to meet *sooner*.”

* * * * *

Even to her own ears, it was the cry of a desperate woman, transparently needy. Nicky felt shamed, but consoled herself with an *it'll all become clear*.

And then, frustrated: didn't Renaldo realize she wouldn't leave work without a good reason?

Apparently not. “Sorry. Can't fit you in.” Renaldo sounded as if he were choking.

Maybe it wasn't “choking”. Maybe it was laughter. “Tonight, then,” Nicky told him coldly.

Renaldo must have picked up on the chilly note in her voice. Dale would say later it was enough to permafrost the lab.

“Nicky—!” Renaldo began.

“Forget it,” she replied, with all the blitheness she could muster. “Tonight will be just fine.”

* * * * *

Dale had been listening intently, even though his hands kept moving as he prepared a solution

for the ultracentrifuge.

Nicky didn't comment on this lapse in prioritizing. Perhaps, at the end of this, Dale, at least, would remain employed.

"So, tonight's not good enough," Dale probed, after Nicky had thunked down the phone, none too gently. "You're saying *now*."

"Let's just say I was listing the pros and cons. I'm leaving it to him to jump to the obvious conclusion."

Dale looked at her then, full-on, avid curiosity in his eyes. "I've always wondered, ya know."

"About me?" Nicky shrugged.

"About the secret language both you and Em seem to speak. And—" he held up his hand when she opened her mouth to comment, "—don't try to buy me off with any of that 'girl talk' shit."

Nicky cracked a smile. "You're too astute for us."

Dale snorted. "Let's just say, that after six years, I'd be blind and stupid if I didn't know there was something going on."

"You're right." Nicky's smile widened. "That Em's a real chick magnet."

Dale gave a bark of laughter. "Dammit, Nix! Not this time! I want the truth, and don't try to fob me off—"

"'Fob' you off? You been reading Marie's historical romances again?"

"Enough." He held up his hand, and Nicky sobered. "I am not a fool."

"Point taken. Chang—" she began.

Dale glared at her. "Don't even go there, Nix. Chang's doing what he does best right now, and that doesn't include drawing insightful conclusions."

"He would be so crunched."

"Spill it. No more bullshit." He was adamant. "Not—this—time."

He had a point. She was asking him to forfeit work time—and potentially worse in terms of reputation and, possibly—*God help us!*—physical well-being—for what was, conceivably, the wildest of goose chases. Chang may have reached a false conclusion.

It's what anyone normal would believe!

Revelation time. Nicky's reluctance showed. She'd never been big on reality TV shows, particularly those "tell-all" revelation sessions. It suited her to live with anonymity in her personal life—hell, without it, she wouldn't have had a personal life! Dale was being pretty insistent, and she couldn't help but resent it, if only a little. What did her abilities have to do with Emma's problem?

He'd be a damn sight happier if he didn't know. There was a lot to be said for ignorant bliss. She didn't know if he was ready—if he'd ever be ready—for the truth. How strong was a friendship, anyway? She had a nasty suspicion this would be enough to end their easy rapport. It had happened to her often enough in the past.

She could feel his eyes boring into her, damn it! If he only knew how hard this was for her—letting down her guard after years of subterfuge.

Dale wasn't finding it easy to be patient while Nicky conducted her little mental inventory. He prompted, a trace of asperity in his voice, "I'm in the middle of a major protocol."

He's not being unreasonable, and nothing she'd told him so far had proven just how urgent Emma's situation was. Dale wanted to know why she'd gone along with Chang's crazy allegations, and what background—data—knowledge base—was supporting her own conclusions.

She and Em weren't always subtle with their jokes. *He must suspect.*

He does. That's why he's demanding to know.

Nicky nodded, a little absently. Once she started down this road, there'd be no turning back. Dale, and by extension, Chang, might not be too happy with her, either. She had, more or less, been lying to them for six years.

Reticence is not the same as lying.

She wasn't so sure Dale would see it that way. Lies notwithstanding, she'd still been disturbingly misleading, considering how much she expected them to trust her. The truth was, she'd been hiding things for so long she didn't have a clue how to approach this.

Baldly, an inner voice told her. *Lay it on the line.* Dale wouldn't thank her for revealing less than the truth now—and he needed to have a choice whether to participate. He'd already expressed his views, that Emma needed expert guidance. Well, he needed to know that Nicky *was* an expert, of sorts. Maybe not in Em's particular area of *psi* activity, but if anyone knew where to turn for help, it

was Nicky MacPherson. Nor was she likely to run away from a confrontation—with anything.

Chapter Fourteen

Dale fidgeted; barely restraining an impatient sigh. You'd think he was asking for some state secret, the way Nicky was carrying on.

Drama.

This kind of melodramatic reaction wasn't going to help anyone—least of all, Emma. If anything, it made him doubt Nicky's interpretation of events. She was usually damn sensible. He couldn't believe she was making such a big deal of this.

God knows, Emma had his full support—his and Marie's both—but he also knew Em would never expect him to lose work time, or jeopardize an experiment, just because she was having another “psychic moment”.

What does Nicky expect?

Obviously, for you to forfeit work hours, and chase this down.

Dale just couldn't see it. In his mind, he, Chang, and Nicky had proven little more than excess baggage to this psychic investigation—complications to what was already a big mess; contributing little more than their share of panic and confusion. Other than familiarity with Emma's usual behavior, and a working knowledge of Emma's personality, “confusion” was all they possessed in any abundance.

Don't forget fear. And subjectivity. Dale already had his doubts about Renaldo's approach, and the “group exercise” scenario. Granted, that hadn't been the way it had started, but if it was intended to be a series of individual interviews, it had turned out to be more of a group exposé, with everyone's heads being turned inside out.

Emma had been his friend and listening post for ten years. She'd been there when he'd been worried about failing graduate school; through a bout of Epstein-Barr which had made him feel like he'd never be strong again; with encouragement during the ups and downs of his early days with Marie; and she'd even been Marie's maid of honor at their wedding. He didn't know whether he'd be

able to hold back, if Renaldo or Harley decided to confine or commit her. There was a chance, despite his commitment to pacifism, that he'd come in, fists flying. His "Defy the Establishment" genes were merely dormant—not extinct.

Dale watched Nicky now, surprised when she refused to meet his eyes. If there was one thing about Nicky which had always stirred his admiration, it was her openness. The girl had guts, and wasn't afraid to tell it the way it was.

Until now.

But she's not the victim here. The last Emma episode had used up most of their allotment of patience and goodwill—Dale had to admit it—but it was still Emma who was being victimized. He was sure of it. At the moment, it was just easier to offer support from a distance. Safer, too. None of them wanted to push a work-social friendship too far—not even someone who'd called her friend for a decade. There were times to step back and take a breather, if only to maintain. Dale hadn't even told Marie about the other night. Instinct warned him she wouldn't see things the same way he did.

Let's face it: Emma's like cause-and-effect, in one desperate package.

* * * * *

Harley pulled over to the side of the road, and stared, unseeing, at the desultory traffic. There wasn't much activity out this way. It was late in the day, and most of the other visitors to the prison had finished their business, hours before.

Better things to do with their time.

A shiver started somewhere in his spinal column, and traveled down Harley's limbs.

Daniel Forsby gave him the creeps. However much the man's defense attorney may have tried to justify his crime, as the righteous, almost-justifiable action of a man driven too far, it didn't ring true, even now. There was no remorse in Forsby over the death of his only son. No emotional reaction at all, from what Harley could tell.

What had prompted his aberrant behavior? The courts had investigated the drug angle, but the man had come up clean. There'd been no chemical inducement or destabilizer involved, and no overblown consumption of alcohol to fuel parental fires. There'd been only minor competition with his boy for black market connections, and no overt involvement with Junior's murderous obsessions.

If Daniel's whereabouts during the more heinous of the younger Forsby's activities were in question, his propinquity couldn't be verified, and his ignorance, according to his legal counsel, was profound. No knowledge of specifics. No complicity and no duplicity.

And, if his lawyer was to be believed, not only had the senior Forsby's business dealings been on the up-and-up, but he was considered an asset to the community by his creditors, if not exactly a "pillar of society" by anyone else.

No, at the trial it had appeared to Harley—and the jury—as though Daniel Forsby had killed Terence simply because he'd decided Junior had lived long enough. The act had been scheduled in, and the damning clue had been Forsby's error in not removing it from his day planner. The notation had been typed in, right after "meet j for lunch", and "remember lottery ticket".

Harley's lips creased at the latter. The lottery ticket clue had set them hopping. Big money, everyone had thought—historically, a strong precedent for murder. But this one hadn't been like that. The lottery ticket had been a dud, and the "clue" merely a reminder to buy another one.

Wouldn't want to miss out on the weekly draw.

"j" was presumed to be "Junior"—Daniel's sometimes-nickname for his son—but an accomplice, or a potential witness hadn't been ruled out. So, they'd attempted to track "j", with no luck. The unknown j had vanished into the ether. No one had been able to determine an owner for that initial, other than the obvious "Junior", and it made sense that Forsby would arrange a contact with his victim in order to proceed.

If there had been someone else in the picture, their quarry wasn't exactly forthcoming. The defense had pushed the possibility, in a last-ditch effort to distribute blame, but since they couldn't produce a subject—didn't even have any idea whether their missing j was male or female—it was, pretty much, a wash. It remained doubtful whether locating the elusive j would have done much good, anyway. Daniel Forsby wasn't exactly a recluse. He'd had a rowdy side, and his companions hadn't always been the most savory. "j" could have been anybody. Locating her or him might not have proven an asset.

Still, for a short time, both offense and defense had searched. An interview with j could have given them some idea regarding the senior Forsby's state of mind. Shock or remorse would have gone

over better with the jury than the man's cool composure had. Forsby was just lucky his son was such an evil bastard. Terence Forsby's own record had prevailed. His father had done no more than rectify the mistake he'd made at conception.

Had Daniel Forsby been framed? That had been the question of the day. The blatant entry in his day planner, which offense preferred to think of as an oversight, was a little—or a lot—too obvious. The defense had hinted strongly at some after-the-fact finger work by the real, and unfortunately anonymous, culprit. “No one with Daniel Forsby's intelligence would make such a grievous error.” Perhaps “j”, that unknown assassin with an appetite for clues, was truly at fault. Daniel Forsby would never have been so careless; so foolhardy.

"Unless he wanted to get caught." Offense's retort. Remorse, riding the tail of retribution.

If Forsby had played on it, they would have cut his sentence, but he'd blown it. He hadn't exhibited any of the emotions, from remorse to sorrow, which would have appealed to a jury.

Daniel Forsby hadn't appealed to anyone. Even today, on Harley's visit to the prison, he'd been the same personality Harley remembered: empty.

Hollow.

Harley suspected there was more, under the surface, because every once in a while the man's calm would give way to agitation. It wasn't blatant, but it was there, nevertheless. A quiet agitation, with nails pressing red half-moons into his fingertips and palms, as though attempting to incite pain.

A reminder to keep his mouth shut? Pain to enforce reticence?

Harley didn't think so. In those moments, the man's eyes had taken on a deeper cast, and the blue-black rings of the insomniac welled his eye sockets. For an instant—just an instant—another man peered out. A man whose lips twitched to answer Harley's questions.

Haunted.

A multiple personality? The psych people hadn't detected it, and none of the agitation had shown up on the detectors.

Maybe it had been too soon—then.

Harley mentally booted himself. He'd been hanging around Renaldo Parrish far too much. He was beginning to search for secret meanings and undercurrents in everything. Dual personalities and

desperate eyes.

The haunted look was far more likely to be the product of Forsby's new reality. Prison was finally getting to him—beginning to crack that careful facade of cool insouciance.

On that thought, Harley had ignored his doubts, given Forsby a firm nod, turned his back, and walked away. There would be no overt emotional display from Harley Chalmers, either. He'd gain nothing from antagonizing a convicted murderer.

But, as Harley was reaching the door, Forsby had changed tact. He'd done something then which Harley didn't expect. He'd laughed.

It had been dreadful: an insane, hyena laugh as though the joke was so hysterical Forsby couldn't hold it in. He'd laughed and laughed as he was led away. Even after the doors had closed behind him, Harley had been able to hear it, as an echo in his head.

Sick.

Well, if the man hadn't been "sick" when he'd committed his crime, he appeared to be now.

* * * * *

Nicky hadn't missed the mixed expressions crossing Dale's face, even though he thought she wasn't watching. He'd been talking nonstop for the last three minutes, in what she guessed was an attempt to provoke her into a response. He'd been insisting Emma needed help, but he was also adamant that she should have some say regarding the nature of that help. After all, how could she be expected to develop any form of self-regulation, if authority figures insisted on taking steps for her? It was a sound argument, if your given was that Emma's problems stemmed more from a lack of self-control, rather than some outside force.

Renaldo may have been her initial choice, but that was *then*, before any of them realized he was also a psychologist who spent at least part of his time making judgment calls at the psych ward. Dale had doubts about whether the man would be Emma's first choice *now*. The latter had been said pugnaciously, as though he were daring Nicky MacPherson to argue with him.

Besides, he'd continued, with what he probably considered incontrovertible logic, if damage had been done, it had been more to Emma than anyone else. The way he said it, and the mulish set to his lips, spoke for him. He expected Nicky to argue with him, so in defense, he'd blasted her with his

position before she could do much more than open her mouth. For a moment there, Nicky had wavered—the temptation to pick up his oratorical gauntlet so strong that it was only the memory of Chang’s repeated pleas for assistance which had kept her from releasing some of her tension in shouted retort.

Chang’s pleas, and the haunted look in Dale’s eyes. His, “I can’t get those finger marks out of my head,” told Nicky how terrified he was, and she knew he was having as much trouble as she in erasing that particular image from her internal viewing screen. The idea of a ghost with so much physical presence that it could actually damage the living, scared Dale shitless.

Me, too.

Nicky shifted, and she hoped he would read it as impatience rather than uneasiness.

Too late. She’d been chewing her lips nervously, and had only realized it when she saw a flicker of surprise cross Dale’s face. Obviously, he’d expected her to argue, but otherwise, remain unfazed.

He must be nuts.

“Whatever it is, Nix, I’ll try hard as hell not to judge.” Dale was reassuring her now. It was almost too much for her to take. Dale was, indeed, a true friend—to her and Emma both. No one could promise to be totally unbiased, but he was going to try his best.

Nicky’s eyes met his. “The truth’s pretty goddamn awful,” she admitted. She was near tears, and she hated that he knew it. “The ‘Bones’ reference you were asking about? The one Max dropped as they were leaving?” Her lower lip trembled, but she sucked in a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Her expression was self-derisive as she acknowledged wryly, “He was referring to *me*.”

* * * * *

As unpleasant as the interview at the prison had been, it wasn’t that which made Harley park along the verge of a nearly empty road, in a place he didn’t really want to be. It was something else—several something elses—which had popped into his head *en route*. In anticipation and preparation for their meeting, Harley had forced himself to peruse the old records once again—all of them, from the most mundane.

The senior Forsby had made a few interesting purchases during his last months of freedom.

Internet purchases, which hadn't been considered noteworthy in the initial enquiry.

Harley's jaw tightened as he considered how easily he'd dismissed the account records, too. Nothing strange about ordering over the Internet. After all, these were innocent items, like candles and star ornaments. The man's taste might be lacking, but the purchases themselves were considered to have no bearing on the case.

Now, Harley wasn't so certain. Recently, he'd examined the descriptions more closely, and the memory was eating at him.

Because there was something else Daniel Forsby had done. Every Tuesday night he went to a church meeting. Some of the pillars of local society attended the same church, and a few (whose reputations were strong enough to withstand the risk) had even acted as character witnesses to the Court. Without exception, they'd all been shocked by the indictment. Forsby had always put on a good face for church.

A public persona, pulled out for parade.

One of so many discrepancies, in behavior and context. Nasty little facts which were getting to Harley now—like the list of church members. There'd been lots of names he knew, but he'd been searching for something different. He'd been looking for a connection, between Emma Rathburn and Terence Edward Forsby.

The only connection he'd immediately discounted, and resigned himself to delving deeper into the others' profiles. Now, he wondered whether he'd been too precipitate, and he yanked it back up, out of his mental file folder.

Like bringing back up a mouthful of food, he thought with disgust. Not exactly the place he wanted to start delving.

Get over it. It was time to see past his aversion, because it was all too easy to condemn what you disliked. He attempted to put himself into objective mode, but it wasn't working all that well—not with this damned gooseflesh racing across his skin.

One thing was sure: Emma would hate him for even considering it.

But he couldn't deny what he'd seen, or found. Things were beginning to look damning, he realized, with a flicker of dark humor.

When he'd driven away from the prison just now, Jock had been there. Harley knew, because a car had been blocking his lane, and he'd had to exit on the far side of the parking lot. Inconvenient and time-consuming, and not the way he would have gone if he'd had any choice.

Not the way anyone would have expected me to go.

He'd shrugged it off. Jock, no doubt, had buddies behind bars. Not unexpected when you considered how antisocial he was.

But Jock Jamieson's name had been on that list of church members—and his police interview during Daniel Forsby's indictment had been cursory, at best. After all, he was a police officer, and he barely knew either of the Forsbys. He moved in different social circles. Common knowledge.

Harley thought again about Forsby's purchases. Jock did some bizarre shopping, too. In their newfound chumminess, Jock had tried to encourage Harley to check out a sex shop on Tanner Street. "Shop there all the time," he'd boasted. Harley had dropped by, just to get Jock off his back.

He'd stayed about two minutes, memorizing enough about the place so he could convince Jock he had, indeed, stopped in to look. At that point, Harley had still been trying to find Jock a social outlet, and some common ground to work from. This sex shop wasn't it. What enthralled Jock disgusted and amused Harley. *No common ground there.*

There'd been nothing very unusual about the place—it had the usual sadomasochistic gear and equipment, though it ran pretty heavily on the sado side. At the time, Harley had thought disparagingly, How like Jock.

He was *still* thinking it. With hands that shook only slightly, he started the car, and pulled back onto the road. He was suddenly conscious that Jock might be heading this way, and Harley was reluctant to encounter him. A "discussion" like they usually had would make Harley want to punch him.

It was hard to get past what now seemed glaring. *Jock Jamieson. "j"*. The items which the shop kept along a back wall, but which matched many of those on Daniel Forsby's list. Harley had no doubt, that if he were to pull up a list of purchases made by Terence Forsby, he'd find many the same. Among them would be candles and stars. Knives, too.

Not pertinent. There'd been nothing to suggest the younger Forsby had been stabbed or

coerced with a blade. Besides, lots of people collected elaborate and elegant weapons. Daniel's collection wasn't even particularly extensive, and his knives had been openly displayed on his walls. No blood or organic residue *in situ*. No connection.

Hanging around Emma and Renaldo must have expanded my mind. Harley doubted whether he would have put this together otherwise. An appropriately suspicious mind would feel bound at this point to check Emma's purchases, too, but Harley elected not to. If she could ever find it in her to forgive him for what he was thinking about her stepbrother, he'd still lose if she discovered he'd run the same checks on her. There were some things you just couldn't get past, and Harley wasn't willing to risk it—yet.

Some of the *psi* reading he'd done had listed rituals as one way to make people more susceptible to demon influence. The only problem with that approach was the codicil that the victim needed to be a participant.

Another reason for not suspecting Emma. She wouldn't willingly lure a ghost or a demon in.

In her sleep?

Maybe. He made a mental note to consult Renaldo—casually—on the manifestation of dreams.

The important thing to remember here was that he'd been to Emma's house. None of her candles had been black, and there hadn't been a pentacle in sight.

He'd be willing to bet he'd find something entirely different at Jock's. Harley just didn't know what it all meant. Besides, what difference *did* it make—now? Terence Forsby was dead, and his father had confessed to the crime.

But there was no denying Terence Forsby's continued commitment to mayhem. He wasn't content to stay in his grave—and it could be he didn't have a choice. Perhaps someone else was calling the shots; performing the rituals which would keep Terry Forsby from finding peace.

Rise up, Terry Boy, and do your worst.

Perhaps that had been the intention, all along. *If you can't do it for yourself, get others to do it for you.*

Absurd. Preposterous.

And ... Jock's credo.

The more he considered it, the more Harley was certain Renaldo's testing should begin at Jock's house. There might even be a way to gauge fallout, or residual vibes, from demonic rituals.

Emma, for her part, was an innocent. Even her mediumistic activities had been a trick: Terence Forsby insinuating himself in on Studley's tail, literally. Of all the natural forms her "psi" could have taken, Studley's would have been the least offensive. Emma had dearly loved her dog. However much aversion she might have felt for another wandering soul, she would never have felt that same revulsion for Studley. Someone had known that—and used it.

Jock.

There was no evil in Emma. But, if Harley was right, about any of this, she wouldn't thank him for proving her innocence. It was more likely she'd never talk to him again.

Especially if he were to bring proof—from Jock's house. Any breaking-and-entering which she might—hopefully—excuse in her own territory; she'd never forgive if it included Jock. It would only make her face what she must already know, somewhere deep inside.

But, admissions were far different from suspicions, and there was a chance Emma would forgive Jock even this. Over the years, he'd stirred up so much guilt for her that she wouldn't know how to deal with this any other way.

That is going to change.

Sure, Harley. He may have learned how to manage his own guilt load over the years, but Harley doubted he'd ever get the opportunity to help Emma learn to manage hers.

Even if Jock weren't "family", he was a long-term fixture in her life, and Emma would want to believe the best, especially in someone she cared about. She would discount any of Jock's "collection" as his crude idea of art, or a childish assemblage of ostentatious ornaments—just one more way for him to show off, and establish his coolness to the world.

Harley's back, where it contacted the plastic seat, had gone rigid. Some people might consider these kinds of rituals harmless, and their tools, art, but Harley didn't see it that way, especially in Jock's hands. There were objects in this world which were too dicey to play with. They had a bad rep for a reason. Things like ritualistic knives and metallic sigils inscribed with kabalistic symbols. Five-

pointed stars with goat head centers. Triangular frames with dangling mirrors.

And recent copies of seventeenth-century texts, which rumor claimed were penned in the name of King Solomon himself, like the grimoire, *The Goetia*. Magical texts, which came complete with Satanic and Chaos spells. Terence Forsby's personal effects had contained a number of photocopied sheets from just such a book. Only, no library Harley had ever visited held a book like that.

Now, Harley couldn't help but wonder who'd owned the original.

* * * * *

Dale didn't say much as Nicky rambled on, but his eyes widened a time or two. Shock or sympathy, she couldn't tell.

Or maybe it's just plain fear. Must be hard for him to take, learning two of his so-called friends—and long-term coworkers—have one foot in the grave. For a millisecond, Nicky was tempted to toss in Chang's name, just to see what Dale would do.

Wouldn't want to destroy all my credibility.

Afterwards, Dale had to clear his throat to speak, and what he said nearly earned him a punch. "Sounds like Renaldo's the perfect guy for you."

"Sure, Dale. One guess what he'll see every time he looks at me."

* * * * *

Dale shrugged. "Hey, he knows what you are already, and it hasn't stopped him." He smirked. "Or maybe his proclivities lean toward the bizarre." He saw the trace of hurt in Nicky's eyes and added quickly, "Nix, I was kidding. I don't think the guy cares." He realized that was the wrong thing to say, yet again, and added quickly, "I mean, 'cares' about the Bones thing."

"Of course," Nicky said crisply.

"If anything, it's got to be an inconvenience—" *Wrong again.* Dale had a trace of panic in his eyes now. How did you handle something like this?! He tried one more time. "—if he wants to get to know the real you." Nicky still looked more upset than convinced, so he amended, "Like me and Marie. She has a religious ethic just short of mania—in my opinion."

It broke some of the tension. Nicky's lips twitched. "Imagine what she'd make of me."

“Flawed, like the rest of us. Hey, she puts up with Emma’s stunts.” There was a glint in Nicky’s eye at that one which made Dale add, “We can’t all be saints. At least you won’t find any complaints from my direction.”

“The soul of tolerance.”

“Must be—to Marie, anyway. Every once in a while she goes on a Creationism bent and it drives me nuts—but I still adore her.” Nicky opened her mouth to comment so Dale held up a hand. “And I don’t see a religious icon or some bloody saint every time I look at her.” His eyes lit up. “I just see ... Marie.”

“Being tolerant of intolerance is a lot different, and you know it.”

“Not the way I see it.” Dale assured her, “Renaldo will get past it. Just give him time—but don’t give him distance. Lapses in contact offer a man too much time to dwell.”

Dale couldn’t help but notice that despite her reservations, Nicky had brightened considerably. She was nearly smiling as she ventured a, “Now, about Emma?”

“You said ‘now’, and ‘*now*’, I believe you.” Dale gazed at his tidy row of Eppendorf tubes somewhat resignedly. Then, before he could consider it further, he tipped them out into the contaminant bag.

Trashed, he thought, *in every way*. He sucked in a big breath. “Ready. Let’s go give Chang a much-needed hand.”

* * * * *

I should have listened to that “we need”. As it turned out, there was definitely something wrong with the infrastructure of Renaldo’s Great Plan. Harley arrived, only to find a crowd waiting.

He’d planned to talk to Renaldo quietly, about his suspicions, but now? Jock might be as obnoxious as hell, but he *was* a policeman—and Emma’s stepbrother. He deserved a fair deal, and that didn’t mean making a judgment call against him, *en masse*. Speculation was one thing; accusation another. A “Tell All”, in front of this group?

Not a chance.

“I was informed,” Renaldo whispered, with an annoyed glance at Merlin, “that my plans may have been slightly precipitate.”

“‘Precipitate’, my ass,” Merlin muttered.

“Merlin told him if he didn’t include the ‘team’, there was no way he’d fine-tune the equipment,” Max said baldly. “Damned Queens—always causing trouble.”

“At least I limit my liaisons to the living.” Merlin crossed his arms. “Hard to find good help these days.”

“Yeah,” Harley agreed coldly. “See you.”

“I told you he’d react that way,” Max announced triumphantly to anyone who’d listen. “Maggie’s never wrong.”

Harley froze. So, now they were second-guessing him?

“Like hell,” Merlin was saying. “That refrain’s getting a little ‘old’, don’t you think? Almost as old as your dead girlf—”

“*Don’t*,” Renaldo barked. “Can you deal with this complication, Chalmers?”

Which one? Harley twisted slowly, his eyes meeting each of theirs in turn. Any lingering doubts he may have possessed, about the wisdom of holding his tongue, vanished in that instant, and he didn’t bother hiding his frustration.

Merlin, amused, snorted, then starting laughing out loud.

At him.

Harley told himself he’d be stupid to let it get to him. But, him didn’t want to listen. *Damned bunch of geeks.*

Denial will get you nowhere. The truth was, he hadn’t exactly balked when it came to this crazy plan, despite the risks. Even his decision, to opt for discretion, could be construed as a form of denial. And implicating Jock might be merely one more way of implicating Emma. After all, he—Harley Chalmers—was a newcomer on the scene, whereas Jock’s and Emma’s relationship was of long standing. Was he really foolish enough to believe Emma couldn’t be involved, if Jock was? Taken that way, “discretion” could be confused with “cowardice”.

Harley smirked. Maybe the reason this group irritated him so much wasn’t because they weren’t on the same wavelength, but because they understood each other all too well. He just wasn’t as comfortable in his own skin—or his judgment calls.

Good thing at work the only kind of discernment they wanted dealt with physical evidence. Motives were speculative, and worth investigating only if there was some kind of evidence to back them up. You couldn't waste time on what wasn't there.

Whereas these guys could be said to conduct entire investigations based on what wasn't there. Despite his best efforts, Harley had recently found he was enjoying letting his imagination run wild with speculation. But running a few electromagnetic tests wasn't exactly the same as acquiring fingerprint and blood samples.

Or Breaking and Entering. His status as a cop had elevated Renaldo & Company to entirely new levels. "Opened new doors", so to speak.

Far be it from me to deny them their treat now.

Besides, there is always hope, despite the company you keep. If he—Harley Chalmers—could lift a social pariah like Jock above worm status with a few kind words and glossed-over habits, there was no end to his potential in unauthorized acts of antisocial chivalry. Hell, he might even give lessons in burglary, once he lost his job on the Force.

Harley's sigh wasn't lost on Reischa. Her face darkened and she shifted uncomfortably. "Someone has to record it," she said, lamely.

"Of course," Harley responded gravely. "We don't want to be short on evidence. This way, when they try us, we'll be sure the prosecuting attorneys have everything they need."

* * * * *

"Oh—my—God!"

It was the fourth time Dale had said it, and Nicky was beginning to get annoyed. She was too grateful to him for hanging in after this little interlude, though, to complain. What they were seeing was, naturally, a shock.

Chang was as pale as whatever ghost now possessed Emma. That it was a case of possession, Nicky had no doubt. There was too much eternal knowledge in the eyes turned their way; too much evil amusement at their plight. Nicky averted her own gaze, and *Faux* Emma laughed. It was coarse, somewhat heinous, laughter. Nicky had never had cause to use the word "heinous" before, but now it fit. The Thing in Emma's body was evil, and ever since they'd arrived it had been heckling them with

arrogant descriptions of their failings as humans.

No, worse—their failings as living beings. No status here. Humanity be damned. If there was a comparison to be made, Emma’s mouth did it—and glorious humanity held the status of feces-laced vomit.

It wasn’t like anything Nicky had ever seen or heard. Chang Avery had a healthy vocabulary, but she guessed he’d never heard some of these words, either. The weird—and, to Nicky’s way of thinking, most terrifying—part was that *Faux* Emma seemed to guess as much, and modify it so there could be no doubt in her listeners’ heads.

She—He—knows us too well.

Nicky had done a lot of reading in her field. Limited somewhat, yes, by her own fear of influencing her ability to more than she could tolerate, but enough to explain some of the things she’d witnessed. Ghosts weren’t in her repertoire, though she’d occasionally perceived a certain restlessness to the corpses encased below ground. If she’d seen anything suspicious, though, she’d always blamed it on herself—wayward psychokinesis. That it wasn’t true, and that she couldn’t move so much as a rose petal floating on the water, or manipulate a dice throw to save her life, didn’t matter. The “wayward psychokinesis” theory was hers, and allowed her to sleep nights. The truth was, Studley’s shade was the first she had ever truly seen.

“Could it be Studley?” Chang’s shaky question nearly made Nicky burst out laughing—it followed so closely on her own thoughts. She stopped herself by biting her lip, until it bled.

Chang not only knew this wasn’t Emma—he also knew the creature within her wasn’t human. That was the part which scared Nicky the most. If it wasn’t, or hadn’t been, flesh and blood like themselves, what the hell was it?

“Hell,” Nicky muttered. *Hell*. “Demon.”

“No.” Dale shook his head. Nicky could tell he didn’t want to believe it. He was still hoping for some simpler solution. “Maybe Chang’s right. Not human, but manageable....” He was stretching and they all knew it. His voice was almost plaintive as he asked, “Is there a way to vanquish demons?”

“Nooo!” The bellow rattled the branches of the trees overhead, sending a pelting of pine

needles onto their exposed skin. The sticky deluge grew, becoming one with a wind which whined through the trees, cracking limbs, raining down twigs and branches. The ground furrowed beneath their feet, sucking voraciously at the humus layers; fracturing and shifting like a sinuous snake.

“It knows too much,” Nicky said, simply. “More than any—*person*—should.”

“Even a dead person?” Chang sounded chilled. He was shaking, even though the wind had stopped. Emma had berated him all afternoon. She’d seen through his carefully-constructed illusion of success, and stripped him down to the Olympian failure he’d always been afraid would greet him in his mirror. A fucking failure. Holed and empty. A loser, with no past worth claiming, and no future. Nothing and no one.

* * * * *

“It lies a lot.” Dale’s attempted blitheness fell flat, but Chang seemed to draw heart from it. The despair in his friend’s eyes was scaring Dale more than he wanted to admit. He felt like telling him to go stay with Marie, until this was over.

He shouldn’t be alone.

And he definitely shouldn’t be here.

Dale tried harder. “Don’t you *get* it? Listen: it’s taking half-truths and magnifying them; twisting them. I’ve heard demons do that kind of thing,” he added, wisely.

Chang’s eyes brightened slightly. “She talks a real crock full.”

Nicky nodded. “Nasty little shit, isn’t she?”

“It’s not Emma,” Chang hastily reminded her.

In that moment, *Faux* Emma twisted to glare at them. Wherever she was heading, it was apparent she didn’t want company. Her face was darkly blotchy, puffily swollen, with lesions on her cheeks and neck. Bloodshot eyes dared them to cross her, and somehow, her trimmed nails had evolved into claws.

“Needs a manicure,” Nicky remarked.

Chang started, then burst out laughing. If it held traces of hysteria, it didn’t matter—he was back.

Dale looked relieved. “Leave it to you, Nix.”

“No, thanks,” she retorted. “You’re not off the hook yet, Dale.” She took her eyes briefly from Emma’s frame to focus on Dale’s face. For a moment it was all bone and gristle, and she had to blink to refocus. The truth was, she’d been watching Emma obliquely, by eyeballing her skeleton. It was a lot easier at this point than watching the ghastly lesions distorting her body. “It’s all chaos,” she mumbled. “I don’t think—” She left it there, unable to continue. Only a shrug betrayed her lack of resolution.

At that instant, there was a thud. One of the trees *Faux* Emma had disturbed had decided to drop a branch right on her head.

“Emma!” Dale shouted. He started to run, but Chang held him back. He struggled, and went on struggling, but Chang’s body was too toned. Dale swore, then followed it with, “We’ll get help! I promise!”

Faux Emma looked up, and, despite the pain she must be feeling, from pounding tree limb added to running sores, it was Emma there, in her eyes. Nicky caught it—that glimpse. “Go home, Emma,” she ordered, her voice hoarse. “Do it! Now!” She injected all the urgency she could into those few words. Given some familiarity with her surroundings, they just might—might—have a chance of calling Emma back. “Go *home!*”

And, then, it was over. That brief lucidity was once again replaced by callous cruelty. Nicky blocked it out. “You, too, Chang,” she said quietly. “Go home. You’ve done all that anyone could ask.”

Chang was exhausted, and his voice showed it. He’d released his grip on Dale and looked at him now, a little nervously. His own self-confidence was too shaky to assume Dale would agree with what he’d done. When Dale nodded to him, a little curtly, Chang released a pent-up breath. “I’m outa here,” he muttered.

Dale relented. Chang had been through hell. “God speed, my Friend.” At any other time, it might have seemed over the top. At the moment, though, it seemed ... right.

Chang flashed him a quick smile, then took off, through the trees.

Behind him, *Faux* Emma burst out in a profane litany, which rattled the leafy canopy above.

Chapter Fifteen

Harley was silent as the spook team headed toward Max's car. They were still squabbling—had apparently never heard of the discretion Renaldo had boasted about—but at least they were keeping the noise level down. Harley had a feeling this backchat was their *modus operandi* for a lot of their research efforts; a way to calm their nerves. For the most part, it seemed to be good-natured, but Reischka had relaxed enough to slip in the snide comment or two. She was obviously feeling Renaldo had blown it on the planning end by omitting the most competent planner on their team: her. Judging from the way the others were reacting, she was right, and they were irritated that Renaldo had contrived this with no double-checking of the plan, and no backup contingencies.

“He checked it with me,” Harley threw out. *Anything to clear the air.*

It wasn't met with the enthusiastic response he'd expected. Reischka plastered on a fake smile, and Merlin's, “Oh, goody,” left no room for doubt. For just a moment, Harley's ego was crunched enough to make him want to spit out, “Didn't you read my dossier?” He actually opened his mouth to retort, but Max's expression of eternal patience did him in.

Childish.

Damn it. Harley lifted one brow, and studied them, a little dismally, through half-lidded eyes.

Merlin squirmed.

Good. Childish or not, I win.

Renaldo hadn't even noticed the byplay. He was squirrely as hell, his movements agitated. He jumped from eager to shaky, to worried, to murmured recitations of whatever list he'd made to accommodate this fiasco, to twitchy pseudo confidence. When he realized he wasn't exactly acting as befitted a leader, he attempted to modify his psychobabble with contemplation, but only succeeded in conveying a picture of silent doom.

Harley knew there was no point in drawing attention to what must already be glaringly apparent to the others. Besides, with Renaldo distracting them, they wouldn't notice how distracted

he—Harley—was. He plastered a shuttered expression on his face, and trailed behind. Damn it if Reischä hadn't generated some grim thoughts in him, as well. All from one heedless comment.

Not heedless. Harley came out of his reverie long enough to give her a quick glance. It confirmed what he'd already suspected: not even for this team, of errant ghost hunters, could this be considered a run-of-the-mill effort. Reischä, like her teammates, was scared.

Not for the same reason you are. They hadn't seen Terence Forsby in action. Word-of-mouth didn't convey the horror experienced in battling something which wasn't wholly present, but which could, nevertheless, do physical damage. They'd no doubt likened the Forsby-Rathburn incident to a poltergeist encounter. Still, frightening as that might be, it wasn't the only reason Reischä was upset.

"I don't want to end up as naked as last time." She'd muttered it scathingly to Renaldo, but the meeting of eyes had given the game away. It was confirmation, in Harley's view. Reischä, like most normal people, had a few skeletons she'd like to keep hidden from the world, and, perhaps especially, from her friends. She was nervous that another incident would expose her to ridicule.

Which is why they're hitting Emma's house first, rather than Emma.

Because they're too scared to have another personal encounter with the woman they perceive as the source.

The realization stirred up unexpected ire in Harley's gut. They weren't going to give Em a fair deal—not even to the extent he was willing to give Jock. They'd already decided Emma was dangerous to their collective peace of mind, and were trying to avoid meeting with her—yet. When they did, it would probably be at a competency hearing.

In that moment, Harley felt like shouting, "This is stupid!" If they found some underlying vibes at the house, it still wouldn't let Emma off the hook. The doubt would be there. Only, then they'd be wondering whether Emma had lured "it" in, vibes and all.

Harley's eyes were half-closed as a jumble of thoughts tumbled through his head. He tried to recall how it had been—how unsteady he'd felt with stray brainwaves inundating his thoughts. How he'd questioned just which opinions were actually his own.

Reischä had experienced it, too. *If any of Renaldo's people are telepaths or clairvoyants, I need to know.*

There was no way he could protect them, if he didn't know who was most vulnerable.

What are you thinking, Chalmers?! They're all vulnerable—because we're dealing with Terence Forsby. A violent personality.

Evil, manifested in human form. Flowery the description might be, but at the moment, it was also apt.

The truth was, however much this group might disdain Harley's presence, other than as their burglary expert, they'd need him if Forsby decided to put in an appearance.

And I'm certainly the most conversant with corpses.

He'd seen more in his police work than he'd ever want to reveal, and it suddenly seemed unbelievably naive to conduct a psychological, or worse—parapsychological—case study around someone as grim as Forsby.

That's what this was about, really. They were terrified of meeting the source—Emma—because none of them wanted to take another chance on the kind of “revelation” they'd experienced before. Yet they were eager as all get-out to encounter the product: Forsby. Oh, they'd help Emma resolve this, if they could, but if there was any chance Terence Forsby was “home”, they wanted a chance to encounter him, without any interference.

Call them parapsychologists, but the truth is, they're ghost chasers.

If he'd thought it through before, he would never have turned up.

Too late now. He observed his companions, noting the carelessly-concealed glints of fear-tinged enthusiasm. They were here to watch the latest horror flick, only this one would have more realism than most.

They're not ready—at all. Despite their study, their experience with the undead, their reading, their scientific approach, they were unprepared, and working under too many misconceptions.

As he considered his companions, and their analytical approach—all gauges and gadgets—he felt an inkling of despair. He stopped it there, erecting an internal barricade.

Don't let it get to you.

He couldn't afford to be down, to give up. He needed to be able to front up with his happy thought.

It made him feel like a bad actor in a Peter Pan sequel. One thing, though—he had common sense on his side, and determination. The latter was going to count, big time. If the crunch was as bad as last time, with their brainwaves blasted all over the place, and rats running rampant over the rugs, salvation would involve more than common sense.

He'd have to be tough enough, especially if Forsby turned up on the scene, to hang on to any sense at all.

* * * * *

“Bossy bitch.” Dale’s comment was mechanical, his thoughts obviously elsewhere.

Nicky didn’t take offense—her thoughts were elsewhere, too.

She wasn’t going to be allowed to keep them there.

“That’s it, then? ‘Go home?’” Dale had given himself time to think about it, and it was apparent he didn’t like it one bit. “What’s the point of that?”

This time there was no ignoring it. His tone demanded attention.

Nicky pulled her car over to the curb. “You want I should consult you first?” she retorted, fighting to overlay all with a hint of amusement. It was belied by the strained look on her white face.

“Uh-uh,” Dale replied. “Just to use your head. Emma’s ‘home’ is where we were the last time it happened.” He thought of something and hope brightened his eyes for the first time since they’d seen Emma. “You mean Renaldo’s going meet us there?”

Nicky sighed. *Renaldo, the source of all answers regarding the Unknown.* Any other time it would have stirred her competitive streak; maybe, even, dented her ego slightly, but today—it was what she’d been hoping herself, even if her last contact with him hadn’t been too successful. Maybe now that she could offer firsthand testimony, he’d be more amenable.

Certainly, it would take more than the hints she’d tossed out before. Blunt revelations, no matter what their consequences to Emma later, were all that would save her now.

Unfortunately, Renaldo was still out of contact. She would have admitted to Dale that she was hoping—praying—she could contact the man in time, but one look at Dale’s face warned her to keep it ambiguous. Dale didn’t need his confidence shaken further.

I may be all we’ve got.

God help us.

“I can’t reach him,” she admitted. To demonstrate, she punched in “Redial” and let him listen to the message. “Not available.”

His expression was first, aghast, and then, blatant disbelief. Impossible to reach someone in this day of cell phone, pager, message services, and email? “Did you try—?”

She didn’t miss the undercurrent of skepticism. “Yes, and yes.” She held up a hand as he opened his mouth. “He doesn’t want to talk to me, except on his own terms. I think he’s up to something—regarding Emma—and he doesn’t want me to know.” She swallowed the sour taste it left in her mouth.

Surprisingly, it appeared to take the edge off Dale’s anxiety. “Him and Em. Go figure.”

Nicky buried her face in her palm. “No, you dolt,” she muttered through gritted teeth. Patience was at an end. Her mouth still felt rank with vomit after her confrontation with Emma. Every one of her own bones was aching, and she knew she was just an encounter away from having every muscle in her body lock up. *Catatonia*. It had happened once before, years ago, but she’d gotten through. It wasn’t, however, something she ever wanted to happen again. “He’s plotting. Whatever it is, he doesn’t want to know me now. Either that, or—” A new thought occurred to her, and she lifted her head, to stare unseeing at the late day’s light. “—he’s not going to meet me.”

Dale was quick, despite Nicky’s inferences. “Tonight—because you’re going to be meeting Emma.”

Nicky returned his look, eyes wide. “At the restaurant. I’m her distraction.” It fit, God help her! The reason Renaldo had seemed both tense and apologetic. He might think he’d pulled it off, but he’d already been signaling his regret. “He’s going to her house,” she announced, appalled, yet at the same time, slightly relieved. *Expertise on the scene. I hope.*

“With Chalmers.” Dale could be blunt, too. Nicky shook her head, but Dale elaborated. “Chalmers isn’t available, either. He texted me: ‘call back after nine’. Whatever it is, they’re in it together.”

He made it sound dire, but comparing what Renaldo and Harley were doing, to true evil, of the type Emma was manifesting? “Get your priorities straight, Dale. They’re not in the same league.”

“I don’t care,” Dale said insistently. “I still say, they’re working together.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The impatience had taken over, and the “dumbass” was implied, if not spoken. “As *Emma*. As Emma—the way she is *right now!*”

“Oh. Yeah.” It was obvious he’d thought it was stupid of her to be worrying about inconsequentials. Now it was apparent she wasn’t. “Though, if anyone can handle this—” he began.

“They’re not ready! It’d be like Chang confronting her, only worse! Half-truths and half-cures versus—”

“Turn tail and run.”

“Well, yes.” It was probably grossly unfair to Chang, considering how he’d stuck with Emma all afternoon, even though he’d been scared out of his mind.

“He’s sensible enough to call it quits.” Dale must have guessed where her thoughts were heading. Chang deserved a medal for what he’d done today. Dale said as much, then added lightly, “You’ll notice he didn’t argue when you told him to take off. He’s done his bit. Better for him to get out now while the getting’s good.”

Nicky glanced Dale’s way as she started up the car again, just to see whether he was referring to himself as much as Chang Avery.

“I’m in, for now ... but I know my limits, Nix,” he told her seriously. “I can’t claim any expertise in *your* field.” He eyed her warily, obviously wondering whether he’d said the wrong thing again.

Nicky didn’t act offended. If anything, her backbone stiffened and her jaw tightened. “This is, as you say, my ‘field’. I expect you to be sensible enough to call it quits, too.”

Dale nodded agreement. He couldn’t resist adding, “Whereas, Renaldo and Harley—”

Nor was her sigh lost on him. “Will refuse to yield, to their last breaths.”

“Pig-headedness,” Dale complained.

“For one,” Nicky told him wistfully. “But for Harley, it’s different.”

“Love.” Dale said it diffidently, as though concerned Nicky would ridicule him.

Ridicule was the last thing she was feeling at the moment. Nicky offered him a smile which held no trace of humor, only regret. “Yes,” she agreed. “He’s finally found it, and he doesn’t want to

lose it—now.” With the last, she revved the engine, and took off at high speed down the road.

* * * * *

Harley had personally seen far too many cases of good kids going bad, from influence by peers, a longing for status, or a yearning for possessions. Wouldn't influence by a supernatural entity be stronger? Especially when you'd already made yourself susceptible, through your own enthusiasm, awe, or terror? If the “happy thought” theory he'd read about worked, and defense lay only a positive attitude away, then emotional state counted. Enthusiasm and awe might make the recipients more receptive, but terror was worse: it undermined self-esteem.

Wouldn't Evil prefer a trace of genius, to better its chances for success? The people who'd aided and abetted Terence Forsby hadn't been penniless vagrants with a grudge against society. They'd been well-educated professionals with goals—and Forsby had somehow convinced them that he offered a means to achieve them. Genius tended to become lost in the specific, with a resulting naiveté of the basic. Hence the “geek” generalization: that genius couldn't comfortably interact with average. No common ground, too much solitude, too little understanding—only naiveté to balance the high IQ.

Harley froze in his tracks and his heart pounded as sweat broke on his brow. *This isn't gonna work—not at all.* There was something very wrong here, and he wondered whether he was the only one who realized it. These people were gourmet fare, to individuals like Forsby. If he could manipulate them, get inside their skins, and their heads...

He already has. That display at Emma's hadn't been accidental. Would it make them more susceptible next time? Or more wary and suspicious?

Depends on their emotional states.

Harley surreptitiously surveyed them again, and his gut tightened. *Not good, dammit!* Apparently, something—maybe his own presence—was making them feel “safe”.

Safer than they should. Guard down, Forsby in.

Jock always gave the impression of being a stupid jock, but Harley had often suspected there was more to him. Maybe Forsby had done his trial runs on him. Maybe that was why it was so easy to suspect him—perhaps, even, to blame him. Forsby had been a powerful man, who'd given even police

veterans a shiver. Nor had he worked alone. There'd been his church, his father. Harley refused to include Emma in the list.

The question remained: were psychic “vibes” more powerful in concert?

“Hold it!” His tone brooked no refusal, but Max opened his mouth to comment anyway—no doubt about Harley’s use of the phrase. Harley ignored him. “We need to talk—now.” It was time to clue these people in—if not about Jock, specifically, then about Harley Chalmer’s conclusions, generally. If negative vibes were stronger in concert, then positive vibes might well be, too.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, he was ready to toss his own “positive vibes” out the window. Max's car had been hot and smelly, and there'd been far too much attitude in far too small a space. Now that they were in Emma's back yard, things didn't look to be getting much better. At this rate, they'd all be arrested before they could set a foot inside the door.

“Don’t you guys ever agree on anything?!” Harley fought to keep the strident note out of his voice. If it remained, he blamed it on the way he was attempting to yell at them in a whisper. “This isn’t a competition. What *I* say goes—”

Renaldo cleared his throat in that superior manner which made Harley want to pound him.

Harley glared. “I suppose you have yet *another* opinion?” It was clear he felt Renaldo had voiced one too many.

Merlin sniggered.

“Not now, dammit!” Max warned him hastily.

“Please—!” Reisha held up both hands, as though she thought her plea would actually do some good. “This isn’t the time—”

“Damn right it is!” Renaldo.

Harley’s mouth snapped shut. Renaldo’s sentiments were his own. For a moment, he was taken aback, and wondered whether they were doing that mind reader thing again. Then, he realized Renaldo was just plain mad, and wanted the chain of command clear in everyone’s head, just in case.

“I’m in charge of safety.” Harley said it bluntly, and his expression dared any of them to contradict him. “If I find you’re acting contrary to the safety of the individual—or the group—I’ll call

it.”

Renaldo shook his head. “You’ve made some good preliminary investigations, and your reasoning is sound,” he said coolly, “but this isn’t your area of expertise.”

“It’s Forsby! That makes it—!”

“Understood,” Renaldo said calmly. “If you’d been more conversant with the paranormal, you would have reacted differently the first time you came to this house—and heard the dog’s bark.”

“Your psychic ‘nerve’ wasn’t exactly twanged when you showed up in that bunny suit—!”

Renaldo had the grace to look a little flustered. “I knew something was up! Why do you think I left my card that way?”

“Shut up!” Max appeared to be listening to something none of them could hear. “Someone’s coming.” To Harley’s unspoken question, he shook his head. “No time,” he mouthed. The rest went unsaid: with the equipment load, and the rather noisy crew, they were less at risk hiding inside, than trying to sneak away.

Nevertheless, Harley did a speedy survey of his companions’ expressions. They were all still game—wary, but game. “Right.” He tinkered with the lock, using several picks taken from his inner pocket. In moments, he’d swung open the back door. “In,” he ordered, drowning out Merlin’s envious sigh. After one look at the guy’s face, Harley stowed his tools deeply in his pocket. He glanced over his shoulder, realized no one had moved a muscle, and gave Merlin a shove. “Get in there!” he hissed. “Now!”

Within, all was quiet. Positively calm, dammit. Not to say there wasn’t a certain degree of tension, from all concerned, but trepidation was swiftly giving way to tense excitement. Harley’s tension hadn’t eased at all, and it was rapidly becoming edged with guilt. By bringing them here, he’d helped eliminate one area of speculation—and weighed the case against her.

Dammit!

Because the reason for the calm, the quiet, the undisturbed atmosphere was obvious. *No Emma*. Oh, they’d run their tests anyway, but they wouldn’t find anything, so, at least theoretically, they’d conclude the source was absent.

Maybe it is. Harley refused to give the “source” a name. Speculation was okay, he told

himself, without condemnation. Besides, there was always Jock. Where he fit in, Harley couldn't say, but he didn't like it. The truth was, he still didn't like Jock, despite all his previous efforts.

But he stubbornly refused to label Jock, too. No condemnation. No accusations.

Get on with it.

They were in free range now, hiding places established. Max's insistent, "There is someone coming," had been met with Renaldo's demand for a time frame, and Max's woeful response: "You know how it works, Renaldo." Merlin had snorted, Reisha had sighed loudly, and Renaldo's nostrils had flared. Apparently, astral time worked on a different framework from diurnal rhythms, and this had clearly happened before. Renaldo didn't chide Max for his vagueness, merely nodded firmly, while the other man hustled to unload equipment.

Harley just wanted to get this over with. He was uncomfortable as hell and every moment watching them made him feel worse. It was bad enough to bear guilt solo; to have a bunch of other people in on it made it worse.

He walked stiffly out of the room, but nevertheless made an effort to record his own observations. It had been Renaldo's idea, by nature of a "control", but it was probably just one more way of getting inside his head to eliminate him as the source. Harley made a point to jot down innocuous details.

What surprised him was how different her place looked this evening.

I could have sworn the walls were gray.

There had been dark tones everywhere, those other times. Artificial lighting hadn't been able to touch it. In one instance, he recalled grimly, the darkness had been tinged with red. He risked a quick glance at the front door, half-expecting to see ruddy stains on the paneling.

Nothing. Her home was not only clean, but lacking in personality. The rat invasions—and he could personally testify to at least two—had left as little mark as the spectral visits. Emma had fastidiously cleaned up all traces. Her ruined couch and over-scrubbed chairs were all that remained.

The night he'd spent here, standing guard over her and Nicky, had been different, but he couldn't have said why. The truth was, when Emma was around, his powers of observation were as dim as the sometimes-lighting in her house. He had eyes for one person only.

Not today, he thought as a thud came from the bedroom. Today he was stuck here, with this group of analytical “experts”, and he didn’t like it. He had no desire to pick at her place or her person. The wrong comment from any of these jerks would be all it took to send him over the edge.

And get us caught.

Don’t let us get caught! It was a silent prayer, but Harley hadn’t realized how much it mattered to him until now. In his efforts to testify to her innocence, his actions had destroyed any chance they might have had together. He’d violated her space and had invited others in, to violate it, too.

And they hadn’t proven a thing so far, except that Emma’s house without Emma was a safer place. Safer, and emptier. Not good for Emma, and inconclusive. Max’s face showed only disappointment. There was nothing here.

Without her.

Dammit!

All was empty. Lonely, even. Unmarked by any presence and unclaimed. There was nothing to say this was Emma’s residence, except the ice skates in the cupboard, and the books on fungi and viruses lining the shelves. It was plain she hadn’t bothered to unpack all her stuff. According to her file—*another intrusion*—she usually didn’t remain in a premises very long. Not long enough, apparently, to want to claim it as her own.

She doesn’t like coming home. Harley wished he could change it for her. If she’d only give him a chance.

Behind him, Renaldo cleared his throat, and Harley gave himself a mental shake.

Discernment. Objectivity. Hang on to it. If Emma was to get a fair “trial” from these people, he had to be ready to defend her, but with reason. She didn’t need sympathy—she needed a solution.

It was then Harley realized Renaldo had cleared his throat for another reason entirely—not to draw attention to Harley’s distraction or deficits, but to draw Harley’s attention to Renaldo’s own management skills.

His “team” was performing in synchrony, like a well-oiled clock. Harley stared as they set up the last of their equipment. He couldn’t help it—the technical part of this fascinated him, and he was

particularly drawn by the magnetometer.

He wished, in that moment, he had the power to make some of their needles jump. To influence their gauges and throw off their suspicions. Anything to direct speculation elsewhere, and give Emma an out.

He looked up, to see Renaldo taking his cell phone away from his ear, an alarmed expression on his face.

“Fired?” Harley asked him, with exaggerated sweetness.

Renaldo didn’t come back with a retort. All he did was shake his head. He peered over at Max, indecisively, then resolutely looked away. Whatever he’d heard had hit him hard.

Harley knew it was petty, but he found Renaldo’s consternation more satisfying than disturbing. Harley could read him better than he suspected. Renaldo was wondering whether to inform his team about something, beginning with his second—Max—but was afraid it would influence them. He finally opted for circumspection. “Important news,” was all he’d say.

Emma didn’t need to be discredited any more, but there was no one around to invalidate Renaldo’s concerns but him. “What is it?” Harley asked bluntly.

It wasn’t the first time Harley had seen fear in Renaldo’s eyes, but it was the first time he’d seen pity. He rested a hand, briefly, on Harley’s shoulder, and suggested, “Check your phone for messages.”

Harley did as he suggested, and heard Nicky’s voice, then Dale’s. His face whitened, and he sank into a chair. Merlin tut-tutted the noise, but an angry nod from Renaldo silenced him.

“We may have a problem,” Harley managed.

Max had turned one of the monitors onto audio to remind them, not so subtly, that some people were anxious to get the work done and get out. At that moment, the slight fluctuations in the annoying “tick-tick-tick” went into a wildly erratic, racing pulse.

Gooseflesh rose on Renaldo’s skin and his face stiffened. His eyes met Harley’s. “You may be right,” he said.

* * * * *

Nicky didn’t stop the car again till she was two blocks from Emma’s. “We walk from here.”

“At this rate, she’ll beat us home.”

Nicky knew he was trying to make it sound like a bad thing, but Dale wasn't that good an actor. She could agree with his sentiments: the idea of the *Faux* Emma, as he was calling her, locked in safe and sound and out of confrontation's way, did hold a certain appeal.

“We need help,” Dale added. “No offense.”

“None taken. I agree with you.” Nicky fidgeted with her bag. What did you take to an exorcism?

As little info about yourself as possible.

“Leave your wallet here,” she suggested. “The less It knows—”

“—the better.” Dale didn't bother to hide his shiver. “Doesn't It *already* know—?”

Nicky shrugged. “A lot, maybe, but not everything. He's not God.”

“He'?”

“One of the dangers of association,” Nicky told him somberly. “‘It’ finds out a lot more about you, but you also discover more than you want to know about ‘It’.”

* * * * *

Renaldo didn't want it to happen. For the last eight years, he'd geared up for an event just like this, but now, all he wanted to do was run for his life.

For his soul. He studied his comrades. There wasn't one of them who didn't feel the same. Their equipment lay abandoned at their feet, and Max was panting so hard he was nearly hyperventilating. Maybe he, alone, knew what was coming.

“She's screaming,” he rasped, feeling Renaldo's eyes upon him.

It was enough to move them all in the direction of the door. “Go!” Renaldo ordered, shoving Reischka ahead of him.

It was too late. He sensed It before he saw It. There was a flavor to the paranormal, and a senses-tingling event could take the form of the sweetest and most pervasive floral aroma you'd ever experienced.

Or, it could be tainted, gag-wrenching, nose hair-shriveling like this one. Vomit and feces, sour earth and rancid water. Merlin was already retching, and Reischka joined him. Max had sweat on

his brow, his lips curled. Renaldo put a steadying arm on his shoulder. “*Hang on to it!*” He didn’t even know whether Max could hear him. He appeared deaf to anything, everything, except the dead voice in his head.

“Weakening us, so we can’t fight back.” It was Harley.

Renaldo knew then he’d been wrong. There was one of them who didn’t want to run; who remained stoically in place. Harley’s back was ramrod straight, and Renaldo was very glad, as he’d been in that parking lot, to have him on their side. Harley was sweating heavily, the stains dark marks on his shirt. But, he wasn’t giving in, or up. “I need to—”

He left it there, but Renaldo understood. *Wrest her back. Save her. Salvage her soul.* Any of them would do. Harley was doing staunch, but it wasn’t for them, though Renaldo now knew he’d do it, if it meant saving any of them, too. It was the nature of the man, and Harley felt as much responsibility for their well-being as Renaldo did. “You’re a fool, Chalmers,” Renaldo told him, but there was no mockery to his tone.

Harley’s eyes—white-rimmed with fear—flicked his way, only to find that crazed psychologist grinning at him. “You’d do the same,” he retorted. The Rabbit *would*—Harley could feel it in his gut.

“I didn’t say you were the only fool.”

“It’s Emma.”

Renaldo nodded. “Yeah.” He drew on everything he’d ever heard about possession. About demons. If Nicky claimed this was a demon, he had no doubts now she was right. The fact that they could sense Its influence, at such a distance, was testimony to Its strength.

Whoever had invoked this Thing had played them. Harley just didn’t want to believe it was Emma. Renaldo sighed. “It’s Emma,” he echoed.

Harley realized their conclusions were different, even if their words were the same. He didn’t have time to explain, or argue—not now. The walls were already graying; shriveling before their eyes.

It’ll be like the door. He clung to that thought, as though it were a life preserver in a stormy sea. When this was over, there’d be no sign: no blood, no pain. *Hang in and hang on.*

The walls were darkening further as they withered—so much so that the welling up, of oily

black, wasn't noticeable at first. The stench, already so invasive, grew worse now, as the thick filth leached out of cracks and joints; plaster and paint. Renaldo choked. "Th' evil which lurks in a man's soul—" He gagged, barely holding onto it. His eyes were running so much, he could scarcely see what happened next.

Merlin was bleeding. He was leaking blood from stigmata wounds on his wrists and feet and torso. The fluid was running freely as he screamed in agony. The damage from those non-existent nails was contracting his muscles; bending his palms inward against his wrists, leaving him hands which no longer worked; making it impossible for him to free his feet from his shoes. He was trying to scream, but blood kept flowing down his face, into his eyes, his nose, his mouth. He was drowning in his own fluids.

The ground was shaking like a palsied man beneath his feet, and Renaldo lost his balance. He didn't let it stop him—he grasped Merlin by one slippery forearm and tugged him toward the window. His burden was lightened then, as Harley tossed Merlin's other arm over one shoulder. "Safety!" he shouted, over the din.

It was the stupidest thing at the most insane time Renaldo had ever heard, but it brought a smile to his face. The Policeman was challenging him, as though he knew that's what it would take. Renaldo inclined his head in a bow, then he and Harley hauled ass toward the window, Merlin now looped between them.

There was no time. Merlin was about to lose it: shock or bleed-out.

So Harley called it. With a gigantic thrust which left Renaldo's shoulders feeling as though they'd been dislocated, Harley tossed Merlin into Renaldo's arms. Then he slammed Emma's lamp into the glass over the desk.

Renaldo didn't hesitate. He knew what Harley was up to now. With a giant heave which matched Harley's own move, he hefted Merlin up into his arms, and tossed him out the window.

* * * * *

It was only the beginning. Reisha knew it—had known it even before the dozen voices now shouting it in her head. Her own voice joined them, in shrill denial, and for a brief time was able to drown them out. All but the familiar voices, like Renaldo's and Max's. Or Merlin's screams, which

she heard both inside and out.

There was another voice, not-so-familiar, which had a penetrating power like no other: Maggie, who was wailing in the background.

Maggie was always teasing them. To her, life was a game once you'd left it. She tricked and misled, but not to harm—never to harm. She valued Max too much for that. He was part of her Eternity. Their souls were already linked, and time would link them further.

Unless she were to interfere. She could hint, and warn, but she couldn't reveal—not fully. It would be the one thing which would challenge their—her and Max's—Eternity. The one thing to lose them their joint destiny.

Reischa could hear Maggie's voice, mingled now with all those Others. She was on the verge, of revelation—

Don't! Reischa warned her. *We'll save them! We'll save them all!* But seeds of doubt echoed back her way. Through her own insistence she may have staved off Maggie's words, but the woman didn't really believe her.

In her.

She has reason. Reischa cringed now at the admission, but it was true: her motives were open to question.

Selflessness bred on the back of Envy? It made her want to weep.

For years, Reischa had been Max's most vocal opponent—tossing the stupidity of such an etheric relationship back at him, again and again. *"How can you be satisfied with so little?" "Other people wonder how they could 'live without her'—don't you ever wonder what it would be like to live with a 'her'?"* Deriding his sincerity as a cheat, a half-life, an escape from commitment.

A lie.

Only, it wasn't, and if any doubts had remained, now they'd vanished. Reischa also realized in that moment she might never find anything close to the Maggie-Max connection for herself, but she didn't care. Max had it, and the cosmos demanded that he keep it. *Hell!* Reischa Forsythe's romantic spirit demanded that he keep it. Whether or not Max's Love had arms to clench him didn't matter. Maggie would be there for him—had always been there for him—when it mattered.

Don't do it, Maggie! Don't tell him—me—any of us! Reisch's teeth were gritted, and every muscle taut. She willed her thoughts that way—channeled them back the way they'd come, so the dead woman would get the message. Maggie had no need to play Oracle. They'd get through this, with Max intact.

Don't! Please!

Desperation in the Void became displaced by uneasy tension. Reisch drooped, like a faded flower.

The voices of the world around her were eating at her brain and she slumped down, onto the floor, her arms clasped around herself, in a mockery of the human contact she'd once derided in Max. She sat there, cross-legged, attempting to hold herself together, while her brainwaves dashed in fragments like broken waves on the beach. She was unaware that she was humming; unaware that the tune was contributed by some distant voice. Clinging and rocking, she prayed to ease the pain within her skull.

She wasn't even aware of it when the hum became a groan.

* * * * *

Nicky shot a worried glance at Dale.

"You're not losing me now!" he panted.

If he were smart, he'd trail so far behind that I wouldn't even know he was gone.

But Dale wasn't smart. He was exhibiting no more intelligence than she as they ran down the block. This full-tilt race, to beat Emma to her house—

That nearly pulled her up short. Bad thing, to let compulsion drive you.

It was more, though, and she knew it. Renaldo was already there, at the end, and his presence read like molten energy in an ice cold sea. *He needs me.*

Which meant nothing was going to stay her. Not when his spirit was calling to hers so strongly.

"Wow!" Dale said, behind her. He appeared slightly befuddled, and shook his head when Nicky looked at him. "Seeing things that aren't there," he explained, slightly shamefaced. Apparently, it was giving him trouble in the running department. He was leaping awkwardly over non-existent

obstacles.

“Thought that was my trick,” Nicky retorted.

Dale seemed to take heart at the small joke, and nodded to her. It was as much as saying, *Ready to proceed.*

Nicky hit the door at a run, barely remembering to turn the knob. It wasn't locked, but then, she'd known it wouldn't be. She left Dale outside, to tend to Merlin, who was a bloodied mess dressed in window glass. “Neighbors!” Nicky shouted to him, over the din.

It was so loud in here it should have rattled the rafters. Hell, it *was* rattling the rafters! The ceiling was reverberating in shivery waves of vibration, and it was so dark Nicky could scarcely see. The black seeping out of every crevice was drooling across the window glass, like a slime mold.

Renaldo was flinching, against the light. The abrupt flare of her entrance, with sun at her back, must have been blinding, and one of his hands was still up, to ward off the glare. He'd been in the middle of lifting the woman—*Reischa*, Nicky remembered—to her feet.

Nicky barely saw her. Her eyes were for Renaldo. He was dressed in Merlin's blood, and splashed with the slimy goo, but she feasted on him. Then she was at his side, her hands helping drag Reischa's weight up off the ground, and out of the rapidly pooling black excrement.

“*Nicky!*” The word held more than gratitude for her assistance. There was a warmth in it which beat back the incongruously fetid chill in the room. Despite the rattles, the fluid rumbles, the shattering of glass, the dancing vibration of furniture, and the tension which elevated blood pressure to pound in their ears, Renaldo was smiling. As Nicky's eyes met his, he did what only Renaldo would in a situation like this: he inclined his head to her, in a bow.

Nicky's own smile broke through her tension. She helped lift Reischa higher, into his arms, then shouted, close to his ear. She hoped he would hear it, over everything. It was important—she only wondered whether he'd realize how much.

He was the one man in the world—the only person in the world—who brought her peace. The only one who could blind her to horror, and still her inner vision. Ironic that his field of choice was so contrary to his effect on her.

Black humor. It seemed there was no escaping it.

Her voice shook, only a little, as she blurted, “When I look at *you*, I *can't* see *bones*.”

* * * * *

Dale had propped Merlin against the door of the first house he came to with a warm engine in the driveway, then played Ding Dong Ditch as fast as he could go. He was hindered by all the objects he was seeing, which he'd already guessed weren't really there. The problem was, he kept missing what was. He'd tripped over his second lawn sprinkler when Chang tapped him on the shoulder.

Dale nearly had a heart attack. He thought it was the neighbor; the police; Merlin, chiding him for abandoning him to a neighbor's auspices; and, lastly—but most terrifying—the minute Emma, who no longer seemed quite so small or nearly so helpless. Dale almost went to his knees, but Chang steadied him. “You see,” he was saying when Dale was finally able to tune in, “I kept seeing what it was like, and I couldn't leave you to it.”

“Thanks.” It came out more sarcastic than Dale would have liked, so he made an effort. “Appreciate it,” he added, his gratitude genuine.

Chang grinned, but it was a pale echo of his usual smile. His eyes were dark, and Dale suspected the man was seeing more than stray objects cluttering his vision.

“Precognition,” Chang explained. “The future, depending on how we play it.”

He shuddered, and Dale didn't give him any more time to think about it. “Let's make sure then,” Dale told him grimly, “that we play it *right*.”

He caught Chang looking back toward the house where Merlin had just flopped down onto a lady's entry carpet. The woman's scream was long and shrill.

“He'll live,” Dale assured him, striving to keep the skepticism out of his voice.

Chang's eyes met his. “I know,” he said.

Dale smirked, shook his head, and after a quick search of Emma's front yard, led a tripping, dodging dash for her front door.

Chapter Sixteen

Harley was having problems. He backed up, into a corner, and concentrated on boxing himself in. If he couldn't control it—if he couldn't learn to tamp it down, he was going to kill someone.

And it might start with Emma.

It didn't help that distraction was everywhere. He was ankle deep in foul-smelling sludge now, and the walls were alive; moving at his back. He was fighting to concentrate but he couldn't find enough focus. His thoughts were scattered, splayed, shredded.

The door burst open, and Harley, like Renaldo, was momentarily blinded by the glare. He covered his eyes and tried to channel his thoughts anywhere but there. He managed it, somehow, but Emma's sofa suffered. It was flopped on its back, the stuffing strewn.

That could have been Nicky.

The fear was nearly enough to stop him. It was churning in his gut; burning in his chest. *Damn whoever was doing this to them—to him.*

In all his days in police work, he'd never wanted, really, to kill anyone. His work was a tribute to his non-violent half—the side which countered the brute in him. He'd always bested it, in every arrest, and every altercation. He had no qualms with the ire in his genes—it was built in—vestigial humanity from the eons past when violence had maintained life and limb.

And each time he won a battle, by besting his adversaries with his mind, his wits, he counted it a victory against that grunting, pumped-up, tight-jawed, chest-thumping, fist-flinging Neanderthal within, who would secretly have delighted in pounding every confrontational, knife-wielding, gun-toting, karate-hopping, foul-mouthed, spittle-mongering, antisocial mongrel into the ground. Savage Harley didn't exist because Harley wouldn't let him.

But now, Harley wasn't sure he had a choice. The hotheaded kid who'd stared back at him in the mirror, so many years before, was writhing out of the crypt where Harley had sequestered him. He was back, with all his fury. And Harley didn't know whether he could control him.

He'd learned to manage his anger, as part of becoming a man. He'd closed the door on it; allowing it to smolder around the jamb and underneath, but never allowing it out to roam. He was civilized; a fully-functioning adult.

Who was now scared out of his wits, and it wasn't just the wriggling house or his screaming companions that were doing it to him—though they got to him, too. He couldn't help them, didn't dare to help them, because there was too great a chance he'd blow them away.

Slam it in, lock it down, barricade the threshold. He grimaced and squinted his eyes closed. He could do this.

Dale and Chang flung open the front door, as though hellhounds were at their backs. Their mistake was in hesitating there, on the threshold.

Harley barely had time to register their presence. He was concentrating too hard on closing down his mental portals. *Shut the damned door!* he told himself. *Now!*

It worked, but not the way he'd figured. The door slammed closed again, right in Dale's face.

* * * * *

Some part of her knew what she was doing, but that same part was conversant with defeat. How many times had she fought it, over the years? How many times had she lost to rats, and, more recently, ghosts?

It's Jock.

If it were Jock alone she could fight it. It was one of the reasons, she knew, with sudden clarity, that he hated her so much—because she could best him. Should she ever choose to work with the weapons he'd selected, and to link herself with the sources he dredged for power, he wouldn't stand a chance.

So he denounced her as a weakling, and destroyed her a little, day by day. It was his form of love, because he couldn't truly do "love". For him, it was a twisted form of hate.

It was the way he'd destroyed his father. Emma knew it now, and though the realization was only hours-old, the knowledge had been there longer. At some level she'd suspected—had always suspected. But, denial was as much a part of her relationship with Jock as hate. Denial had been her tool for years; the only way she could endure his presence, by pretending he was something he was

not.

He'd killed Ethan Jamieson, her stepfather, by burning him alive. Not literally, of course, but every bit as painfully. Ethan had been charming, and witty, but he'd begotten a brute, and his failing was his inability to make the best of it, of him. Unlike Emma, who'd invented a version of Jock which she could endure, and which had very nearly endeared her to him, Ethan had seen Jock for what he was, and predicted his future. Jock needed to make more of an effort, Ethan had always told her mother, more than most. He could be whatever he wanted, but he'd have to work hard at it.

He must have known, even then, that Jock was never willing to work hard at anything, least of all genetic flaws, which gave him an intuitiveness he used, but seldom displayed.

Gave him a power he should never have exploited.

So, Ethan Jamieson had died. The heart attack had been a farce. Ethan had died of fear.

The kind of fear Emma was feeling now. Her limbs were so cold they were leaden. Her past was a fallacy, her present a farce, and her future, ash.

It's too late. The refrain was as built-in to her as her determined optimism. Jock had done that to her, she knew now, and the only way she'd be free of him—and the caul he'd cast over her existence—was to overcome her resistance and force her native optimism to break through.

It had worked once, there, in the forest, in a moment of distracting pain. For an instant, she'd heard Nicky's voice, and seen her, Dale's, and Chang's faces. It had been enough to motivate Emma, to drive her here, and nothing had been able to stop her. She'd dragged along the burden of that other self. However much it might suppress her spirit, at least she was fighting.

Jock had done this, too. It had been coming for years; a gradual confinement of her spirit, an eating away of her self-determination. That's why it had happened—why she'd been weak enough to succumb, but it didn't stop her from hating herself for her weakness. Her hate, Jock's hate—in that moment, they were both one.

And she almost lost it, then—the meager control she'd fought so hard to acquire. The Beast was writhing within and without, and it was terrifying because she knew it would use her—her abilities, her form, her muscles, her bones, and maybe, even, her brain—to perform.

Fear wasn't enough. It was yet another negative emotion; another way of succumbing. She

just didn't know how in bloody hell she was going to find the resolution, the positive energy, to stop herself.

* * * * *

Renaldo thought helplessly of Merlin's bleeding wounds, and how they'd tossed him out the window. What could he do to help Reischka? Hysteria flickered. Shove her down some stairs?

His anxiety was peaking, now that Nicky was here. Emma was outside somewhere, far too close for any of their comfort. And the last thing Renaldo wanted was to have Nicky in harm's way.

"Look!"

He came out of his panicky distraction to see what Nicky was pointing at. Reischka had an abrasion, with mottled bruising on her arm. She'd hit the coffee table so hard on her descent that there was already bruising under the skin. Where Renaldo had gripped her, though, patches from his fingers showed.

Clear patches of healthy skin.

Nicky was smiling. "It's *you!*" she shouted.

Me. Renaldo laid the flat of his hand across the reddish-blue, then lifted it, astounded to see no trace of damage. "It's me!" he gasped. He waded through the sludge, heading for the door, tossing the word "Merlin" back over his shoulder. He stopped just before he got there, then trudged back, to lay his palm across Reischka's forehead. Nicky's smile widened.

When Renaldo finally hit the door again, he found it had been slammed so hard it was wedged in the jamb. Still half-lost in his bemusement, but determined to put this new and novel "gift" to best use, he braced a foot on the jamb and yanked on the knob. It took Nicky's shout before reality penetrated. Renaldo twisted, frowning, his eyes searching the room. *Harley.*

* * * * *

"No!" Nicky warned him, shaking her head. Renaldo may have missed some of the action, but she'd seen that door slam. She'd also guessed who was responsible. She took out her cell phone and punched in Dale's number. "How's your nose?" she asked. Her grimace reflected some of Dale's anger. She interrupted with, "Bring it in here and Renaldo will fix it for you."

There was silence, and then Dale started to speak, but Nicky wouldn't let him. "If you bring

Merlin, he'll fix him, too.”

“Too late. The ambulance just left.” Dale paused. “So, healing’s on the menu now?”

“So it seems. The best thing you can do is get in here, Dale,” Nicky told him seriously, “before Emma gets to you first.”

* * * * *

She’s here.

Harley had his eyes scrunched closed, but he didn’t need them to know she’d arrived. The tension went up another ten degrees, and Harley gave a mental squirm. He was so afraid he’d hurt her. So afraid anger and fear would get the better of him and he’d blow her apart.

His heart pounded and his breath came in panting gasps as he fought to control it.

Terrified, he sank down, into the gooey mass, drew up his knees, and buried his face in his arms. *See no evil, hear no evil.*

But he couldn’t miss the creak, crack, and pelting of splintered wood as Emma—his tiny, defenseless Emma—shattered the door.

* * * * *

She didn’t come alone. The welling black sewage was undulating now, then peaking in spasms which gave birth to squiggling forms. Nicky’s face reflected her horror as their surroundings came alive.

These were the inky black patches with indefinite form which rode the dark corners of rooms at night. That amorphous leaching, of uncertain shape, which lingered in unfocused peripheries. With Emma’s arrival, the blobs of thick ink coalesced, and became cohesive entities.

Imps. Renaldo recognized them from the descriptions, but these held none of the quaint cuteness of their name. As they separated from the blackness, on sinewy legs and taloned feet, his pounding heart moved into full-bore race. *Definition, form, locomotion, intent.*

Their slitted eyes glowed red, and each possessed tapering, nearly-skeletal fingers which terminated in jagged claws. When the first one jumped on Nicky’s back and stabbed her through her shirt, Renaldo saw red, too. He lashed out, teeth gritted, and with a solid thunk sent it flying.

Solid weight. Real.

His wriggling victim toppled, and was sucked down, into the muck, where it melted into the mass.

Renaldo wasn't even given time to feel satisfaction. The reabsorbed imp emerged again—in seconds, it seemed—undaunted—but this time, its eyes were fixed on *his* leg.

Intelligent.

Crap! He was still thinking it when, with voracious hunger, the sharp-toothed gremlin bit into his calf.

“Harley!” Renaldo shouted, but it wasn't until Nicky screamed, “Emma! Stop it!” that Harley finally lifted his head. The imps were all over the man—his shoulders, his back—but he'd been letting them come. Anything rather than lashing out.

But he couldn't take the scene being enacted before him. He'd been fighting injustices for too many years. Max was down, on Emma's toppled couch, nearly invisible now under the load of monsters. They were trying to drag him down, into the blackness.

Into the fissures—the maw—of Hell.

“No!” Harley roared it, and the nearest imp began writhing, screeching in a high, chirruping voice while smoke rose tar-dark from its liquid skin. With no other warning, it burst into flame—going from inferno to ash in seconds.

As one, the black oily army turned, to regard Harley through slitted red eyes. And the closest one, who'd been eagerly gnawing Harley's back, smiled.

The next moment, *en masse*, the imp legions pounced.

* * * * *

At Nicky's warning, they'd both moved like lightning—until they'd hit the back door. After a panicky bashing of the latch, Dale and Chang crept in through the kitchen. At that moment, “inside” had seemed a whole lot safer than “out”.

When the first pang reached his ears, Dale tossed caution to the wind. He sprinted toward the lounge, then hesitated on the threshold. He didn't have a choice: his heels were locked in place, layered in slimy black, while sinuous, writhing tendrils encircled his feet, binding him to the mucky mess. He was toppling to all fours when the tendrils developed grasping hands.

“Fuck this!” he howled. With a gigantic lurch-heave, he pushed himself to his feet, and with dancy, jerky, God-help-me determination, he jumped up onto a toppled end table, and gazed in horrified dismay at the writhing semisolid below.

Chang seemed oblivious to the animate mass, which made Dale want to throttle him. He would have been tempted if Chang hadn't been so fast to act. He leapt up beside Dale, and the small table gave an ominous crack.

Harley had it worse. He was being inundated—folding under his burden ofimps.

“Fucking hell!” Dale bounded bravely from the safety of his perch and took two steps in Harley's direction.

Chang jumped down and gripped his arm. “Wait! He can handle it,” he shouted.

Harley did. He handled it in a savage blast that flung imp spatter in stinging splats across the room. Where they landed, they self-immolated in minor flares of stinking smoke.

“Oww!” Chang yelped, striking a glowing wad off his cheek.

“Nasty,” Dale muttered, but he wasn't talking about Chang's minor burn. He recalled how Chang had held him back. “Since when did you acquire caution?” he yelled, in Chang's ear.

Chang flinched a little at the noise, and blasted Dale back with a, “Let's just say I'm more *perceptive* than usual!” Whatever he saw in Dale's expression triggered a weak grin. “I know—wouldn't take much.”

“Don't look at her eyes!” Renaldo was shouting. He was at Max's side now. There was blood pouring from his torn ear, but he patched it with a touch of his fingers.

“Good with his hands,” Nicky explained. She wasn't being exactly quiet, either.

“Please! Don't share!” Chang yelled back sarcastically, but his eyes never left Emma's face.

Dale saw it was changing now; becoming the Emma they knew.

“Don't trust it!” Chang bellowed.

Emma opened her mouth, but instead of words, emitted a wad of mucousy spit. It shot, projectile-style, across the room and hit Chang right in the eye.

Dale yanked him back. “Surprised you didn't see that one coming.”

Emma laughed then. It went on and on, the echoes of it vibrating their eardrums.

Harley felt like his drums were going to burst. He could feel liquid welling in his ear.

“Emma!”

Emma stopped laughing, and smiled sweetly at him.

Renaldo warned quietly, “It’s not a ‘She’ any more, Chalmers. Think ‘It’.” His fingers hesitated only slightly, before they gripped Harley’s shoulder. “Fight the influence, any way you can. Otherwise, It’ll use you—manipulate you.”

Again, that laughter. “She can’t love *you*,” Emma’s mouth told him. “She’ll *never* love you.” The smile was kind—understanding, almost. “So you might as well put an end to this now.”

Renaldo had moved away, but at a signal from Chang, turned back.

Harley had drawn his gun from its holster. He remembered his own words: “Don’t you think this gun in my hand predisposes me to violence?” and Emma’s response, “Well, actually, yes.”

She’d been right—right about it all. How could he have thought he’d stood a chance? He’d come in here, trying to act like her bloody savior, but the truth was, he knew next to squat about her problem. She was merely seeing him now the way he was seeing himself: as the world’s worst fool. An overdose of testosterone trapped in a hero complex.

I put down her brother, for God’s sake! Her only family, and I alienated him. I invaded her house, her space.

And I wanted to invade her person.

He was worse than a fool—he was dirt. How could he expect to deal with the dead when he’d generated a few himself? “Stop or I’ll shoot,” he remembered telling the boy. Only, the boy hadn’t. He’d dived, just as Harley had aimed for his leg.

Harley was so lost in guilt, in misery, he didn’t see it coming. Didn’t see his own trembling fingers put the gun to his temple.

The next thing he knew, someone had slammed him, and wrested the gun out of his hand. He was flat on his face in the guck, and someone was sitting on his back.

Nicky.

Harley lifted his head, and forced himself up on his elbows, his gooey eyelids wide.

There were cyclone winds buffeting Nicky’s hair. She looked like an avenging demon herself,

with the arcs of static electricity lancing across the ceiling.

“Are you through?” she bellowed. It was lost in a wave of fouled water which splashed across her head.

New tactics.

But the source wasn't Emma, after all. Max was outside the window now, aiming a hose full blast at Emma's head. Harley, his eyes clearing, could see that his Demon-Girl was retreating, into a corner. Max was keeping her there the best he could, but lashback was in the air. Spirally winds were sucking up the water, in a violent cyclone of tarry wash. Through it all spun those impossible, half-formed fiends, sucked out of their primordial soup: fetid metamorphs, trapped mid-state.

And the lot—black goo, fetid fiends, foul wave-wash—was about to be dumped, on Emma's would-be saviors.

Harley caught Nicky's eye again and nodded. "Yeah."

“Good!” she shouted, then spat, disgusted. “’cause we’ve got work to do.”

“Okaaay,” Dale said, never taking his eyes off Emma's feet. "Regrouping time." He was beginning to doubt that any of them, with the exception of Max and his water works, knew what they were doing, and it showed in the almost resigned slump of his shoulders. “What I want to know is why *now*?” he asked, a little desperately. "If she's been susceptible all this time, doesn't it seem a little weird that some demon would invade when she has the most backup?" It was clear Dale thought if they could figure out what was making her susceptible, they might be able to turn it off, like water to a tap. "Or," His expression filled with shocked horror, and he lowered his voice even further, “do you think the demon's been there all along?”

“No,” Renaldo replied brusquely, shaking his head. “She's more open to it now. Demons apply themselves to our baser instincts.” He glanced at Harley, then quickly averted his eyes. “Emma probably didn't have too many baser instincts—”

“Till someone woke them up,” Harley drawled. “Are you saying this is *my* fault?” At the moment he really didn't care whose fault it was. He just wanted her back.

“No. It would have happened some time. Better now—”

When we're all here to help her. Harley finished it. Renaldo didn't know the half of it, but he

wasn't sure whether he should be the one to supply the details. His own conclusions were too biased, and he knew it. Besides, after his little display of moments before, he didn't know whether Renaldo or anyone else would trust his judgment.

He had to bite his tongue to hold back the damning words, but somehow, he avoided mentioning Jock's name. It was Renaldo's job to make that call. Harley's personal aversion for Jock Jamieson had made him jump to Jock as the instigator of this disaster. It wouldn't help Emma if he were to implicate her brother on the basis of his own prejudice.

He might be the only one she has left—after this. He eyed Nicky, Dale, and Chang.

No, no matter what happens, she has me.

Still, he knew in his head if not his heart, that she would need more. Emma needed a network of friends—not just one lunatic policeman who adored her. She'd need the people she'd started this venture with, plus the opportunity to face the future, with some confidence in herself.

He just didn't know how they were all going to get out of this intact.

Chang's agitated voice interrupted his thoughts. "Do I want to know Its name?"

"No!" It came from three sources, simultaneously: Harley, Renaldo, and Nicky. Nicky went on to explain, *sotto voce*, "Makes it too personal."

Then Renaldo, gruffly, "Don't talk to *it*. Emma, maybe—"

"Maybe?" Max's echo held a note of panic. He'd handed off the hose to Dale, and now stood there, looking petrified.

"Never seen this before?" Nicky asked him. At his fervent denial, Nicky offered him a trace of a smile. "I've seen worse."

Renaldo, watching, could have kissed her then. He just wished she'd listen to him, and get the hell out of here. It was doubtful that, given even Nicky's vast experience, she'd ever been in this much danger.

Her words had obviously made Max feel better, though. He'd need that reassurance when Renaldo told him what he had to do next. Max without his machines would be like a naked man standing in a windstorm.

"We need to turn off all equipment," Renaldo ordered. "Phones, digital equipment, PDAs,

computers.”

Max didn't question him, though it was obvious he wanted to. “Darn it!” he muttered chastely.

“Yes, darn it,” Chang repeated. “How can I make it leave If I don't talk to It?”

“Just don't interrogate It—”

“Yeah, *right*. Like I want to have intercourse with a demon—or anything else!” Chang amended, when he realized how it sounded, “Correction: a Q-and-A session with a demon.”

Emma snarled loudly in the background. It ended on a watery splutter.

Chang glanced her way. “This is shitty.” He was shaking now, and the words “Why me?” were so soft only Harley heard them.

Harley laid a bracing hand on his shoulder. “Because you have the least to lose.”

* * * * *

Chang's brown eyes flicked to him, and an expression of horror crossed his face. “Say, *what?!*”

“Of all the people here, you're the least susceptible,” Harley amended. “And you care the least about Emma.” The firmness in his tone dared Chang to argue with him.

Chang argued anyway. “I care more about her than they do.” He nodded toward Renaldo and company. The “company” was a little thin. Reisha was working the Scripture reading angle on Emma, to distract and weaken her, while Dale was outside with the hose. *Should I feel confident?* Chang fretted, spying the worried looks on the others' faces.

Not.

“But they're like the filter paper you use in that lab of yours,” Harley was telling him.

Chang forced himself to focus.

“And you have an alternative perspective, that isn't ‘involved’,” Nicky added. “You can hold her in your head as the figure skater who can't quite figure out how to do it.”

Chang nodded. “I get it. No passion. No angst.” He thought about it. “Well, a little angst when she persists in doing it all wrong.”

“Right. Use her klutziness as a barricade—” Chang guessed from his expression that Harley

was begging silent forgiveness for the slur.

Powerful things, slurs. Could show either hatred or affection; generalization or intimate knowledge. Chang grasped and held onto the image Harley had given him. *Affectionate klutz.*

That could work.

But Harley wasn't finished. "Instead," he went on, "concentrate on letting someone else win your battles for you."

In other words, don't punch her out.

"And don't take it on yourself," Renaldo warned.

Myself? A trace of near-panic flickered in Chang's eyes. "Then how?"

Harley elaborated, "Leave it to God, Jesus—" He glanced at Renaldo's notes. "—Isa Ben Miriam."

"Who's that?"

"If you don't know, you don't need to. She's not a Muslim, is she?"

Chang shook his head, a little blankly.

"Then don't sweat it. She won't recognize the name any more than you do."

"You can *do* this," Nicky told him firmly.

Chang sighed, then nodded. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she was right. "I know." To the question in her eyes, Chang replied, "Because I've seen it."

* * * * *

It's wrong.

It had been bothering him from the start. Chang was drenched in sweat but doing well. In the background, Reisha droned on, reading Scripture from the Bible. All according to the book—or, at least, according to all the sources Renaldo had been able to find before they'd shut down the computers.

But nothing Renaldo had read had mentioned bizarre events, like the ones they'd encountered this afternoon. It hadn't just been Emma manifesting abnormal powers—it had been *all* of them.

Like before. There was something, or someone, at fault here. They'd run the tests, and this site was within the norm. That indicated it wasn't a place, but a person. *Emma?* It would be only logical to

think so.

She seemed a lot too preoccupied at the moment, though, to focus on anything—anyone—else. Were his suspicions just a form of paranoia? Another delusion, sponsored by their demon? Renaldo looked wildly around. The worst thing now—for their collective peace of mind—was to have them all begin to suspect each other.

All of us at each other's throats.

Still, if it wasn't stopped—if he or she wasn't stopped—this could go on forever. If Emma was to blame, she was far more gifted than anyone deserved. It meant she was not only harboring a demon, but side-stepping Its control.

Not likely.

Renaldo whispered to Harley, “Something—someone—is facilitating Its entry.” *Who?!*

* * * * *

A facilitator. Harley's eyes searched the group, much as Renaldo's had. It didn't fit. There was only one person who fit the part, and he wasn't here.

Or was he? Gooseflesh rose on Harley's skin. It all fit the man—so damned well. The reason he'd never been able to get ahead. Why he'd come so close to getting the label of “jinx”. Why bad luck seemed destined to thwart his every attempt to succeed.

His personality alienated those around him, and then he empowered them to act on it. On him. Except now, it seemed, he'd decided to turn the tables.

Jock. Harley knew now why Jock had been there, at the prison. He'd gone to get his orders—or give some.

“He's not a medium,” Harley told Renaldo quickly. “Just someone who empowers those who are.”

The tension was rising again, in the room. Whether it was singular, or combined, it was enough to make Renaldo's hair rise on his neck. “You *know* who it is.” He said it bluntly, and Harley nodded confirmation. “Then let's *find* him.”

Harley plugged in his happy thought with an effort. It was hard to think positively when he'd come so close, only an hour before, to blowing his own brains out. But he clung to a vision of Emma,

snuggled in his arms.

And his happy thought was that finding Jock Jamieson would put an end to all this.

He'll know I'm gunning for him.

I owe him.

We all owe him.

The happy thought nearly prevented Jock's getaway. He didn't know Harley was close until he spied him, rounding the corner of the house. The rush of the hose had concealed any external noise, so Jock had been busy concentrating on more havoc, and savoring his savage victory, the bastard.

Harley punched him, right in the jaw.

He and Renaldo hauled Jock's sorry ass back into the house. "You have the right to remain silent." Harley began the litany through gritted teeth, but Renaldo could have told him he'd never complete it. Jock Jamieson wasn't going to take this lying down.

* * * * *

There was a thundering rumble Dale recognized, and he turned to shout a warning. "Incoming!"

Nicky looked from Emma to Renaldo, her eyes dark with despair. If the rats came on now, there'd be no stopping them. Any control Emma may have exhibited in the past was hopeless here—there just wasn't enough Emma left in her body to thwart them.

They're not going to curl up at her feet and sleep, Nicky thought, as vomit spilled from Emma's mouth. *Not now.*

Not a chance.

Jock took up where the demon left off—and laughed. The fucker was enjoying this, and Harley—fist still gripping his shirt—shook him till his laugh rattled.

Harley punched him again, then flung him aside, as he took up a stance between Jock and the others, weapon at the ready. If he'd retained any of that couch-flinging, door-slamming, imp-toasting power it would have saved them now, but he had nothing, and his gun was as useless a weapon today as it had been that first day on Emma's walk. It was too late, and not even shooting Jock could stop them now. The rats were coming.

This was it. As the walls trembled once again, drywall sifting into wet sludge, Harley knew it was already too late.

* * * * *

Renaldo recognized what was happening before the others. Call it instinct, call it training, call it after-the-fact telepathy, but he could read Jock Jamieson. Whatever ritual the man had performed, to bring this on, it had sent his ego into overload. Jock thought he was above rules, above ethics.

Above God.

Certainly, above the law. But, he, of all people, should have realized there are laws which transcend time and space—warnings which shouldn't be ignored.

What was the classic admonishment in the magic texts, about deals with demons? *If you make a deal with a demon, you need to uphold your end. Renege on the deal—and you'll be smitten by consequence.*

Jock Jamieson was about to meet his karma.

* * * * *

It wasn't supposed to be about the rats. They weren't supposed to come—not this time. Emma was pre-occupied, but occupation of her body was only part of the bargain he'd struck. In this state, if the rats had their way, even that pact would be broken.

Jock rubbed his damaged jaw, trading his smirk for a smile.

His personal plans had no further use for self-sacrifice. The only ties binding him, when he left this room, would be those of his own choosing.

It ain't gonna happen. No arrest. No backlash. No consequences.

The rats were racing in. Jock backed slowly away, toward the door.

He'd had enough rat crap to last him a lifetime. Enough shit from Emma and everyone else. Now, there remained only the evidence, and after today, that'd be gone, too.

It had been a test, all a test, just to see. And what he'd done once, he could do again, and again. Contrary to the fuckin' "texts", you *could* best a demon.

For a moment, the boldness of it gave him a qualm, but demons were neither omnipotent nor all-powerful. If they were, they wouldn't need human intervention.

I won. He was grinning. He looked over, almost automatically, to catch Emma's eyes. "Bye, Sis—" he began, knowing she'd never hear him. After today, she'd never hear anything again.

He froze, before the words were out. In that instant, he knew. He'd broken a bargain, and forgiveness wasn't in the cards.

The last thing he heard, as the rats came at him *en masse*, was the shrill horror of Emma's scream.

Epilogue

They were sitting in the lunch room at Emma's work. Harley had planned it that way. After that night at Emma's house, Dale and Chang needed to know why it had gone so wrong. This was one time when moral support wasn't enough. All the staunch friendship in the world wouldn't dispel the lingering doubts. He knew they would always wonder how much of it was Jock, and how much Emma.

"It—the rats—weren't your fault, Emma," Harley told her. "They were never your fault." He lifted her hand. She didn't dissuade him, but she wasn't exactly encouraging either. His lips brushed her cold fingers. "They were your defense," he went on, quietly but firmly. "Against his influence."

"Jock's?" Dale pulled out a chair with a loud squawk that made Emma flinch. He bit into an apple. "Thought it was something like that," he chomped, gesturing with the core. "Pretty obvious."

"So wise in hindsight." Chang snorted rudely, then plunked down on Emma's other side. "Don't listen to the nice policeman, Emma. Definitely a victim of—"

"—arrested development," Dale interrupted. He met Harley's glower with mock innocence. "Hey, don't blame me. It's *his* joke."

Harley glanced at Emma. A glimmer of amusement had appeared briefly in her eyes.

Good.

He told them, "Nicky's going to be back next week."

"Slacker. A few moans, and she gets a holiday," Chang griped. "If I claimed 'mental stress', they'd can my ass. You know where she is, don't you?"

Dale nodded. "Hawaii, dammit."

"Wonder what kind of therapy her 'psychologist' is administering there?" Chang sniggered.

Dale sighed. "The same kind I'd give Marie."

"Life's unfair," Harley said mildly.

"Hey, with Nix, it's any excuse she can get. Apparently," Dale snorted, "she can get plenty."

It's all who you know.”

Chang looked hopefully at Harley. “I know you.” At Harley’s smirk, Chang sighed. “Didn’t think that one would be worth anything.”

Dale glanced a little pointedly at his watch. “Emma, those slides?” he prompted.

Emma’s smile didn’t reach her eyes as she shook Harley’s hand good-bye. “Thank you,” she said, formally.

She stood up, and Dale followed with a shrug and a silently mouthed, “Women!” Chang merely rolled his eyes and smirked.

Over, Harley thought morosely, as he watched Emma weave through the tables and chairs out of the room. He could still hear Chang arguing with Dale as they followed. “I’m telling you she’s got *connections!* Knickers is loaded with ’em.”

“I’ll tell her you said so. Maybe she can toss a few your way.”

Chang’s hesitation, then, “Hey, when I was skating—”

Dale’s exasperated, “Not *that* again! Does Nicky know you’re still calling her ‘Knickers’? I’m sure Parrish will be delighted to find out.”

“Pistols at dawn.” Chang sounded delighted at the thought.

Emma looked back only once—a quick glimpse which told Harley nothing.

Yes, it does, Chalmers—you just don’t want to accept it.

His stomach sank. He knew why she was avoiding him. If he were honest, it had been staring him in the face. He belonged to a time Emma would rather forget. Unlike her coworkers, he and Emma had never had an opportunity to forge any kind of relationship beforehand. They hadn’t been friends to begin with. There was nothing left now, at least from Emma’s point of view.

Only memories, she’d much rather forget.

There must be some way to convince her—

No. The decent thing.

He was stuck with just that, and only that. Decency. Honor.

Fuck it!

He refused to be another obsessive bastard in her life. Emma had had enough of that to fill a

lifetime.

Resolutely, he strode out of the lunch room, down the stairs, and out the front door. He might be a little blinded by his feelings for her, but he wasn't stupid. It was obvious Emma never wanted to see him again.

And, as difficult as the prospect might be, it could be arranged.

* * * * *

Emma circled the skating rink once more, lost in thought.

She had some things to work through. She knew it wasn't fair to Harley, but she couldn't face him—not yet. And, as much as she appreciated his visit to her work, she knew better than to offer him any encouragement. Jock had trained her well on that front. Any positive response had been open to misinterpretation. With Jock, she'd had to deliberately make her existence an exercise in bland, just so she wouldn't ever lead him on, encourage him, or make him want her more.

Get over it. He's dead.

What she really needed was to get over the guilt.

Harley had said it wasn't her fault, but maybe it was. She'd been spoiled by her mom—by Jock's dad. She'd been the youngest, and Jock must have been jealous, at least a little.

And Jock wouldn't have turned out like that without a reason. They said that psychological problems like his could have been a reaction to his childhood—and even Renaldo had agreed when she'd put it to him. He'd been hesitant, but eventually he'd said, "Yes, it could have had a detrimental effect on his development."

Was it Jock's fault that they'd formed some kind of synergy? That his abilities influenced hers? *He couldn't have known—*

Or maybe he did.

Of course he did.

But Emma wasn't ready to think that. Maybe she'd be able to later, but not now. Right now, she needed him to be a victim, like her, so she wouldn't hate him.

Because it would be so very easy to hate him, for everything he'd done to her youth, her adulthood. She'd lost a father as much as he'd lost a mother. She'd loved Ethan Jamieson. He'd been

good to her, and she'd been so young when their parents married that it had been easy for her to think of him as "Daddy". He'd loved her, too, she was sure, at least until she became a freak. Then it had been hard for anyone to love her, including her mom.

Only Jock. He'd derided her, but he'd stuck with her. That's what she'd thought, anyway. His loyalty had inspired her own. Even when Jock had threatened to kill her, she'd wanted to believe he didn't mean it. After she knew—after they *all* knew Jock's role in this—she'd still believed he'd intended her no real harm. The rat invasion the day she'd met Harley—the one which had overwhelmed all previous "visits"—had been Jock's effort to stop himself. He hadn't really wanted to harm her; hadn't really wanted to wring her neck.

He let Forsby do that for him. The thought was out before she could reason it away.

"He said good-bye to you." Nicky had told her—assured her it was true. Good-bye for good. It had been difficult to listen, and harder to hear, but Nicky had been adamant. Jock had intended to let the rats finish what Forsby's fingers had begun.

Emma didn't want to believe it. She was so confused about those last moments—Jock's last moments. Her perspective had been marred, like someone coming out of a comatose state.

And she couldn't help but hate Jock still, for what he'd done to her relationship with Harley. Harley knew her only as "Rat", the woman who summoned rats and ghosts, in almost equal measure. He'd stuck with her through the terror and tension, but would he want to once it was all taken away? Once she was no longer so unpredictable? The words she'd overheard—a long time ago, it seemed: "You never know what Emma's gonna do next", had now become a curse. Whereas a week ago, she would have given anything to be rid of her psychic ability, she now knew it had defined her. All those people who'd seen past her problems to become her friends now had no reason to consider themselves either forgiving or staunch, loyal or big-hearted. Harley no longer had a distressed maiden to protect, or her faults to overlook. Emma herself may have changed, but none of this changed what Harley was.

A policeman, who thrives on excitement.

Whereas I'm now boring, everyday-the-same, Emma.

Nicky had already hinted that the lack of an in-your-face paranormal ability was no guarantee that all her *psi* stuff had disappeared. It might not be as blatant, but it existed, in some subtle form.

Nicky had offered the news almost apologetically, so that Emma wouldn't be crushed if the odd rat or three stopped by for a visit.

It made Emma realize how often Nicky must have wished for her own abilities to vanish, but Nicky knew the score, and she didn't think Emma had a prayer in hell of escaping from this totally rat-free. It didn't really mean much, to someone who'd become accustomed to hordes of rat invasions. Emma figured, in time, she might even be able to greet the occasional rodent visitor with nonchalance and rolled eyes. No more mass attacks. No more panic.

Most people would be ecstatic at being freed from that kind of stigma.

Emma skated harder. One thing she'd noticed, since she'd lost all that superfluous psychic influence, was that she had a lot more energy. What did ordinary people do with it? She really had no idea.

She considered it seriously, comparing her life with those of other people she knew and admired.

They played policeman, did paranormal research, skated—and attended SF conventions.

For the first time in days, Emma grinned.

* * * * *

Choco's howling door-thunk, as he flung himself against the protesting panels, was usually enough to chase off the most intrepid of door-to-door sales types. As Harley tossed the dog's slimy ball in the general direction of the bedroom, then hustled to slam the door behind him, he knew he'd be stuck buying one of whatever his visitor was selling, whether it be ticket, gadget, or a chance at religious conversion. Choco had a way of weeding out the undetermined.

Dammit!

Choco also made it difficult to miss a caller. Harley could admit it now: he'd been deliberately keeping Choco in the front room, just so there was no way Harley Chalmers would miss a knock.

Stupid.

And every time someone knocked on his door, Harley reacted. He didn't mean to, because it meant he was still hopeful. It didn't matter that it had only been three days since he'd seen her last. He

had to get used to it. It would be forever before he saw her again.

Unless I spot her, walking through town....

Stop it!

He made his face carefully blank as he turned the latch. No point in everyone knowing he was a dick. *No Jock Jamiesons at this residence.*

It was a bounty hunter—the Bounty Hunter, who'd delivered Chewbacca to Jabba the Hutt. Apparently, she'd misplaced her quarry.

Harley's eyes widened, and his jaw gaped. There was a reason for that expression, "stock still". Harley knew that was how he must look: like a deer caught in the headlights, all staring eyes and drooping jaw.

The Bounty Hunter held up some manacles. They were the cheap kind that joke shops sell, but Harley didn't care. This small Bounty Hunter had a better hold on him than any manacles could provide.

"I've come for the Wookiee," she demanded, gruffly.

"Wookiee, eh?" Harley didn't waste any more time. With one quick step, he swung her up in his arms.

His smile would have done a Wookiee proud. "You've *got* him," he growled.

THE END

Writing, painting, archaeology, graphic design, plant pathology: N. D. Hansen-Hill's interests span the spectrum. She has lived in both the United States and Mexico, and now resides in New Zealand, where the mythology from the Land of the Long White Cloud—the land where mountains walk—stirred her to write her first fantasy novel.

That was in 1996, and Hansen-Hill is now published in a variety of genres, from fantasy and SF, to horror and, more recently, romance.

Some of her latest SF and horror novels have been influenced by her postgraduate studies in archaeology, and she continues to paint, and now has representative pieces in eight countries.