

FROM THE DARK PLACES

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by

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Dedication

Gratefully dedicated to Chris, who provided the inspiration.

Chapter 1

San Francisco, August, 1977

"The dark! It's watching me--make it go away!"

Wrenched out of sleep, Kate sat up in bed. From across the hall, Sara screamed again. "Mommy! Make it go away!"

Throwing the covers back, Kate glimpsed the glowing numerals on the alarm clock--one thirty-five in the morning. Nightgown tangled around her hips, she dashed into Sara's room and snapped on the light. Her daughter sat up in bed, rigid, her eyes wide, shrieking, "The dark! The dark!"

Blinking in the sudden glare, Kate sat on the edge of the bed and put her arms around Sara. The child's slender body felt as stiff as a mannequin. Stroking her hair, Kate found it damp, plastered to her scalp with sweat. Sara gave no sign of seeing, hearing, or feeling anything. She screamed over and over, emitting a siren wail like nothing Kate had ever heard. Shaking, she murmured Sara's name

and massaged the tight knots of her shoulders under the Winnie-the-Pooh nightshirt.

Night terrors. Now, with her panic fading, Kate remembered reading about this phenomenon, a nightmare-like seizure so extreme nothing could break its grip until it ran its course. She'd never expected to see it in Sara, though.

She set her teeth, her own pulse pounding in her head, and waited for the attack to end. After several minutes, Sara abruptly fell silent and slumped back, eyes shut. Kate eased her onto the pillow, tucking sheet and quilt up to her neck.

She looked sound asleep.

Kate watched for ten minutes before she could force herself, still trembling, to stumble back to her own bed. She lay awake for over an hour, straining her ears for any sound from the other room. Sara had never before expressed any kind of irrational fear, certainly not of the dark. Was she sick? She didn't have a fever. Was the stress of having no father and a working mother taking its psychological toll? I can't believe that, not when she's always handled it so well. And if I did believe it, what could I do about it? A succession of worries chased each other around Kate's skull like hamsters on a wheel until exhaustion stilled them.

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The next morning, she considered asking for the day off from work. To her surprise, though, Sara didn't mention her panic attack. She dressed herself and ate her whole-wheat raisin toast as calmly as ever. When Mrs. Pacheco, the widowed grandmother who lived upstairs, arrived to baby-sit as usual, Sara welcomed her with no apparent reluctance. Rather than upset Sara all over again, Kate left at her normal time.

When she came home that afternoon, though, Mrs. Pacheco greeted her with the whispered remark, "I don't understand what's gotten into Sara this afternoon. About an hour ago, she started acting, well, nervous."

"Nervous?" Kate kept her voice low, glancing from the foyer into the living room, where Sara sat on the rug in front of the TV, watching Sesame Street.

"It's not like her, Mrs. Jacobs, that's why it worried me," said Mrs. Pacheco.

"She said something about a dream she had last night."

"A nightmare. She's never had one before that I know of." So she hasn't forgotten it, after all. Kate gnawed on her lower lip as she shrugged out of her jacket and hung it in the entryway closet.

Mrs. Pacheco whispered, "She said she didn't want you to leave tonight."

"But how could she possibly know--" Kate herself hadn't known until half an hour before quitting time that her boss had an assignment for her this evening. She stifled a twinge of guilt about having to go out. This is the 1970s; mothers are allowed to have careers. As if I had a choice, anyway!

Recalling last night's hysterical outburst gave her an almost physical chill. It contrasted so sharply with Sara's normal behavior. No mother could ask for a more self-possessed, composed four-year-old. The child probably got her competent manner from associating so much with adults. Now Kate didn't know how to cope with this sudden change. Could it come from the strain of acting older than her age? Did Sara think she had to act grown up because of her mother's job? Cut out the amateur psychology, Kate told herself. One nightmare does not mean a breakdown.

At that moment Oscar the Grouch finished his trash song, and Sara leaped up to run into the foyer. "Mommy, you're home!" she cried in a surprised tone as atypical as the fears. She flung her arms around Kate's waist.

"Of course, just like this time every day." Kate let Sara clasp her hand and tug her to the couch.

Barefoot, dressed in lime green shorts and T-shirt, Sara perched cross-legged on the couch, with her elbows resting on her knees and chin supported by her fists.

"Please don't go out tonight. It's real important." Now she wasn't screaming or crying, just making a statement she obviously saw as plain fact.

"I have to. I promised." Sara usually understood about promises. Kate stroked her daughter's honey-colored, shoulder-length hair. "I've worked late plenty of times, and you didn't mind." She glanced up at Mrs. Pacheco, waiting in the entry hall. "I'm awfully sorry about the late notice, but could you possibly watch her this evening? Starting about six-thirty?"

"Of course, Mrs. Jacobs, no problem," said the older woman, though her worried frown didn't relax.

"It will be all right. I won't stay out any longer than I have to." Kate knew how lucky she was to have someone like Mrs. Pacheco living in the apartment right above hers. Comparable personal attention at a day care center would have gutted her budget.

Sara didn't speak again until the babysitter had left. "Who did you promise? Mr. Boyle?"

She nodded. Sara knew and liked Ned Boyle, not only Kate's employer but a long-time close friend of her deceased parents.

"He's a nice man," Sara persisted. "He'll let you stay home. Tell him it's important."

"Why, munchkin? What makes this time different?" Kate stepped across the room to turn down the sound on Sesame Street.

Sara's lips quivered. "The dark. I don't want the dark to get you."

"But you know the dark isn't an animal or a person. It can't 'get' anybody." The faded couch sagged in the familiar spot as Kate sat down again. "You've never been afraid of the nighttime before. It's just like in Goodnight Moon, remember?"

"Not that kind of dark." Sara's voice held the long-suffering patience with which she often explained things to her lovable but rather dim parent--or so it sounded to Kate. "This is a special kind. I saw it last night." Fear welled up in her blue eyes.

Worried that the child might talk herself into another panic, Kate stood up and said more firmly, "I wish I didn't have to go, too, but this time I don't have a choice. You like Mrs. Pacheco, and you know I'll come home as quick as I can. Don't you?"

Sara gave a tentative nod.

"You have to be brave, munchkin." She ruffled the girl's mop of hair. "All for one--"

"And one for all!" Sara managed a smile.

Kate turned up the TV and headed for her bedroom, her eyes stinging. No four-year-old should be required to "be brave." At moments like this, she felt an irrational anger at Johnny for abandoning the two of them.

Yeah, right, as if he planned the whole thing.

She plucked hairpins from her chignon and collected them in her palm as she walked. She'd have to hustle to make it to the Mark Hopkins by seven.

What a day for Ned Boyle to ask her to represent him at a book signing! But he wouldn't have done it on the spur of the moment without good reason. He'd been scheduled to attend the affair himself, until his wife had gone into the

hospital with pneumonia barely an hour ago. The other three staff members had previous commitments; only Kate remained available. She couldn't say no to the man whom she owed so much. His small publishing firm, Golden Apple Press, had hired her straight out of college, with no qualifications beyond a B.A. in English from Berkeley and a year on the campus newspaper. Not only that, she owed him double for hiring her back after Sara's birth, when she'd desperately needed an income.

But tonight of all nights! And for Arthur Sandoval, of all people! She zipped through her shower, consoling herself that she could escape after a brief show of support. Ned believed Sandoval's latest treatise on occult and supernatural occurrences in modern California could be a breakout book for both author and publisher. The public's fascination with weird phenomena might give this release a wider appeal than Golden Apple's usual line, poetry and regional-emphasis material such as guidebooks. Kate kept her opinion to herself. She'd had to copyedit Sandoval's book as part of her job; otherwise, she wouldn't have touched the thing. After Sara's birth and Johnny's death, her indifference to the occult had changed to outright revulsion. And she didn't care for Sandoval himself, either. He wore a black goatee that looked doubly affected with his thinning hair and middle-aged pot-belly. Apparently, he was hoping to make himself resemble the head of that "Church of Satan" downtown.

Bundling on a robe over fresh underwear, Kate dashed from the bathroom to her bedroom. As she started working on her makeup at the scarred early-American dresser, she heard Sara switch off Mr. Rogers and patter down the hall. "Mommy, may I come in and watch you?" She seldom forgot to use "may" instead of "can" when appropriate.

"Sure. What do you want for supper?"

"Hot dogs?"

Kate sighed and blotted her lipstick. "Okay. Not the healthiest thing in the house, but it's quick."

Sara knelt on the end of the bed, behind her mother. "You really gots to go?"

"I really gots to go." Watching Sara in the mirror, Kate compared the child's reflection with the picture of Johnny on the dresser. The familiar resemblance struck her afresh. Sometimes she fancied that Johnny had produced Sara by a sort of male parthenogenesis, with Kate only an incubator. Father and daughter had the same thick, dark-honey hair, the same deep blue eye color that faded after infancy in most people, the same elfin features. Kate's own face was broad rather than delicate, though her height enabled her to eat what she liked without expanding from solidity to plumpness.

She began to French-braid her auburn hair. To her relief, Sara seemed to give up trying to make her stay home. Instead, Sara asked, apropos of nothing, "What's inn trow pee?"

She pronounced the three syllables so distinctly that Kate had to mouth them to herself a few times to come up with the word "entropy." Good grief, what did I do to deserve a precocious genius? "Chaos, I guess. Disintegration. Everything winding down like a worn-out clock." As if that will make any sense to her.

"Where on earth did you hear that word?" Kate figured Sara must have accidentally viewed part of a science program on public TV. The concept couldn't have popped up in conversation with Mrs. Pacheco, who, for all her fine qualities, was no intellectual.

"Daddy told it to me." Sara made the remark in the same offhand way she always made these outrageous statements.

A chill prickled over Kate's skin. She'd given up trying to talk Sara out of these fantasies. Dwelling on them only made Kate herself miserable, without shaking the child's conviction. And why shouldn't a fatherless little girl indulge in compensatory fantasies? Other kids had imaginary friends; Sara had a phantom father. She appeared serene enough otherwise; she'd never shown any odd behavior that could indicate something--wrong. Until now. Until that nightmare and this stuff about the dark.

Kate ordered her fears to shut up. Sara didn't need a dithering, overprotective neurotic for a mother.

Sara herself clearly didn't attach any importance to what she'd said. "Will you read me *Goodnight Moon* before you leave?"

"Sure, munchkin, if there's time. I'd better get a move on." Though Sara had begun to puzzle out simple words, she was a long way from ready to give up her read-aloud time. Nor did Kate want to give it up, not for years to come. She tossed her robe on the bed and wiggled into an electric blue, crepe-de-chine cocktail dress, then hurried to the kitchen to zap a pair of hot dogs. The new microwave oven was a blessing, despite the dent it had made in her savings. When she set the single place in the dining nook, Sara asked, "Aren't you going to eat some hot dogs, too?"

"No, I'll get my supper out of the snacks at the party." In truth, Kate's stomach felt so knotted from anxiety that she had no interest in food.

After tidying up while Sara ate, she barely managed to finish *Goodnight Moon* before Mrs. Pacheco arrived. At the door Sara clung to her, another unusual action. But no tears, no begging. The child made the effort to act brave. All she said was, "Promise you'll be careful, Mommy."

Kate promised--and rushed off before she could succumb to the yearning to stay home.

Outside, she breathed deeply to quell the simmering brew of fear and resentment, while she scanned the street for the cab she had called. It would've been too much of a hassle trying to park in the hotel's garage. She drew her evening shawl tight around her shoulders. She didn't need it yet, but nightfall brought a nip to the San Francisco air, even in August.

At the Mark Hopkins, riding up in the elevator, she reminded herself to behave pleasantly to Sandoval. The Golden Apple Press prided itself on offering authors personal consideration in lieu of huge royalties and mass marketing. I can't let Ned down on this. It's not much to ask, just for an hour or two. Standing around in high heels and listening to a lot of boring chitchat hardly constituted medieval torture. She smiled to herself at the sudden memory of one of her late mother's favorite pronouncements: "Only boring people let themselves get bored."

A minute later, she scanned the room reserved for the book-signing party. She easily spotted Arthur Sandoval, holding forth at stage center--i.e., the table adorned with a pyramid of copies of *Shades of the Golden State*. He wore a rumpled blazer with the stem of a briar pipe sticking out of a side pocket. Kate had never seen him smoke the thing. Another prop, like the beard. He waved at her, and she walked over to him.

"Ms. Wade, meet one of the architects of my success," Sandoval said to the woman next to him, wearing a tailored suit and a hotel staff name tag. "Kathryn Christina Jacobs, my editor."

Gritting her teeth at the verbal flourishes, Kate pasted on a smile and shook hands with Ms. Wade, who turned out to be in charge of catering. After receiving

Kate's thanks on behalf of Golden Apple, Ms. Wade excused herself. Sandoval introduced Kate to a silver-haired lady whose name promptly slid out of her mind. "We were just discussing the reality of the supernatural," he said.

The woman said, "I asked Mr. Sandoval if he really believes in it."

"Well, to paraphrase Horace Walpole, I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them." That line got a polite laugh from the knot of people beginning to gather around him. "But seriously, why should the dimensional plane we live on be the only one that exists? I firmly believe that some people can get in touch with other levels of reality--other modes of being."

Kate hoped he wouldn't quote the "more things in Heaven and Earth" line from Hamlet again, as he had during a local talk show on which he'd guest-starred the day before. Listening to that rigmarole once had been more than enough for her. The other woman said, "Suppose you're right? And suppose your books inspire weak-minded people to get in touch with these entities? If they contact evil powers, couldn't they get into serious danger?" Her tone suggested that she asked for the sake of argument, not out of genuine belief.

"Any great adventure can hold danger. As for evil, the question may not have any meaning. What makes you think that good and evil are any more than culture-specific referents?"

He had spouted the same lines on the talk show. Hearing them repeated word for word, Kate couldn't resist the opportunity to speak up. "Mr. Sandoval, are you saying that ultimate reality is amoral?"

"Why should our insignificant selves and our moral standards have any importance for the cosmos?" He waved his arms for emphasis, jarring a stack of books. Kate leaned over to rescue them. "All my research into the occult seems to indicate that they don't. After all, as Shakespeare says, 'nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.' If these discarnate entities--assuming they exist--think they're acting in their own best interests, what gives us any grounds for arguing with them?" He chuckled at his own cleverness.

Kate refrained from pointing out that Shakespeare hadn't exactly made that remark; one of his invented characters had, at a particularly low moment. I've heard this guano in plenty of college bull sessions, expressed more intelligently, too. Why do I let this man get to me? She slipped away, murmuring something about the buffet table, and left Sandoval to his admirers.

At the bar she ordered a wine cooler and downed half of it, then drifted over to the food, nodding at a few acquaintances she passed. The hors d'oeuvres spread didn't appeal to her, but she knew she would regret it later if she didn't eat.

She forced herself to nibble a carrot stick. When her stomach didn't revolt, she filled a plate with vegetables, crackers, and cheese cubes, picked up her drink, and zigzagged across the room exchanging greetings with the guests. When she got within Sandoval's range again, he had dropped the subject of the occult and was arguing with a professor from Berkeley about President Carter's foreign policy. A balding man in horn-rimmed glasses at the fringe of Sandoval's group offered his hand to Kate. "Good to see you. I was expecting Ned."

Setting down her drink to shake hands, Kate explained about the Boyles' family emergency. After a moment's mental floundering, she recognized the man as owner of an independent bookshop near Fisherman's Wharf. "Glad you could make it, Jeff. Having a good time?"

Jeff glanced over at Sandoval, then said with a wry smile, "An interesting time, anyway. We'll stock the book, of course. People go wild over that stuff. I hear he's tackling UFOs next. How's your daughter?"

Flattered that he remembered that much about her, Kate gave a noncommittal answer while trying to suppress her anxiety. Maybe she ought to phone home, make sure Sara had settled down for bed all right? Only half hearing Jeff's remarks and her own automatic replies, she chatted with him about their respective families and the new science fiction epic, Star Wars, which she hadn't seen yet. From what she'd heard, Sara might find parts of it fascinating, but Kate wasn't sure even a mature four-year-old could sit still for a movie of that length.

When Jeff excused himself and wandered off, she ate a couple of crackers and then looked around for her wine cooler. There, next to the stack of books where she'd left it. She picked up the glass but froze with it halfway to her lips.

Hadn't she drunk down to the halfway mark? Now the glass was almost full. The shiver of alarm along her spine annoyed her. Don't be silly, somebody must have exchanged drinks by mistake. Yet she was suddenly possessed by the notion that the liquid smelled wrong.

Silently mocking her fantasies, she raised the glass to her mouth. A foul odor enveloped her like miasma from a sewer drain. Her stomach churned. At the same moment, Kate felt an animal prickling of nerves as if someone were watching her. Watching to see me drink? The situation was ridiculous, though. If the beverage really gave off such a stink, everybody around her would notice it. I must be coming down with the flu or something. Still, she would no more taste the cooler now than she would sip from Alice's "Drink Me" potion. She set down the glass and glanced around the room.

Something was wrong with her vision. The air seemed dense with smoke. Her eyes ached from peering into it. Yes, she must be sick; first imaginary odors, now imaginary fog. Again the sensation of watching eyes crept over her. Scanning the room, she found the source of the stare she felt. Earlier, she had looked out a window in that corner and seen, framed by crimson drapes, the cold sparkle of the downtown lights. Now the view was blocked by--Nothing. Not no-thing, but Nothing, if nothing could have substance.

She thought of black holes, dead stars so compressed that not even light could escape their gravity. She felt as if a black hole stood before her, a rip in the cosmos revealing a universe of negation.

A piece of the dark turned itself toward her.

Though the zone of negation was man-shaped, like a silhouette cut out of the air by a sharp blade, Kate couldn't distinguish a face. Yet she did see a pair of eyes. They glinted icy-blue.

Her stomach clenched. Her skin contracted with chill. The fog in the corners thickened and rolled toward her. Sara's cry from the previous night flashed into her head: "Mommy, the dark, the dark!"

Kate stumbled toward the door. The fetid mist stretched octopod tentacles after her. It entwined her ankles, slowing her steps. She staggered blindly to the door, careening against anonymous bodies whose voices made an insectile buzz in her ears. By the time her vision cleared, she'd made it to the ladies' room.

She leaned on the sink, water running, splashing her face and gasping. She became aware of someone beside her, a woman in a tailored suit. Focusing on the name tag, Kate recognized Ms. Wade, the hotel's catering director.

"Are you ill, Mrs. Jacobs? Maybe I'd better get you some help."

Somehow Kate managed to steady her heaving breath and speak calmly. "No, it was just the stuffy air. I felt dizzy for a minute. I'll rest a little while and get a cab home."

"Wouldn't you like me to sit with you?"

Kate shrugged off the woman's hand. "No, please don't fuss, I'll be fine."
Ms. Wade looked dubious but finally yielded to Kate's insistence. Relieved to find herself alone in the restroom, Kate swallowed hard a few times and stared at her panic-stricken face in the mirror. She had to get out of the hotel before some other well-meaning person delayed her. The memory of Sara's nightmare rang in Kate's head like a warning bell in a fogbound harbor. She had to get home right away.
Hurrying out of the restroom, she ignored the elevators and ran down the stairs. Nothing mattered but escape; the building felt like a trap, its atmosphere choking her. On the street level, she dashed through the lobby doors and looked around wildly. A cab--she had to find a cab. But panic still gripped her. Dimly conscious of the sidewalk pounding under her feet, she ran toward Union Square. Car horns and shouting voices crashed around her like the noise of waves on rocks.
Sara's voice burst upon her: "Mommy, watch out! Stop!" Not a memory--this sound was real.
Kate abruptly halted. She was standing in the middle of the street, hemmed in by traffic. A row of headlights struck her in the eyes. The car behind them careened straight at her.
With Sara's cry still reverberating in her head, she took a half step backward. A massive impact, and she felt herself hurled from the pavement into the dark.

Chapter 2

She floated in a warm, translucent fluid, gazing up at the surface of a pool, where a diffuse, pearly light shone. Liquid didn't seep into her lungs; she felt no need to breathe, no suffocation. She was slowly sinking, lapped in the light's silken embrace, not afraid of hitting bottom, for the pool had no bottom. Lazily she stretched toward the light. She began to drift upward. After a while she recognized the glow. She remembered it from that other time. For almost four years she had blocked from her mind the anomalies surrounding Sara's birth. She had drawn back, as if from a chasm gaping at her feet. Now she wondered why. Why had she wanted to forget this? Why had she been so absurdly frightened? This was the peace and joy she'd been denied the first time. This time no one could summon her back to the torturous weight of her body. Rising toward the light, she glimpsed a shape hovering above the surface. A face. She knew it even before it grew distinct. "Johnny!" While her bodiless form could not shed tears, they welled up within her nevertheless. He hadn't deserted her; he was waiting--

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Darkness like the shadow of a hovering bird of prey fell across her path. She could barely discern Johnny's silhouette, outlined by the now-obscured glow. His voice faded, as if the shadow muffled sound just as it clouded sight.
"Kathryn!"
The unfamiliar voice called from a great distance. She ignored it.

"Kathryn Christina!"

"Go away!" she moaned--not aloud, only in her mind. "Leave me alone, let me go!"

"You can come back now, it's safe."

The voice sounded very faint. It couldn't drag her back against her will. "No!

Let me go!"

But the stranger wouldn't stop calling. "Kathryn, come back, you're needed."

Ignoring the appeal, she reached for Johnny. His outline began to shimmer and

dissolve. "I'm sorry, beloved. It's not time yet. You have work to do."

Despairing rage seized her. Abandoned all over again? She felt caught in a vortex that sucked her down into the pit.

Scarcely audible, Johnny said, "Go back. Sara needs you."

Of course, I can't leave Sara. She surrendered, allowed the whirlpool to drag her downward. The shadow loomed to block her way. Staring into its heart, she confronted the palpable emptiness that had terrified her--when? She couldn't identify it with a time or place. She struggled to rise away from the dark thing, but her will seemed drained.

The voice she'd heard before echoed in her mind. "This way, Kathryn! To me! If you fight, it can't touch you."

She oriented herself upon the voice. A burst of radiance obliterated the shadow.

With an agonizing wrench, she dropped back into her body, and then into nothingness.

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She woke to dryness in her throat, the scrape of sheets against raw skin, and a pounding in her head. "Let me go," she tried to moan, but no sound emerged.

The masculine voice that had summoned her back spoke again. "Stay with us. The pain will pass." Warm fingertips touched her wrist. She sank into sleep.

When she woke again, she felt each separate throb of pain, along with her burning eyes and parched throat. This time she hung onto consciousness. She took in the white glare of the walls and the empty bed in the other half of the room.

A petite nurse with platinum hair stood at the end of Kate's bed. "Would you like some water?"

Kate licked her lips and nodded. After sipping from the bent plastic straw, she said, "Sara? My little girl. Where is she?"

"Don't you worry. Dr. Benson made sure she was taken care of."

"Who?" Kate's throat rasped painfully when she spoke.

The nurse ignored the question, perhaps hadn't even heard the faint sound.

"Don't try to talk too much yet. Your throat's probably sore from the respirator tube--general anesthetic during surgery."

Surgery? What's she talking about? Kate didn't have the energy to ask for an explanation. She forced out the words, "How long?"

"You were brought in yesterday evening. It's almost two in the afternoon now.

You're out of recovery and in a private room." The nurse stuck a thermometer in Kate's mouth and felt her pulse, then made a note on a clipboard. "Just try to take it easy. The doctor will probably authorize removing that catheter later today, and then we can try getting you up."

Once free of the thermometer, Kate said, "When can I see Sara?"

"I'm sorry, hospital rules don't allow children under twelve." The nurse patted her hand. "Now, don't worry. Get some rest."

Rest? What else have I been doing? Kate fumed. Is my insurance going to cover

all this? And what surgery, anyway?

Despite her anxiety, she dozed. When footsteps roused her to full awareness, she found a young man with blond bangs and boyish apple cheeks standing over her. His name tag identified him as Dr. Hardesty.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Jacobs, I'm the resident on duty. How are you feeling?"

His voice didn't resemble the one she'd heard while half-conscious. Or had she only imagined hearing it? "Like I've been run over by a steamroller."

He chuckled. "Not that, just a Chevy." He looked into her eyes and checked her pulse.

"What happened to me?" Cautiously shifting position, she grimaced at the pain in her side and felt something binding her skin. With a downward glance, she saw bandage tape around her chest.

"What do you remember?"

She remembered rushing away from the party and out of the hotel, dodging traffic, imagining Sara calling to her--and a cascade of confused images she didn't want to relive. Hallucinations, induced by head injury or drugs, not worth mentioning. "The last thing I can remember is a car barreling down on me."

Dr. Hardesty nodded. "You were brought to the emergency room as a hit-and-run victim. You have two cracked ribs, a sprained ankle, assorted bruises, and a concussion. Believe it or not, you got off lightly--somehow you managed to sidestep the full impact at the last minute. We had to perform surgery to relieve pressure on the brain, but you're making a remarkable recovery." He glanced at her chart. "The memory is a good sign. Many people in your situation forget events leading up to the trauma and in some cases never regain them."

Kate let that comment pass; she would have been glad to forget those minutes of panic. "When can I go home?"

"We'll shoot for day after tomorrow." Kate stifled a groan. What was Sara doing all this time? "Right now I'll order the nurses to take out that IV and catheter. You can try a few steps and take some nourishment by mouth. And don't be afraid to ask for pain medication if you need it."

Kate was surprised and indignant at her dizziness when the nurse helped her stand up. I can't afford this, I have to go home! She managed to get to the bathroom and back, after which an aide assisted her with a sponge bath. The "nourishment" turned out to be clear broth and a cup of tea. Though she discovered with the first sip how empty her stomach was, she became sated quickly.

Now that she could talk more comfortably, she phoned her apartment. No answer. Taking deep breaths in an attempt to slow her racing heart, she dialed Mrs. Pacheco's number. Her neighbor answered on the third ring.

"Mrs. Jacobs, I'm so relieved to hear your voice. How are you feeling?"

Kate tossed off a noncommittal answer and inquired about Sara.

"Don't worry about a thing, dear. I've been staying with her at your place. We just came up here for a little while, to collect some things I needed, and we were about to go back downstairs. That nice Dr. Benson arranged everything."

I'm already getting tired of people telling me not to worry. And who is Dr. Benson? "Please let me talk to Sara."

When Sara came on the line, she cried out, "Mommy, you're okay! It didn't get you!"

It? "No, sweetheart, I'll be fine. How are you?"

"Mrs. Pacheco is taking care of me. I made you some paper butterflies. Did a bad

man hit you with a car?"

I'd like to know more about that, myself. "I'm sure he wasn't bad, munchkin.

Maybe his car wasn't working right and he couldn't stop. Don't worry about it."

Good grief, now I'm singing the "don't worry" song, too.

"When are you coming home, Mommy?"

"Soon, I hope." Kate swallowed incipient tears. "Maybe the day after tomorrow.

Be good, now."

By the time she hung up, she found her energy drained by the conversation. She flipped her way through the TV channels--soap operas, a game show, a National Geographic rerun. She watched the mating rituals of sea lions for a while before switching off the set. Glad to be alone, with no need for polite chitchat with a roommate, she closed her eyes and tried not to gnaw at the worries in the back of her mind.

Some time later, a man's voice broke into her reverie. "Mrs. Jacobs, do you feel up to talking?"

The resonance of that voice made her heartbeat accelerate. This man had called her back from--whatever it was. She opened her eyes.

He closed the door behind him and strode to the bed. When he offered his hand, Kate felt a tremor of apprehension. But his warm, firm handshake and the straightforward gaze of his chocolate-brown eyes soothed her at once. "Glad to see you awake. I'm Ray Benson." He was long-legged and lean, with wavy brown hair in need of a trim. Though he looked not much older than Kate herself, he had deep lines around his eyes and mouth. The scent of his Old Spice aftershave brought a welcome change from the odors of disinfectant.

"You were here earlier," she said. "You talked to me."

He pulled up the straight-backed chair and sat next to her. "That's right." He seemed pleased that she remembered. "In the recovery room--you had a close call. Had us scared for a while. Nobody knows how much patients actually sense about their surroundings when they appear to be comatose. I've always maintained that it can't do any harm to talk to them and may do some good." He checked her pulse, apparently more to make contact than to gather data. "I'd venture to say that your quick recovery is nothing short of miraculous."

"Do medical scientists believe in miracles, Dr. Benson?" She spoke lightly, trying to distance herself from the temptation to relax under his touch and trust him without question.

"Some of us do," he said, straight-faced. "Please call me Ray. What do people call you--Kathryn?"

"Kate," she said. Why is he acting so chummy? Well, it's an improvement over the doctor who addresses female patients as "honey" and still expects them to use his title.

"Coincidentally, we have the same middle name--sort of." He tapped his name plate, which read, "Ray C. Benson, M.D." "Mine is Christopher. Obviously, we were fated to meet."

He smiled with that remark, so she obligingly returned the smile. "Sure--and am I fated to meet all the other millions of men named Christopher, too? Dr. Benson--Ray--what about Sara? And don't tell me not to worry!"

"We found your babysitter's number in your wallet. I called her and explained the situation. This morning I ran over to your place and paid her in advance for the time you'll be hospitalized." He held up a hand to forestall Kate's protest.

"Don't give it another thought. You can pay me back whenever it's convenient."

"Thank you." She plumped the pillow behind her and sat up, hoping an upright

posture would make her feel more in control. "Why are you doing all this?"

He assumed an exaggerated drawl. "Just part of the service, ma'am."

Yeah, right, busy doctors make house calls to patients' families all the time nowadays. She knew better but let the comment pass for the moment. What's his real motive? Just kindness, or is he after something? "I'm very grateful," she said, to fill the silence. She wondered whether she ought to phone Ned and ask him to check up on this man. Her tired brain had trouble hanging onto the thought.

"Forget it. I figured without a next of kin anywhere nearby, you'd be worried about your daughter. And stress blocks healing. By the way, I took the liberty of putting myself on record as your attending physician. Hope you don't mind."

Puzzled by this latest tidbit of information, she said, "As long as it doesn't mean I have some irresistibly exotic ailment you aren't telling me about."

"Hardly," he laughed. "You should be able to go home on schedule, day after tomorrow--though you'll have to take it easy for a couple of weeks." After a minute of thoughtful silence, he said, "Tell me what you remember about last night."

Her thoughts scrambled over that bewildering landscape. Palpable darkness, frenzied flight, the hallucination of hearing Sara's cry--how could she tell a stranger all that? "Like I mentioned to the other doctor, the resident, I wasn't paying attention and stepped into the street in front of a car."

Ray looked politely skeptical but didn't challenge her directly. "What about earlier, at the cocktail party?"

"How did you know--?"

"The police took statements. After all, it was a hit-and-run. I coaxed the information out of a friend of mine in the department."

Kate shivered at the memory of that man-shaped nothingness she had gazed into--or imagined. I can't describe that! He'll think I'm crazy. "For some reason I had the idea my drink smelled strange. It made me nauseated, and I ran to the ladies' room. After I'd caught my breath, I still felt shaky, so I rushed outside for some fresh air. Guess I wasn't thinking straight or looking where I was going. Maybe I had some kind of twelve-hour flu?" As soon as she said the words, they took on a comforting concreteness. Yes, a short-lived virus infection would explain the nausea, the illusory odor, even the hallucinations.

"I'm afraid not," said Ray. "Another woman at the party collapsed and had to be hospitalized about half an hour after you left. The last I heard, she's still critical. She'd consumed a potent drug, so new it hasn't even been made illegal yet. My theory is that she accidentally picked up your drink."

"Oh, come on! Have you mentioned this theory to your friend on the police force?"

"No, because it's purely my intuition. Do you have any idea who would want to hurt you?"

Kate shook her head emphatically. "Nobody." Maybe this guy has a screw loose. Yet she couldn't make herself forget the way Sara had begged her to stay home the night before. Pure coincidence! I don't believe in ESP!

"You see?" He shrugged. "Without evidence to offer, there's no point in drawing official attention to you, which I didn't think you'd want."

"You're right about that!"

"About that hit-and-run driver--" Ray smoothed his hair with the palm of his hand. For the first time, she noticed the gray circles under his eyes and recalled that he must have been awake all night and part of the day. "The man

was at the book-signing party. Witnesses saw him leave immediately after you did. He claims he blacked out at that point and can't remember anything else--until a couple of policemen dragged him out of his wrecked car."

Kate stared at him. "You believe that? Was he drinking?"

"Only a single gin-and- tonic. I'm not sure what to think, but my informant says the man sounded genuinely bewildered. Of course, he could be setting up for a temporary insanity plea."

"It doesn't make sense. I didn't know anybody there all that well, and certainly none of them had any motive to run me down in the street. Who was it, anyway?" To her astonishment, Ray named Jeff, the bookstore owner she had chatted with. "But I don't even know him that well, and he certainly doesn't have any reason to hurt me. What on earth is going on?" She clutched her head, which felt about to explode with confusion. A fresh misgiving occurred to her. "Will I have to go to court?"

"Probably not. What with all the affidavits from witnesses, the driver will most likely plea-bargain."

"That's a relief. I just want to forget last night as soon as possible." She became aware of the weariness that had been creeping over her during the past few minutes. Tears leaked from her eyes. "Can't I see Sara? She's too young for this. She can't possibly understand why I'm not home."

"Officially, that's against hospital rules." Ray clasped her hand for a second.

"If you like, I'll stop by your apartment to check on her, and then see you again this evening. Better try to sleep."

"Okay." Irritated by her weakness, she wiped her eyes and said, "Could you bring me something to read? Anything."

"Sure." He flashed her a smile and left. She caught herself listening to his footsteps until they faded down the corridor.

* * * *

After a bland supper of soup, Jell-o, and pudding, she cajoled the nurse into letting her take a bath, an awkward process while trying to keep her bandages dry. In a clean hospital gown, Kate felt fresher but no less rumpled. At the beginning of visiting hours, she listened dejectedly to voices of people greeting patients in adjacent rooms. When Ray Benson's footsteps approached her door, she somehow recognized them at once.

He stepped inside, carrying a blue suitcase. Her own. "I asked Mrs. Pacheco to pack you a few things." Setting down the case, he offered Kate a pair of paperbacks in his other hand. Agatha Christie mysteries from her living-room bookshelf.

"Thanks very much." Those embarrassing tears threatened to spring forth once more. Won't I ever be strong again?

"Now I have one more thing for you." Ray gave her an enigmatic smile. "Think you're up to it?"

He stepped into the hall. When he reappeared, Sara tiptoed beside him. Behind her, Mrs. Pacheco peered around the doorjamb.

Kate held out her arms. Sara skipped to the bed and gently kissed her mother's cheek. "Dr. Ray says not to squeeze you, 'cause your ribs got hurt."

"That's right, sweetheart." Kate didn't try to hide her tears now. "Are you helping Mrs. Pacheco?"

"Sure. And I made you something." Digging into the pocket of her jeans, Sara pulled out and carefully unfolded a paper heart. Colored all over in red crayon, it had a construction-paper butterfly pasted in the center.

"Thanks, it's beautiful."

"Mommy, do you hurt a lot?"

"Not too much, not now." She had been lucky; though her ribs felt sore, at least breathing didn't cause pain, as it would have with a more severe break. "And I should be home day after tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

"I guess so," Sara agreed with a thoughtful frown. "You'll be okay. Dr. Ray will make you well."

Kate glanced at the doctor, waiting by the door. First names already?

After five minutes of chatter from Sara about her morning visit to the park and the day's update on Big Bird and Mr. Rogers, Ray said, "Time to leave, I'm afraid. I can stretch my perks only so far." He leaned out the door and beckoned. Mrs. Pacheco stepped in.

"Mrs. Jacobs, I hope bringing Sara here was okay," she said.

"Of course--thanks so much for coming along. And for all you're doing."

Mrs. Pacheco blushed, taking Sara's hand.

"Could you take Sara downstairs, please?" said the doctor. "Sara, I'd like you to wait in the lobby with Mrs. Pacheco. I'll be down to drive you home in a few minutes."

Kate momentarily wondered how Ray had persuaded her neighbor to agree to this arrangement in the first place. Well, the act was already done, Sara had been able to visit, and Ray obviously wasn't a crazed kidnapper. The question remained, though, why did he go out of his way to be so helpful? Or, to put it less kindly, to take over her life on one day's acquaintance? Kate didn't bother asking again, certain he would just evade the issue.

When the two of them were alone together, Ray asked her, "Have you remembered anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"No." She didn't want to think about her black hole vision, much less talk about it. Why does he keep looking at me as if he suspects I'm holding out on him? "If you believe I was attacked on purpose--well, what about Sara?"

His mouth hardened into a stubborn line. "No one will hurt Sara. I promise you that."

Nice of you, but I'd rather have SWAT team protection. Yet, despite her better judgment, part of her wanted to trust his promise. It had been so long since she'd had another adult to lean on.

* * * *

The following day, she received flowers and a phone call from Ned Boyle. She decided not to bother him about "checking up" on Ray; after a night's sleep, her qualms seemed exaggerated. At mid-morning a police officer stopped by and took a statement about the accident. Kate talked to Mrs. Pacheco and Sara on the phone at lunchtime. Ray visited her twice, in the afternoon and in the evening. The second time, he brought abstract art finger-painted by Sara.

He stayed so long each visit, talking with Kate, that she wondered how he could spare her so much time. Didn't he have any other patients? She didn't complain, though; she enjoyed his company. Somehow she slipped into telling him about Johnny and their life in Ardath, a small town in the Sierras. "We met at the Golden Apple office. The press published a few volumes of his poems. My boss, Ned, called Johnny a cross between Robert Frost and John Denver."

"Wait--your husband was John Joseph Jacobs? He recorded an album in the late sixties--folk songs."

"You remember that?"

"Remember?" said Ray. "I still have it."

Kate shook her head in wonder. "Johnny told me that thing sank without a trace. I'm glad it left at least a few traces." She sighed, gazing into mists of memory. "I was a lifelong city girl. Never would have believed I'd fall in love at first sight with a--a leftover hippie and move to what amounted to a backwoods retirement village. A little place called Ardath. You could count the other couples our age on both hands with fingers to spare."

Strangely, she felt at peace discussing those happy months, though her brief annual duty visits to check on the cabin--a laughably basic structure that had originally been Johnny's late parents' vacation cottage--had brought her only heartache. She hadn't wanted reminders of the past; she'd even avoided speaking to Sara of Johnny.

Ray listened quietly, never appearing bored. His loose, open body language proclaimed that he had nothing better to do than help Kate find peace. At the evening visit, she found herself telling him about Sara's birth. Her narrative wound down at the point where she'd blacked out.

"It must have been frightening," he said softly. "You may feel better if you put it into words."

Before she quite realized what she was doing, she was describing the experience she had never told anyone before:

Five nights away from her due date, she had awakened sharply out of oblivion. The darkness blocked her vision like a blank wall. For a few seconds she couldn't remember where she was.

Groping, she encountered a solid body. Johnny. Full awareness returned. Her eyes adjusted to the night, allowing her to distinguish the pine tree outside their window from the sky behind it.

She sat up. What had wakened her? She started to grip Johnny's shoulder for reassurance. Abruptly she felt warm wetness pooling beneath her. My water's breaking! She tried to shake Johnny but instead collapsed on the mattress, her breath escaping in a gasp.

Cramps convulsed all four limbs. An invisible band constricted her chest and abdomen. Her lungs couldn't expand; air fluttered in and out of her throat without reaching them. "Johnny!" What she meant for a scream came out barely audible.

He was already sitting up, throwing off the sheet. "Kate? My God, what's wrong?"

"The baby--get Dr. Thom!"

She could hardly hear her own voice. Johnny didn't wait for instructions anyway; she heard him dialing the phone on his side of the bed. His words reached her ears as an incomprehensible buzz. Her whole being was focused on trying to breathe. The agonizing tightness wouldn't let up.

It's not supposed to be like this! This isn't anything like labor pains in the books! Whatever abnormality had her in its grip, though, she knew she had to relax, to implement the breathing rhythms she had practiced. But her muscles wouldn't unclench.

Through her compressed eyelids, she sensed light from the bedside lamp. The mattress sagged as Johnny leaned over her. "Dr. Thom is on his way--it'll be all right. Darling, please look at me. Open your eyes and breathe."

"I can't!" she gasped.

He smoothed her forehead. Under his coaxing, she managed to lift her eyelids. From the center of the pain that smothered her, she saw him struggling to hide his anxiety. His hands flowed over her arms, chest, and stomach. She tried to

yield and make herself pliable.

Suddenly the vise around her clamped down still harder. The sensation passed beyond pain. She felt only an irresistible pressure. "Johnny--it's now!"

"Kate, look at me!" He grabbed both sides of her head. "Remember--pant, pant, blow--pant, pant, blow--" She tried to focus on him as he cycled through the breathing motions.

"I can't, damn it, I can't!"

He called to someone she couldn't see. An instant later, Johnny moved aside, and Dr. Thom stood over her. His bedside smile froze as he groped under her nightgown. "Johnny, get me the sterilized sheets, quick!"

She was vaguely aware of Johnny tearing open a sealed packet, of the two men slipping a sheet under her, but her body felt like a mannequin they were shifting. Her true self was inside a world of grinding, crushing pressure.

She heard Thom say, "Johnny, lift her head. Kate, take a deep breath and push."

Take a deep breath? She could just as easily float out the window and fly to the moon. Before she could make any voluntary movement, her body seemed to burst open. Something shot out of her.

In the murmur of the doctor's voice, she caught a phrase that sounded like "placenta previa." Then it was blotted out by the cry of a baby.

All discomfort melted away. In fact, Kate couldn't feel her body at all. Though she had no awareness of opening her eyes, she saw a soft, gray mist, like the inside of a cloud. She gazed straight up into it. Its center held a corona of faint light. The pale glow expanded, transforming the gray into pearly iridescence. She yearned for the light. Without surprise, she discovered that she could move toward it just by thinking, with no straining of muscles or flailing of limbs.

Peace, rest--this is what I need. She floated upward, flat on her back. The glow cradled her.

Far below, she heard a cry: "Kate--Kate, please!" It took her a moment to recognize her own name. Why was the voice trying to call her back to pain and terror? "Kate, please don't go! I need you!" Johnny. Johnny needs me. Of course I can't leave him. Too bad she couldn't explain the peace and fulfillment waiting in the light.

Regretfully she turned her eyes from it and began drifting downward. Suddenly a shadow fell between her and the remnant of the glow. The black wing of a huge bird of prey, a talon grasping for her--

She dove in panic toward Johnny's voice. Grayness enfolded her, and she fell into oblivion.

Shaking her head, she forced herself back to the present. "It wasn't scary at first. It was beautiful. I dreamed I was floating in a gray cloud. I started drifting up to some kind of light source. It was so peaceful--all I wanted was to stay there and rest. Then I heard Johnny calling me. As I turned back toward him, there was this--shadow. Something like a dark wing. Somehow I escaped it, and that was all until I woke up." She faked a laugh. "Some dream, huh?"

"Why do you assume it was a dream?"

She stared at him in surprise. "What else?"

"Such near-death experiences aren't uncommon. Many people have knocked at that door and been told to wait."

He sounded so calmly assured about the subject. "You?"

"Not me. But I've met two people, people I consider reliable witnesses, who've gone through similar experiences."

Against her will, Kate recalled her time in limbo between the accident and regaining consciousness. "It happened again--after the car hit me."

"I'm not surprised to hear that."

She felt reassured that he didn't dismiss her as crazy, until the thought occurred to her, Maybe that means we're both nuts. "I don't want to believe in it or even think about it. That dark thing--I felt it was trying to swallow me whole."

"You're safe now," he said. He didn't sound like a therapist humoring a lunatic.

"Was I dying then?"

"We thought so for a few minutes. General anesthesia is never completely risk-free."

"You guided me back, didn't you? I remember your voice."

He briefly gripped her hand. "I'm glad you remember." The intensity of his gaze troubled her. "It looked to me as if you weren't trying hard enough to stay with your body. And if you'd--gone--it would have been a loss to more people than you realize."

She couldn't think of a sensible reply to that assertion. Instead, she turned her face away from scrutiny. As if sharing her constrained feeling, he walked to the window and stared into the twilight sky for a couple of minutes.

When he returned to her side, he said in a casual tone, "You'll be discharged about ten a.m. tomorrow. Don't bother calling a cab. I have the day off, and I'll drive you."

Another obligation? Anxiety tightened her nerves. "You don't have to do that. I'm sure you don't chauffeur all your patients."

"That's the point," he said. "As soon as you're signed out, you won't be my patient anymore. Did you think I was going to let you vanish over the horizon?"

She cautiously eyed him. "What are you saying?"

"That I want to see you on a non-professional basis. That I want to be your friend, if you're willing."

Could that be the motive behind all this attention, a simple male-female attraction? That aspect of Kate's life had lain dormant for so long, aside from occasional offhand requests for dates that she'd offhandedly declined. The idea of a man's rearranging his schedule to pursue her seemed as incomprehensible as a Japanese haiku. "I'm willing," she said. "Provisionally."

He laughed. "Can't ask for more than that, to start with. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Kate felt unexpectedly relieved that she wouldn't have to go home alone. In the back of her mind lurked the knowledge she had tried to suppress--that, if Ray's conjecture bore any resemblance to fact, someone had tried to kill her.

Chapter 3

When Mrs. Pacheco opened the apartment door to Kate and Ray, Sara leaped off the couch and ran to meet them. She hugged Kate delicately around the waist,

apparently mindful of the warning not to squeeze. She then grabbed one of Kate's hands and one of Ray's as well. Kate had never seen Sara behave so openly toward a new acquaintance.

"Sit down, Mommy." Sara steered her to one end of the couch. "Are you okay yet?"

"I'm getting there." She gratefully sank onto the sagging cushion. Her side ached more than she liked to admit.

"You still have to take care of her," said Ray. "Kate, don't move, while I get you some water."

Mrs. Pacheco, gathering up her purse and overnight bag, said, "It's good to have you home. I hope the place looks all right?"

Kate glanced around the living room, which looked tidier and more dust-free than it had in months. "Love it! Thanks so much for all your help."

The woman blushed. "No trouble, I was glad to do it." She said in a lower voice, "Was it okay for Dr. Benson to drive Sara and me to visit you? I phoned the hospital, and they confirmed he really was your doctor."

"Oh, yes, it was so great to be able to see her."

Mrs. Pacheco left just as Ray reappeared, trailed by Sara, who carried a tray of crackers and cheese slices. Ray handed Kate a glass of ice water. Sara carefully placed the snack tray on the coffee table and tugged at Ray's hand. "You sit over here where it's not bumpy." She plopped down between the two adults.

"I could get used to this customized service," Kate said.

"Good," said Ray, "because you aren't going back to work for at least two weeks. Maybe more."

"Come on, I can't just--"

"Listen to your all-wise physician."

Kate shook her head in resignation and nibbled on a cracker. Sara left the room to return with a construction of colored paper and string. "Look, Mommy, I made a mobile." She displayed a plastic coat hanger with butterflies dangling on varied lengths of twine. "Will you hang it in the kitchen?"

"I will," Ray said. "Your Mommy's resting."

When Kate started to get up, Sara waved her back. "You have to do what Dr. Ray says." She followed Ray into the kitchen. A few minutes later, she announced, "Okay, now you can come in here."

Apparently coached by Sara, Ray had suspended the mobile over the sink. He'd also assembled a pile of sandwiches. "There's lunch whenever you feel up to it," he announced.

Kate sat down, goggling at the loaded plate. She still felt ambivalent about being indebted to him. His kindness could seduce her into dependence.

"Guess what?" Sara said. "Dr. Ray taught me a new song. 'Found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut just now...'" She chanted all the verses without a glitch.

Applauding at the end, Kate murmured to Ray, "If I have to listen to that twenty times a day for the next six months, I'm going to get you for it."

"Are you kidding, that's American folk culture! Now, I noticed you're running low on supplies, so I'll pick up a few things on my way over this evening."

"This evening?"

"Of course, I have to check up on you, don't I?" he said. "Make a list if there's anything particular you need."

"Cheerios," Sara told him.

"I'll take it under advisement."

"Really, you've done more than enough," said Kate. "At least let me fix you dinner tonight."

He actually looked shocked. "Don't even think it! I'm not here to make work for you. I'll cook dinner."

"You can cook?" Kate shot him a glare of mock skepticism.

"My repertoire is kind of limited, but I have a few specialties. Hey, as you can see, I manage to survive on my cooking."

"Tell me again why you're doing all this?"

He grinned. "To score points with a beautiful woman. Do I need any other reason?"

Kate blushed. She didn't have the energy to argue. I can always throw him out when I feel better.

After lunch, the doctor watched Sara solemnly tuck her mother in with a quilt on the couch. Only then did he leave.

Having forgotten to ask Ray what time he planned to return, Kate woke up flustered at almost five. Oh, no, has Sara really been on her own all afternoon? Fortunately no signs of disaster appeared. Sara was watching PBS with the sound turned low. Kate showered, dressed, and braided her hair. It felt wonderful to be in her own home wearing her own clothes, even slacks and a loose peasant blouse. She had just settled on the couch with three days of newspapers when the doorbell rang.

Sara scurried to the foyer. "No, don't answer it!" Kate ordered. "Remember, not until we know who it is." The fear she'd suppressed welled up again. Until she learned the motive, if any, behind the "accident," she would have to exercise vigilance.

When Ray identified himself, she unfastened the chain and deadbolt. He carried two grocery bags, plus a small sack dangling from one hand. Sara bounded up and down. "Let me help?"

"Here, carry this." He handed her the small bag.

Sara peeked inside. "Ice cream!"

"And I have a friend for you to meet." He conjured a purple object with green polka-dots from one of the large bags. A dragon puppet. Slipping his hand inside the toy, he made it say, "Greetings, Sara Joy Jacobs, I am Drake."

Sara giggled and patted the stiff cloth spikes on the dragon's back. "Do you like ice cream?"

"I am very fond of razzleberry ice cream with firefly sauce." In his own voice, Ray said, "Drake helps me with the child patients at the clinic." He handed the puppet to Sara and picked up the bags. "I hope you like spaghetti," he said as they all trooped into the kitchen. Still not sure how she felt about his take-charge manner, Kate merely nodded. This was the first time she'd seen him without his medical regalia. Jeans and a plaid sport shirt made him look younger.

She couldn't help warming to him further while watching him with Sara. He didn't seem irritated by the little girl's insistence on helping. Instead of trying to squelch her, he gave her tasks she could handle, such as ripping lettuce for the salad. He taught her a folk song, beginning, "The river is wide, I cannot see, Nor do I have light wings to fly," whose melody Kate liked much better than the tune of "Found a Peanut."

Her eyebrows arched in surprise when Ray set out a bottle of Chianti. "Does the doctor approve of this?"

"I have an inside track with him," said Ray, drawing the cork. "Seriously, I

haven't noticed you popping that pain medication. Shouldn't be any problem." Sara provided a buffer, which Kate welcomed. Drake the Dragon read Sara The Tale of Benjamin Bunny while Kate ran her bath. Once ready for bed, Sara gave Ray a goodnight hug. Though she didn't go so far as to kiss him, the display of affection surprised Kate.

Tucked in with her stuffed Tigger, Sara remarked, "I like Dr. Ray. Do you?" Not wanting to undermine Sara's confidence by revealing her own ambivalence, Kate simply said, "Yes."

"He's a good man."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Daddy told me."

The hair prickled on the back of Kate's neck. "Sara, you know Daddy can't really talk to you, don't you?"

"But he does." She didn't sound upset, just faintly impatient with her mother's obtuseness. "He tells me things at night."

"Sweetheart, you know Daddy died right after you were born."

"So he's in Heaven, right?"

Another subject Kate didn't want to confront. "I guess so."

"Then he takes vacations on Earth and talks to me." As far as Sara was concerned, that settled the matter. Kate kissed her goodnight, glad to let the subject drop.

Noticing her preoccupied expression, Ray asked about it. As they drank coffee in the living room, she repeated what Sara had said. Why am I telling him so many things I normally never discuss with people?

"And you don't believe that's possible?" said Ray in a neutral tone.

"I'm not a churchgoer," she said. The last religious service she'd attended had been Johnny's funeral. As far as she could tell, God, if He existed, was a capricious tyrant who bestowed happiness only to snatch it away. "And even if I were, that wouldn't mean I'd believe in ghosts. Aren't blessed spirits supposed to stay at rest, not go around meddling in earthly affairs?"

"There are different opinions about that. I have a friend I'd like you to meet who could give you a lively discussion on the topic." Ray stared into his cup for a minute. "Some people believe a spirit may remain tied to this world if he was cut off before he finished his work."

Kate shook her head vigorously. She hated the thought of Johnny's lingering in some kind of limbo. What possible good would that do me? He'd still be out of reach.

"You never mentioned how your husband died," said Ray, tactfully sipping his coffee instead of looking at her.

"A horse threw him." She swallowed hard. "I don't want to talk about it."

Three weeks after Sara's birth, Johnny had gone out to exercise his roan mare, Felicity, boarded at a neighbor's stable. Kate had been working on a quilt in the living room, while the baby slept beside her. After an hour of painstaking needlework, Kate's eyes had drooped shut. The afterimage of shining threads on white fabric writhed behind her lids. Then a picture appeared, as vivid as a television screen. She saw Johnny on the mare, trotting along a familiar trail under overhanging pine boughs. A shadow like a gigantic, dark wing mantled the scene. Kate glimpsed the horse flying into panic, galloping headlong while Johnny struggled with the reins. The dark swallowed up the image. A second later, the shadow dissolved, showing her Johnny's face. He lay on a mat of pine needles, his skin pale, almost gray, and his hair soaked with blood.

Sara emitted a piercing shriek. The picture vanished. Kate leaped up to pluck the baby from the cradle. She'd never heard that noise from any infant before. She hugged Sara so tightly that the baby caught her breath in a gasp and then began crying normally.

Kate forced her thoughts back to the present, rubbing her forehead, where a dull ache was building. All these years, she'd managed to file the memory of her precognitive vision under "inactive"; why did Ray have to dredge it up?

"Sorry, I didn't mean to push."

After a couple of minutes of silence, she said, "You've pumped me about my past, and I don't know a thing about you."

He told her about growing up in southern California and working his way through medical school. "I have one brother, married, in the Navy. He's stationed in Norfolk at the moment, and we don't see each other often. Our parents are dead."

"No attachments?" she asked, trying to speak lightly. She certainly didn't want to project an impression of romantic interest.

"None. A GP's life doesn't allow for much leisure. Especially since I'm working in a downtown public health clinic instead of private practice. This is the most time I've taken off in weeks." He patted her hand when she started to speak.

"Believe me, I love it. You gave me the perfect excuse to unwind a little. I was engaged for a while in medical school, but we broke it off--luckily. Can you imagine two doctors in a family?" He laughed, and she responded with a tentative smile. "Since then, I stick to casual dates on professionally-oriented occasions."

"You never regret it?"

"I didn't say I intended to spend the rest of my life as a workaholic bachelor."

He gave her a long, steady look that made her blush.

"I'd better let you get to sleep." His voice sounded strained, as if he, too, felt awkward. "I'll phone you tomorrow--if that's all right?"

"Sure. Thanks again." Looks like I'm stuck with him for the foreseeable future.

The sense of protection felt as comforting as a well-worn blanket. She cautioned herself not to get too used to it.

"When you're feeling better, I would like to take you to meet that friend I mentioned. There are things we need to discuss--things he can explain more fully than I can."

With that puzzling remark, he left. Muttering her annoyance at the enigma, Kate locked the doors and tried to lock out her anxiety at the same time.

* * * *

Ray took Kate to meet his friend on Saturday of the second week after her injury. Since he'd certified her (reluctantly, she thought) well enough to return to work on Monday, she was certainly well enough for an afternoon's visit. Sara stayed home with the babysitter. Though Kate no longer suspected Ray of being a con man or a child molester, his mysterious references to this friend made her glad to keep the expedition an adults-only affair.

"I have to confess something," said Ray as he maneuvered his car through the congested traffic of an older downtown district. "Getting together with you wasn't by chance."

So he did have an ulterior motive. "Then what was it?"

"I was at a medical convention in Sacramento. Mike--the man I'm taking you to meet--phoned me and advised me to come home ASAP." Ray spoke diffidently, with his eyes fixed on the windshield. "He said I'd better be at the hospital that

night, the night you were hit. And he quoted a kind of password we use, 'Psalm 74:19.' After he said that, he didn't have to explain any further. I packed and rushed straight back here to the hospital."

"Password? What do you mean? And what's Psalm 74:19?" Was this Ray's hidden flaw, some kind of religious mania?

He gave her a sidelong smile, as if he guessed what she was thinking. "It saves time and discussion--when one of us refers to that verse, the other knows a critical event is about to occur, details to follow later. Besides, I have to admit Mike has a flair for the dramatic. You know Alas, Babylon?"

Kate frowned, puzzled at the apparent change of subject. "I saw the movie."

"Well, that verse is our equivalent of the 'Alas, Babylon' code phrase in the story. The passage goes, 'The dark places of the earth are haunts of violence.'"

"I still don't have a clue what this has to do with me."

"Mike knew you would be injured that night and that you'd need me." Stopping for a red light, Ray took the opportunity to face her, apparently probing for her reaction.

Kate felt her jaws clench in protest. "What do you mean, he 'knew'? Are you talking about ESP?"

"Well, yes." The light changed, and he eased the car through the intersection.

Kate scanned the shabby row houses on either side of the street, clinging to the borderline between low-income apartments and outright slums. "I don't believe in any of that." The unwanted memory of her own pre-vision of Johnny's death made her head ache.

"You seem unusually hostile to the whole idea."

"You're not a psychiatrist, so don't try to analyze me." Realizing that her harsh tone confirmed his evaluation of her as "hostile," she added more mildly, "I just think it's too far-fetched that a man who didn't even know I existed would have a premonition that a car was going to hit me."

"Oh, he's known you existed for years. But he didn't know your name until that night. After I met you at the hospital, I filled him in on the rest of the details."

Kate shook her head. "You're not making any sense." For an instant she felt like jumping out of the car and running away.

"It's too hard to explain in twenty-five words or less. Mike will help both of us get everything straight."

As if in deference to her confusion and resistance, Ray kept quiet for the remaining few minutes of the drive. Her eyes widened in disbelief when he turned off the street into the parking lot of a sprawling, Gothic-style structure complete with bell tower, faux gargoyles, and stained glass. The sign beside the stone steps rising to the main entrance read, "St. Augustine's Episcopal Church."

Oh, no, he really is a religious fanatic!

Across the lot from the massive gray bulk of St. Augustine's stood a three-story, gabled Victorian house with a columned front porch. At one end a roughly circular tower jutted to the sky. From a book on San Francisco architecture she'd once edited, Kate recognized the structure as late 19th-century, eclectic but mainly Queen Anne in design. Someone guided more by convenience than taste had tacked a two-car garage onto the house. An enclosed walkway connected this architectural oddity with the church.

Ray beeped his horn. A few seconds later, the garage door rose, and he pulled

inside to park.

Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly, Kate thought. Noticing how her right hand clutched the armrest, she smiled at her far-fetched apprehensions.

Why shouldn't a doctor have a clergyman for a friend? That didn't have to mean the two of them were planning to brainwash her.

When Ray knocked at the side door leading into the house proper, the clergyman himself opened it. Thin and beak-nosed, he had a halo of white hair--prematurely white, Kate deduced from his mostly unwrinkled face--that reminded her of Einstein. His thick, black eyebrows clashed with the hair, making his age harder to estimate. He wore loose-fitting, gray slacks with a black shirt and clerical collar. Shaking hands with Ray, he used his free hand to push a pair of wire-rimmed bifocals higher on the bridge of his nose. "I'm Michael Emeric, Mrs. Jacobs." He offered his hand. "May I call you Kate? Most people call me Father Mike." His accent held a trace of New England.

"Nice to meet you--Father Mike." He didn't sound like a nut, nor did the spacious country kitchen they entered look like the lair of a crystal-gazing medium. He led Kate and Ray through a formal dining room, whose oak table was covered by a half-assembled jigsaw puzzle. A view of the Grand Canyon, she noticed.

The living room furniture harmonized with the provenance of the house.

Overstuffed, wing-backed chairs and love seats and claw-footed, marble-topped tables filled the room to capacity. A faint dusty smell hovered in the air.

Father Emeric--Mike--waved his two guests to a sofa beside the clean, bare fireplace, which had a marble mantelpiece surmounted by a mirror. "Sometimes I feel as if I live in a museum," he said, chuckling at Kate's fascinated survey of the decor, "but on the whole it's a good thing the rectory came furnished.

Left up to me, half the rooms would probably be empty." He pulled up an armchair for himself. "So, Kate, you're probably wondering why Ray dragged you here. How much did he tell you?"

She couldn't help smiling in response to the priest's friendly manner, but her good humor faded as she mulled over Ray's claims. "He said you had some kind of premonition; that you knew I was going to need help. Is that true? Did I hear him right?"

"You did. But you don't believe it, do you?" Father Mike sounded completely non-judgmental about her skepticism.

"No, I think all that stuff is nonsense."

"You may still think so after I've told you how the knowledge came to me. But I feel I owe you some explanation." He cleared his throat, looking embarrassed, not the way she would expect a raving fanatic to behave. "Immediately after my wife died--many years ago--I dreamed that she visited me, to tell me of a mission I would have to undertake someday--to protect a woman and her child, whom I'd meet at the proper time. I believed this vision was authentic. When Ray had known me long enough to trust that I wasn't crazy, I confided in him."

Father Mike gave the doctor a sidelong glance. "He accepted it, provisionally, but he didn't really believe it, did you?"

Ray smiled noncommittally. Kate listened, too dumbfounded by this wild tale to speak.

"The night you were injured," the priest continued, "your name popped into my head. I called Ray home from the conference he was attending and asked him to check for you at the hospital where he has staff privileges. He found you--which confirms the reality of my vision in both of our minds."

Kate's head spun. Did he really expect her to swallow this psychic garbage? But why would he lie? What were these people up to? "You're the last person I would expect to hear this from. Isn't ESP supposed to be a tool of the Devil or something?"

Father Mike shrugged. "Some Christians think so. I don't. Whatever powers of that kind may exist--and I've seen some remarkable instances--are analogous to perfect pitch or a photographic memory. I believe they are simply talents that may lie dormant or be developed with exercise. Like any other inborn gift, they can be used for either good or evil."

He made the occult sound so reasonable. "Well, if it does exist, I wouldn't call it a gift." She emitted a long, shaky breath. "I'd call it a curse!"

"Do you have some special reason for feeling this way?" His gentle voice and steady gaze invited her to open up.

Suddenly she realized she was tired of carrying that horrible memory alone. At least this man who considered precognition as ordinary as perfect pitch wouldn't think her vision branded her as crazy. He might even offer a rational explanation to erase the incident from her mind. "It happened the day my husband was killed," she said. "At that very moment, I saw him--he was covered with blood. And the baby screamed..." To her dismay, she broke into hysterical tears. She felt Ray's hand on her shoulder. Father Mike passed her a clean handkerchief, which she fumbled to her eyes. Neither of them spoke until she got control of herself.

"Thanks. I'm sorry...so embarrassed..."

"Please go on," said Father Mike.

Grateful that he offered no verbal comfort for her to fend off, Kate described her vision. "And there was a dark cloud," she finished. "No, more like a shadow--or a patch of nothingness, if that makes any sense." The priest nodded as if he understood. "If I didn't know I'd imagined the whole thing, I'd say the darkness made the horse panic and throw him."

"I don't think you imagined it," said Father Mike, "and I suspect that's exactly what happened."

"Are you saying I saw something real?" Her skepticism hardened into her habitual shield. "I can't accept that. I'd almost rather believe I'm losing my mind."

The present tense slipped out before she realized what she was saying, and Father Mike seemed to pick up the nuance. "Have you had any other experiences of this kind, before or since?"

"When Sara was born," she said. "And then again, in the hospital right after the accident." She glanced at Ray. "When you called me back, I imagined your voice fought off the darkness. I still think that was some kind of hallucination."

Ray said, "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

Figuring she'd already gone so far that complete frankness couldn't hurt, she told Father Mike about both near-death experiences and the overshadowing wing of darkness that had grazed her each time.

"Those weren't byproducts of delirium, in my opinion," he said. "A hostile force is operating against you, groping after you, as it were."

"Force? You mean something with--intelligence?" Her suspicions reawakened. That remark sounded like archaic superstition.

"Exactly. To put it bluntly--hard as it may be to accept--the forces of evil want to destroy you and your daughter."

She sprang to her feet, her bowels churning with fear. They really are insane, and I'm alone with them, two against one. "The Devil? You're saying the Devil is

out to get us?" She edged toward the door. What if they won't let me leave?

Chapter 4

Ray spread his hands in appeal but made no move toward her. "Kate, please don't run away. Hear us out. Then, if you still think we're crazy, I'll take you straight home. My solemn word."

Reluctantly she returned to her seat. "The Devil? Sounds like superstitious baloney to me."

"Not exactly the Devil," said Father Mike. "I'll tell you more about what I think it is in a few minutes. But have you never seen a clearer sign of its presence? Why, exactly, did you run away from that party? Were you running from something in particular?"

How did he strike so close to the bull's-eye? If anything could convince her of mind-reading, his accurate guesses could. "I thought I saw something--terrible. But it must have been caused by that drug in my drink. Ray mentioned that to you, didn't he?"

"No, that wasn't it," Ray said. "Remember, according to your description of the sequence of events, your wine cooler wasn't drugged until after you put it down--and you didn't taste it when you picked it up again."

Father Mike said, "Fortunately, some intuition--that sixth sense you consider nonsense--must have alerted you to the poison, stopped you from drinking. What do you remember seeing?"

She described the man-shaped patch of nothingness that had thrown her into a panic. "It made me think of a black hole. I lost my head and just ran. If it was real, what do you think I actually saw?"

"Anybody else would have seen a quite ordinary man," the priest said. "True evil isn't flamboyant or exhibitionist. Organizations like the Church of Satan are only a front. The inmost power is much more subtle."

"Evil," she scoffed. As far as she was concerned, Evil with a capital E haunted only the shadows of cheap horror films.

"You are privileged--if that's the word--to see through the disguise. One of the rarer gifts."

"If that's a gift, they can take it back! Like I said, I think it's a curse."

She wadded the damp handkerchief. "After that, I felt I had to get home as fast as possible. You know the rest--out in the street, that car came straight at me. I dodged at the last minute because I heard--imagined I heard--Sara's voice."

"You didn't tell me that part," said Ray.

"You think I wanted an almost-stranger finding out I had major screws loose?"

She summoned up a weak smile.

"Again, there's nothing wrong with you," Father Mike said. "Your daughter sensed your danger and reached out to warn you."

"No!" Indignation blotted out the remembered fear. "I won't even think of Sara being involved in this crazy stuff! She's innocent."

"Her innocence doesn't prevent her from being a target," said Father Mike. He

didn't seem to be trying to frighten Kate, only stating facts.

She glared at Ray. "Is this what you brought me here for? Well, I've heard more than enough!" She started to get up.

Ray caught her hand. "Please, let us finish. When you've got the whole picture, then I'll take you home like I promised."

She sat down, drawing away from him. "All right, I'll listen, but I won't like it. What's this about being a target?"

"They're after Sara only secondarily," said the priest, "because she's your daughter."

"Who the heck is 'they'?" Kate's initial favorable opinion of him was deteriorating. He seemed to be pushing some kind of conspiracy theory.

"A minute ago, you mentioned the Devil." Father Mike stared at the ceiling, as if gathering his thoughts. A white, fluffy shape padded into the room and leaped on the arm of his chair. When he lifted it onto his lap and began stroking it, Kate recognized the creature as a Persian cat.

"Devil, speak of the?" she said.

The cat fixed its unblinking blue eyes upon her. Father Mike laughed softly.

"Meet Yasmin. Fortunately for her, very few people brand cats as demon familiars these days. Though I have known people who use their pets as, you might say, psychic amplifiers--but that's off the subject." He scratched under Yasmin's chin, while she kneaded his thighs with her claws. "The association of darkness and the creatures of the night with evil is a cultural accident. The imagery resonates for us because we happen to be diurnal animals."

"So if intelligent cats ruled the world," said Kate, "light wouldn't necessarily be a universal symbol for goodness?"

He nodded. "Stigmatizing any part of the natural world as intrinsically evil--certain animals that threaten or repel us, or even, God help us, people of other races who look different--is wrongheaded. All creation, however warped parts of it may have become, originated as good. The true evil you're dubious about goes far deeper than any natural phenomenon, no matter how destructive."

"So what, exactly, is this true evil?" Suspicion tightened her vocal cords.

Father Mike smiled gently as if to counteract her resistance. "No matter how far out it sounds, please humor me for the moment. Assume, hypothetically, that God exists."

"Okay, I can go that far." She glanced at Ray, who listened in silent concentration.

"Furthermore, assume the hypothetical existence of a force opposed to God," said the priest. "Not a self-existent entity, but created by and in rebellion against Him. It shows itself to us as darkness. In a more culture-bound manifestation, it appears as the traditional Devil, borrowing elements from the pagan satyrs that symbolized sinful license in the eyes of the medieval Church."

None of these concepts struck Kate as either revolutionary or relevant to her own situation. She looked from Father Mike to Ray.

"Symbols," the doctor said. "But symbolic of an underlying reality with intelligence and will."

"A personal being?"

Father Mike said, "Think of it as a cosmic force of negation. Your perception of 'Nothing' was close to the truth. A devourer, whose ultimate goal is to absorb and consume all light and life--and there I go again, using the light-dark opposition. A force of decay that wants to reduce all form to primal chaos."

"Entropy," she murmured.

"Why, yes, that's part of it. As for personality, I conjecture that this force wears personality as a mask to make itself more intelligible--more attractive--to its devotees. It's not for nothing that some worshipers of chaos call it 'the blind, idiot god.'"

Yasmin left the priest and jumped up beside Kate to sniff her hands, knotted in her lap. Grateful for the distraction, Kate fondled the silken head. She liked cats and would have adopted one long ago if the apartment management allowed animals. A pet for Sara was on the "someday" list along with a suburban house furnished in a style other than "early garage sale." "Hypothetically assuming the existence of this entity, why would anybody in their right mind worship it?"

"Mostly for pleasure in their temporary exercise of power. Also, under the delusion that after the victory of chaos, they'll rule this planet. Actually, when the enemy breaks through from Outside, it will devour all creation except itself, including its own servants."

"Wait a minute--what do you mean, Outside?" She'd heard him pronounce the word with a capital-O stress.

"This entity--non-entity--has used many methods through the eons. Right now, cosmic 'now,' it seems to be repeating a strategy that was tried long before humanity evolved. Beings from another dimensional plane, another space-time continuum, want to break through into our cosmos. Originally created good, like all creation, they've chosen the side of chaos. They would exterminate all earthly life, except those they'd keep as livestock--food." Obviously aware of Kate's disbelief, he added, "Speaking hypothetically, of course."

She ran her open palm down the cat's back to the tip of the plumed tail. "Under your hypothesis, the world is infested by demons?"

"The 'gods' from Outside aren't demons, as most people understand the word. Demons, where they exist--and I freely admit that most supposed cases of demonic persecution or possession throughout history have been natural pathology of some sort--tend to be immaterial spirits with petty interests in tormenting or feeding on human victims. Immaterial in the sense of being composed of more ethereal matter than we are--only God is truly Spirit, of course."

"Of course." Why am I sitting here listening to this mystical tripe?

Father Mike ignored her sarcastic tone. "The Ancient Ones, as their worshipers usually call those from Outside, are far more powerful, and they have no interest in human beings except as obstacles, tools, or cattle. So it would be a mistake to become obsessed with them to the neglect of all the more mundane evil in the world. The enemy hasn't given up on the familiar forms of corruption and destruction we read about every day in the newspaper. But the ultimate forces remain invisible."

Kate turned to Ray. "You believe all this stuff?"

"I do." He reached out to squeeze her hand before she could shrink from his touch. "If God exists, why not other immaterial beings? I know it sounds crazy at first, but please keep an open mind."

"There's a limit to keeping it so open my brains leak out." Again she fixed her attention on the priest, her head buzzing with the invasion of wild ideas. "All right, go on. Hypothetically, what did I see at the party?"

"Not a man, though it looked like one and had a solid body. Probably an artificial construct." Kate silently gritted her teeth. More weirdness "The mind within the shape was almost certainly one of their lesser minions. Your perceiving it as emptiness suggests that." His brow furrowed as he groped for

words. "Or perhaps an aspect, a partial manifestation, of one of the Ancient Ones. It hardly matters." He leaned over to trace a square on the rug with his index finger. "Visualize a flat surface. Think of a creature living in that surface, a two-dimensional creature. He knows only width and length, not depth or density. Now, imagine my fingers touching his world at different points." He spread his hand, spider-like, and lightly touched the rug. "To a flatlander, each of my fingertips appears as a separate entity. He can't conceive how, in the third dimension, all five fingers are part of a single hand--though, to him, separate in place and time."

"Fourth dimension, fifth dimension--yes, I've heard of that concept. I've read Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. So?"

"Those from Outside can extend parts of their substance into our world, so that what we encounter is only a cross-section of an immense whole--a mere tentacle of the darkness." He straightened up in his chair. "You glimpsed such a tentacle."

"What about you?" She challenged him in a harsher voice than she'd intended. "Have you seen the same thing?"

He shook his head. "I've been spared that. However, I've seen traces of their work."

"Let me guess--you belong to a secret society dedicated to truth, justice, and fighting the monsters from Outside." She flung an accusatory look at Ray. "You, too."

"Not a secret society," said Ray. "Just a loose network of people who know about these forces and try to combat them. Formal organization and rigid hierarchy are more their style."

Father Mike said, "That's right. We do try to--'recruit' is too strong a word--enlist the help of people like you, with special talents."

"I told you, if this talent is real--which you still haven't convinced me of--I want to forget it as soon as possible! Even if all this were true, the very idea of devoting my life to some crazy crusade against invaders from Dimension X, losing any chance of normal happiness, putting Sara in danger..." Her fear, temporarily quenched by this absurd conversation, welled up anew.

"Oh, no, we'd never ask that," said Father Mike. "It's the servants of the enemy who devote their lives to their cause. Everything we do aims at defending what you call 'normal happiness.' Some things are worth dying for, but not living for."

Kate shook her head. "I'll have to think about that one later. What's the point? What does this stuff about Ancient Ones from Outside have to do with me?"

"We think you're a particular target of theirs," the priest said. "Have been for years. Just as I sensed that you're special and therefore in danger from them, their side has psychics of far greater strength who knew about you before Sara was born. As I said earlier, they seem to have been groping around for a long time, striking at you through a fog, so to speak."

"Wait a minute, that's too much. Are you trying to tell me some evil cult is out to get me?"

"Essentially, yes, though not one the general public would know about. The current fad for the occult promotes their cause, but the serious work goes on in hiding."

"Occult? Like Sandoval?"

Ray said, "I'm sure, from what I've heard about him and what you told me, he's not consciously involved in even the fringes of the movement. His books are

useful to them, though, so that author's party gave them a good chance to strike at you."

"Doesn't Sandoval hint at inside sources for some of his information?" the priest said. "The man-shaped being you saw might be one of those sources, a cultist who keeps a low profile."

"And this--creature--poisoned my drink?" Feeling trapped by the priest's steady gaze, Kate fidgeted, causing the cat to desert her in favor of Ray.

"Not directly, I suspect," said Father Mike. "More likely he mentally guided someone else to do it, just as he telepathically forced that driver to follow you outside and run you down."

"Come on!"

The priest continued with every appearance of complete seriousness, "Also, I'm practically certain that the enemy killed your husband. Didn't you mention a vision of a dark wing at the moment of his death? What if the horse saw something analogous to what you saw at the party? Wouldn't that cause the poor animal to panic?"

Kate suppressed a shiver. Talk about conspiracy theories, this really beats them all! Yet the theory sounded so plausible, explained so many anomalies, without requiring her to consider herself mentally ill. No, this would be even worse than going insane! Why am I giving it one second's thought? She bristled at the thought that he was mentioning Johnny to manipulate her, exploit her emotions.

"Even if such things can happen," she said, "why me? I'm nobody special."

"Listen to me, Kate." Father Mike leaned forward to capture her eyes with his own. "Every one of us is more than we appear to be. You, me, everyone. Each human being has special gifts, even if the terrible condition of our world keeps too many people from developing those gifts. We all have to choose whether to turn our backs and live selfishly or to cooperate to the best of our ability with the creative power. You, however, received an extra portion. You can see those from Outside as they really are, and that in itself would motivate them to exterminate you. But that isn't all." He hesitated, looking uncertain for the first time. "This is the hardest part to tell you."

"Harder than monsters from Dimension X?" Her attempt at flippancy didn't ease her apprehension.

"I believe you have latent psychic powers you don't begin to suspect. More important, Sara displays these powers already, from what you've mentioned, and will grow stronger year by year. And after Sara--" He drew a long breath. "The other side knows you're destined to bear a child who will play a crucial role in the struggle against them. A child they must destroy or risk losing this phase of the battle. That's why they're trying to eliminate you and your family--and why Ray and I are trying to protect you."

"What?" Rage engulfed her like a tidal wave. She sprang to her feet. "That's the most insane drivel I've ever heard! I don't know if you're a con artist or some kind of deranged fanatic, and I don't care! I don't want any part of your crazy cult!" She whirled upon Ray, who was standing, watching her in dismay. "And you..."

"I'm sorry, Kate." Pain appeared to shadow his eyes, but how could she trust any word or mannerism of his? How long have these two weirdos been watching me, anyway? "We dumped too much on you too fast," he said.

"I trusted you. I liked you!" She wanted only to get away as far as possible from both of them. Without Ray's car, though, she'd be stranded. "Take me home! Now!"

For a mad instant the fear seized her that the two men would lock her in the basement--or in a crypt beneath the church, like a Gothic heroine. But Ray simply spread his hands in resignation and sighed, "All right. Let's go." He threw an appealing look at the priest, who said nothing as Kate walked out. She hated getting into Ray's car, but this neighborhood was no place to wait for a cab. She doubted she had enough cash for a taxi anyway, even stashed at home. And she didn't even consider the bus. Assuring herself that Ray wouldn't have let her walk out the door of the rectory if he had nefarious intentions, she took her chances with him.

Slamming the car door and snapping the seat belt, she said, "Does the bishop know what your friend Father Mike is up to?"

Ray sighed again. "I know how all this must sound to you. Try to think it over. Please."

She said nothing. Throughout the drive, she stared out her side window. Her sense of betrayal wouldn't let her look at Ray. What possible motive could they have for all this? What are they trying to get out of me? Since she hadn't enough money for a con artist to bother with, either the two men were sincere fanatics or (the new theory hit her like a bucket of ice water) they had designs on Sara. She tried to dismiss this notion as absurdly far-fetched, but all she could think of was Ray's friendliness, which she had already come to depend on. Could his behavior really be a mask for some perversion?

When he stopped the car outside her apartment, her anger boiled up. "Damn you, Ray Benson, I trusted you! I thought you were my friend--and Sara's friend! And this is all you wanted me for!"

He stretched out a hand, then let it fall to the seat between them. "Kate, please." He sounded close to tears. Was he actually hurt by her accusation? No, she mustn't let him seduce her emotions again. "Stay away from me, you hear? And stay away from my daughter! If you call or come here again, I'll have you arrested for harassment!"

* * * *

Kate had a hard time explaining to Sara why Dr. Ray didn't stay for dinner that evening. When Sara asked how soon he would visit again, Kate's nerve failed. How could she explain that she never intended to let Ray in the house again, because he'd revealed his true nature as a liar and a manipulator? She pacified Sara with the reminder that Dr. Ray was a busy man with many patients and couldn't spare any more time for Kate now that she was almost well. A drab supper out of cans didn't cheer either of them. After playing a Peter, Paul, and Mary tape, singing along with "Puff the Magic Dragon," Kate read Sara a chapter from *The House at Pooh Corner* and tucked her in for the night.

Kate hoped she'd managed to distract Sara. The bedtime routine hadn't made a dent in her own misery. Am I actually missing the man? Was I starting to fall in love with him? All the better, she admonished herself, that she'd discovered his ulterior motives before getting further entangled. After a heavy dose of Dorothy Sayers she finally fell asleep, her head stuffed with thoughts of switching her phone to an unlisted number and cajoling the building manager into changing her locks.

Behind her eyelids the dark gathered like a swarm of venomous insects. It coalesced into a swirling, tentacled shape. Between Kate and the patch of darkness appeared a small, white figure. Sara. The tentacles stretched toward the child.

"No!" Kate shouted. She flung herself at the thing.

She woke with a high-pitched scream ululating in her ears. She sat up. "Sara?" Oh, Lord, another nightmare? Yet she'd never heard Sara shriek like that, even in the throes of nightmares. Kate grabbed the flashlight from the nightstand and dashed into the other bedroom.

Before she reached Sara's door, the scream abruptly stopped. A gust of cold air swept over Kate. She stumbled into Sara's bedroom and clicked on the flashlight. "Sweetheart, I'm here. What's wrong?"

She expected to see her daughter either asleep or sitting up staring into the darkness. Instead, Sara lay on her back, the covers dragging on the floor, with her eyes wide and unblinking.

Kate tiptoed to the bed and touched Sara's hand, finding the skin inexplicably cold. When she lifted Sara's arm, it felt flaccid. It fell heavily to the mattress when she released it.

"Sara?" she whispered. She squeezed the child's shoulder, with no response. The open eyes looked like beads of glass. "Sara!" A rough shaking brought no result. She might as well have tried to wake a rag doll.

Sara wasn't asleep; she was comatose.

Chapter 5

Kate dashed to the telephone in the kitchen. Just as she reached it, the doorbell buzzed. She scurried to the front door. "Who's there?" Her voice sounded shrill, like a stranger's.

"Ray Benson."

Momentarily forgetting his betrayal, she scrambled to unfasten the locks. When he stepped inside, she remembered her fury at his breach of trust. "What are you doing here? I told you--"

"I had to come." He clutched her arm. "What's happened? Something is terribly wrong, isn't it?"

"Oh, God, yes! It's Sara!" Together they hurried to the back bedroom. "How did you know?"

"A few minutes ago I woke up out of a dead sleep and knew you needed me. I had a feeling of urgency. What's wrong with Sara?"

She pulled him into the room and flicked the light switch. "Look at her!"

Ray bent over the bed, flexing Sara's limbs, checking her pulse.

"She woke me up, screaming," said Kate, "and when I got here, she was like this." Her voice shook, along with her hands. She intertwined her fingers, struggling for control. "Shouldn't I call an ambulance?"

"No."

"No! Have you lost your mind?" The cry tore from her throat.

Without answering, Ray stood up, glanced at the window--open, Kate suddenly realized, though she had locked it. He gazed bleakly at her. "Kate, you must gather all your courage and try to believe me. This is not Sara."

Paralyzed by the incomprehensible words, she simply stared at him. In a harsh whisper she said, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry to have to do this, but I can't explain. Just watch." He placed his left hand on the little girl's forehead.

Kate grabbed his right arm and cried, "Don't touch her, you maniac!"

"Please, Kate." His eyes held such anguished appeal that she no longer doubted his sincerity. While he might still be insane, he meant her no harm. He cared about her and Sara.

When Kate released his right arm, he raised it as if taking oath in court. He muttered a phrase in a language she didn't recognize. At the same time, he traced a cross on the child's brow.

Sara's shape collapsed like a deflated balloon. Her features withered. A stick figure with hair and clothing like dry leaves lay on the bed. Within seconds, it crumbled into a scattering of gray dust.

Kate screamed. She continued screaming as Ray half-carried her from the bedroom. Blackness swirled before her eyes. She felt hands shaking her. When she opened her eyes, she was sitting at the kitchen table. Ray pressed a glass into her fingers. She drank. Sherry.

He clasped her head between his hands and made her gaze into his eyes. "Listen to me. That was not Sara. Sara is alive."

She had to take a longer swallow before she could process that remark well enough to respond. "What makes you think so?" The room lurched around her. Was he lying? How she yearned to believe him!

"Because if they only wanted her dead, they wouldn't have gone to all that trouble to take her. They'd have killed her on the spot."

"They?" Conspiracy again. God, could it all be true?

"Wait here." He patted her shoulder, then left the room. She closed her eyes, trying to blank out what she'd seen. Shortly Ray reappeared. He pulled her to her feet. "Come with me."

She guessed where he wanted to lead her. "No! I can't go in there!"

"It's all right. There's nothing terrible to see." He put his arm around her shoulders.

Letting him guide her, she forced herself to look at Sara's bed. To her relief, Ray had stripped it. "I want to show you the window," he said. When he pushed the window down to give her a view of the four panes of glass, she saw that the top right had a circular hole in it. "Glass cutter and suction cup," said Ray.

"Standard burglary skills. Someone broke in this way, took Sara--probably after giving her some kind of sedative by injection --and left a golem." Until that moment, she'd still half feared that the thing on the bed was her daughter. The marks of a break-in supported Ray's theory.

"How?" Shuddering, Kate hid her face on Ray's shoulder and burst into tears.

He held her for a long time. When her mind cleared again, they were sitting together on the living room couch. "What was that thing?" she whispered.

"A decoy to give them a head start on us. If you'd depended on ordinary medical knowledge, you might not have realized Sara was gone for days, until the thing disintegrated on its own." He clasped her hand with a gentleness in marked contrast to the grim expression on his face. "A very old trick. The late medieval inquisitors claimed a witch on her way to the Sabbath could deceive her family by leaving a poppet, a lifelike image of herself, in bed in her place. Looks like the legends have a bit of truth in them."

"You're talking about magic." She pressed her knuckles to her mouth to keep from screaming again. After a few deep breaths, she could speak coherently. "Literal black magic, right here in San Francisco in the 1970s."

"I'm not surprised you didn't believe it when we tried to explain this afternoon."

For a fleeting instant, she wondered whether Ray and Father Emeric had set up this bizarre disappearance to convert her to their views. But she immediately dismissed the idea. If Ray's concern wasn't genuine, she couldn't trust any of her perceptions about anything. Then that means I have real enemies--supernatural enemies. "I'm sorry I accused you of such terrible things."

"Understandable," he said.

"If I'm the main target of these--whatever they are--why didn't they break into my room and kill me, instead of taking Sara?"

Ray shrugged. "It's possible that they're afraid of you, think you have more control over your power than you do. After all, you did live through the poisoning attempt and the auto 'accident.' Also, they wouldn't want to risk getting arrested for murder. They'd rather work more subtly. And another thing..."

His hesitation frightened her. "What?"

"I'm sorry to bring it up, but there's always the chance that they think they can use Sara's talent, maybe bring her over to their side."

Kate swallowed a lump of fear and anger. "No matter what their motives are, they're still kidnapers. Isn't it time to call the police?"

"And tell them what? Want to try describing what we saw to the cop on the beat?"

"We can't just sit here!" She bowed her head on her clenched fists.

He rubbed the knotted muscles at the back of her neck. "I didn't say we should. There's a good chance we can find her ourselves. We'll need Mike's help."

She felt her whole body tighten in protest.

"If you can't trust Mike yet," Ray said, "can you trust me? Just for a while?"

She raked her fingers through her tangled hair. "What do you want to do?"

"Get something of Sara's, some object intimately connected to her, and we'll go to St. Augustine's. The three of us working together should have the best chance."

"Okay." In this terra incognita, she couldn't take a step without a guide, and Ray was the only one she had. Bracing herself again, she reentered Sara's room. On the floor she found what she wanted, Tigger, with his synthetic fur rubbed bare, his floppy tail, and his frequently mended ears.

As she scrambled into jeans and a sweatshirt and tied back her hair in a ponytail, she heard Ray on the telephone. Calling the priest, she gathered from a stray word here and there. Can I trust Father Emeric? Is he really telling the simple truth and trying to protect me? If so, she would have to accept that she needed protection. Some unimaginable force was trying to annihilate her and her child. Kate's head spun. Thinking in circles like this did no good.

At the last minute, an irrational impulse of faith made her throw toiletries and a change of clothes for herself and Sara into a tote bag. Locking the windows and the back door, double-checking that she had her keys, she reflected that she hadn't given a moment's thought to the fact that she'd sat with Ray, even hugged him, in nothing but her nightgown.

In the front hall, clutching her purse and the overnight bag, she succumbed to another wave of doubt. As if sensing her mood shift, Ray said, "Would you feel better following me in your own car?"

She nodded. That token bit of control might help her hang onto her sanity. Let's

just hope I don't crash into the side of a building on the way. As she started the car, it dawned on her that she'd meticulously locked the apartment while a gaping hole remained in the bedroom window. No time to worry about that now. Memorizing each turn along the hilly downtown streets helped to distance her from the panic lurking in the back of her head, ready to pounce. She told herself she would need the directions fixed in memory, because in a few hours she would have to drive Sara home.

Or would it be safe to take Sara back to the apartment, where they--whoever they were--knew how to find her? Where else could we go? Ardath? Aside from her apprehensions about retreating to such a memory-haunted place, she had to earn a living. Shaking her head at the folly of worrying about far-fetched problems at a time like this, she strained her eyes to keep Ray's taillights in view.

When a red light intervened between Ray's car and hers, the panic sprang up, gibbering. She knocked it flat. Idiot, if you fall behind, he'll wait for you.

The mist that blurred his car into a spectral shape when the gap widened beyond a block or so fed the fear of being cut adrift. She reminded herself that she'd known San Francisco fog all her life. What did Father Emeric say about branding natural phenomena as evil?

The priest had said a lot of other things, too, things about malicious nonhuman entities from parallel dimensions. If he'd spoken truly, any commonplace object could serve as a mask for something unimaginable. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a man in a leather jacket carrying a grocery bag out of a convenience store. In her side-view mirror she could see only his back. If he turned around, might she see, instead of a man's face, a beast's muzzle and fangs? A writhing cluster of tentacles? Or a well of darkness, like the emptiness she'd seen the night of her injury?

Each time she had to slow down, she scanned the buildings and cross-streets. She visualized the apartments and lightless stores as the facades of Hollywood sets, which an earthquake might demolish at any moment. Behind them might lie a desert strewn with bones or a black expanse of outer space sprinkled with icy stars. Or they might simply melt away to reveal nothing at all.

Stop this; you're scaring yourself for nothing! She clenched and unclenched her fingers. The sweat on her palms made the steering wheel slick. She checked the rear-view mirror, succumbing to a new fear. What if someone had watched the apartment and followed her from there? If so, the rectory of St. Augustine's would become as futile a refuge as Kate's home. Just shut up! she fumed at the yammering voice in her head. I have to trust something!

At last she pulled into the church parking lot behind Ray, who honked his horn. Instantly the garage door opened. The low-wattage light inside revealed that the space had been cleared enough to admit both cars. Kate's hands started shaking as soon as the garage door closed and she turned off the ignition.

Ray tapped on her side window. She blinked at him a few times before realizing that she hadn't unlocked her doors. She did so, and Ray helped her out. Kate carried Sara's Tigger under her left arm. She clung to Ray, quivering, hating this weakness but unable to act strong anymore.

"You're safe for now." He patted her back in an undemanding brotherly fashion.

"This place is safe."

She gulped and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Sorry about that."

A mundane smell of wood shavings and mildew filled her nose. The kitchen door opened to reveal a rectangle of bright light. The priest beckoned them inside.

Once all three of them were in the kitchen, he bolted the door--for her

reassurance, Kate thought. He clasped her right hand in both of his. "Nothing can track you here. The church and this house are--shielded. And I promise you we'll find Sara."

Gazing into his gray eyes behind the wire-rimmed glasses, she almost believed the promise. "Ray told you what happened?"

"The main outline." Father Mike held a chair at the kitchen table for her. He showed no self-consciousness about his bedroom slippers, bristling hair, and plaid bathrobe. "I see you brought one of Sara's possessions. May I?"

Kate handed him the stuffed tiger. "This should work fine," said Father Mike.

"We should calm down and gather our wits first. Anybody for coffee?"

The aroma of the fresh brew penetrated Kate's awareness. She glanced around at the dark wood cabinets, the butcher's-block counters, and the parquet floor. A comfortable room, but right now she distrusted comfort. "I don't want to calm down. I want my little girl back."

"We'll have a better chance if we use our heads instead of flying off half-cocked," said Ray.

Father Mike poured three mugs of coffee and set out sugar, milk, and spoons. Kate found that stirring her coffee and sipping the hot liquid steadied her more than she'd expected. "What's the toy for?"

"A link with Sara," said Father Mike. "Together, the three of us should be able to get a fix on her that way, pinpoint her location or at least the general area where she's being kept."

"Definite enough so we can find her and rescue her?" Kate said. The proposed search mode struck her as less ridiculous than it would have two hours earlier. Compared to what she had seen tonight, sending Tigger on Sara's trail sounded quite reasonable.

"I've seen it work before," the priest said.

Ray leaned across the table in Kate's direction. "Leave yourself out of that. It would be far too dangerous, the worse thing you could do."

"Now, just a minute! Don't try to tell me what I can--"

Father Mike reached over to place a hand on her shoulder. "He's absolutely right. Didn't he mention that you are their prime target? If they got you into their clutches, they wouldn't have any more reason to treat Sara gently."

"Then what am I here for? What can I do?" She heard her voice rising to a wail. She took a scalding swallow of coffee to shock herself back to comparative calm.

Ray said, "We need you to help us get in touch with Sara. And we can draw on your power in tracking her down."

Kate shook her head. "I don't have any power."

"Suspend your disbelief for tonight," the priest said, "because doubt could cripple us." He smiled dryly. "One reason few scientists accept psi phenomena is that wild talents tend to shrivel up and hide in the presence of skeptics. A convenient excuse, but it also happens to be true."

"I'll try," Kate said. "Tell me to join forces with little green men from the Bermuda Triangle, I'll do it."

The priest laughed. "We're not ready to go quite that far. Finish your coffee, and we'll get started."

She concentrated on suspending her disbelief while Father Mike escorted them into the sitting room where they'd talked before and arranged two armchairs and a love seat into a tight circle. Her stomach fluttered with anxiety as she sat down facing the two men, with their knees almost touching. "Are we running a

séance here?"

Ray looked faintly shocked. Father Mike said, "Heaven forbid. Literally, a séance involves contacting the dead, which would be terribly dangerous. However, we are practicing what you might call sympathetic magic. This tiger holds a lot of psychic residue from Sara. Almost as good as a lock of her hair."

Kate's fingers twisted around each other for imaginary support. "Sounds like voodoo."

"Voodoo, when it works at all, does work on the same principle." Father Mike handed Tigger to Kate. "You hold this, since you have the strongest bond with Sara." She clutched the stuffed animal in her lap. Ray and Father Mike each placed both their hands on the fuzzy lump. Kate felt Ray's fingertips brush hers. The priest said, "Tension and excitement will block what we're trying to do. We must all relax. Especially you, Kate. Empty your mind and reach out for your daughter."

She swallowed a hard lump. "I can't relax."

His hand moved briefly to pat hers. "I know you can. You have strengths you don't begin to suspect. Let your muscles and joints go limp, one by one--ankles, knees, hips, waist, diaphragm, chest, shoulders, arms, neck. Be relaxed but alert."

Before she realized what was happening, she caught herself obeying him. Each segment of her body slackened as he named it. Alarms jangled in the back of her mind. "Are you hypnotizing me?"

His voice remained low and even. "Only as much as you hypnotize yourself when deeply engrossed in some task. Hypnosis simply means deep concentration. You'll remain in complete control. Relax your neck, allow your mouth to open slightly, feel the tension flow out of your jaws. Breathe slowly--in, out, in, out."

Her eyes drifted shut. Beside her, Ray breathed in identical rhythm; she heard air sighing in and out of his lungs in unison with her own breath. The priest's chant subsided into silence. For a while they all inhaled and exhaled in harmony. Kate felt suspended in a bubble of unhurried calm. Then Father Mike's quiet voice touched her: "Kate, focus on Sara. Invoke her image in your mind. Reach for her. We are with you, lending you strength. Can you envision her?" Piece by piece, Kate built a picture of Sara in her head. Tousled hair, deep blue eyes, white flannelette nightgown printed with rosebuds, bare feet, a crease on her cheek from the pillowcase, corner of the quilt crumpled in her right hand--the picture hovered before Kate's inner eye as clear as a photograph. She'd never possessed a visual imagination this sharp. "I see her." "Good." Father Mike's voice flowed over her like a refreshing breeze. "Now call to her. Ask her to show you where she is."

Kate received the command with calm acceptance instead of protest. "Sara, can you hear me? Talk to me, Sara. I want to find you and bring you home."

The manufactured picture in her mind gained solidity. At the same time, the quilt from Sara's bed at home melted and vanished. Instead, the girl lay face up on a double bed with white sheets and a white chenille spread, turned down to expose her inert form. Her eyes were shut now, her arms flung wide. Something had leached all color from her cheeks; she looked pale and cold. Yet her chest moved in slow, feeble breaths. Kate didn't doubt that what she saw was real. The image was so three-dimensionally vivid that she might have been gazing through a window.

"It worked," she whispered. "Sara's alive!" In her amazement, she almost lost the picture. As it wavered like a scene under water, she felt Ray and Father

Mike each clasp her wrists.

"Steady," the priest said. "How much can you see of her surroundings?"

"Nothing--a bed." Or could she expand the view? She imagined standing at a real window, stepping back to encompass more of the room in her field of vision.

"Just a bedroom," she murmured. "Modern-looking furniture, blond wood, dresser, night stand. A door opening into a bathroom. White drapes on the window. Can't see out. Goose-neck lamp burning on the night stand." Slowly, afraid of breaking the contact, she rotated her disembodied "eyes." The door to the bedroom was closed. "I can't tell where she is," Kate whispered.

"That's fine," said Father Mike. "I see her now. Ray?"

"Yes," Ray softly answered.

The priest said, "Tell Sara Dr. Ray will come for her. Tell her she needs to show him how to get there."

"But she can't hear me. She's unconscious."

Father Mike's fingers squeezed hers. "No doubts!"

So Kate relayed the message. The image was turning misty. Just before it faded to nothing, she heard a sound--humming. The tune resolved itself into "The River Is Wide." Sara's voice, Kate realized, humming inside her head!

"I hear her!" she cried. Her eyes snapped open, and the sound stopped. "Oh, no, I've lost it!"

"No, you haven't," said Father Mike, flexing his fingers as if they were cramped. "You can re-establish the link at will, and Ray will use it to track Sara. He'll get her and bring her back here. Your part will be to maintain the contact, and I'll help."

Kate rubbed her eyes. "Will it really be that easy? And then what--take her to a hospital?"

Ray shook his head. "This house is safer--psychically shielded, as we mentioned. Don't worry; she'll be in competent hands. Mike is an M.D., too."

Kate stared at the priest. So many surprises were hitting her tonight that no one thing seemed stranger than another anymore.

"And, no," Father Mike said, "nobody says it will be easy. We can only pray."

Kate hugged herself against a sudden chill. "I don't know if I believe in prayer."

Father Mike didn't deliver even a sentence of the lecture she expected. He just said, "Then Ray and I will pray for you. You keep your disbelief suspended, and we'll take up the slack. Now before we start, we have to make sure we're relaxed and free of distractions."

Why does he keep harping at me to relax? I feel like I'm about to shatter into a million pieces! She found his suggested preparations to be practical and far from her idea of the occult. After she'd used the bathroom and had a drink of ice water, Father Mike insisted she borrow an age-softened gray cardigan. "I'm not chilly," she said.

"You may be, later. A drop in temperature is sometimes associated with psychic activity."

"Sara's bedroom felt freezing for a second, when she--when I opened the door to check on her," Kate recalled.

Father Mike nodded. He'd changed into slacks and a pullover sweater. Carrying Yasmin, the white cat, he directed Kate and Ray back to their seats in the living room. "Once we're firmly linked," said the priest, "Ray will get going."

"But we didn't see where that building was."

"That's exactly why Ray needs our help. It'll be like following a thread through

a maze." He turned to the doctor. "Ready?"

"Anytime you are," said Ray. They briefly clasped hands before taking their seats.

Again Father Mike eased them into calm with his hypnotic litany. He touched the stuffed tiger, clutched in Kate's lap, while with one hand he stroked Yasmin, who lay sprawled across his knees. Kate remembered his offhand remark that animals could be used as psychic amplifiers. The memory gave her a chill, making her glad of the sweater wrapped around her shoulders. The rise and fall of the priest's voice, though, created a pool of serenity that submerged her stray apprehensions.

First from a distance, then closer and clearer, she heard Sara's voice--singing.

"The river is wide, I cannot see, nor do I have light wings to fly."

The priest whispered, "Reach out to Ray--not with your hand, with your mind. Grasp the thread and give it to him."

Behind her closed eyelids, Kate saw her daughter's song as a luminous silver cord trailing into the night. Feeling the warm grip of Ray's fingers, a warmth that penetrated her flesh and sank into her bones, she guided him to the cord. With her eyes still closed, she saw him stand up, walk to the garage, and start his car.

* * * *

Ray forced himself to draw long, deep, cleansing breaths as he pulled out of the garage and turned onto the street. He couldn't allow fear or anger to distract him. Sara's voice entered his mind like a distant, faint echo of a sound. He knew that only Mike's trained powers, lending him strength, maintained the link; Ray knew how easily he could lose the trail if he got distracted.

One distraction he couldn't afford was the memory of Kate's rejection, the pain he'd felt, followed by the relief of her renewed trust. It's too soon to care about her in a personal way. If she knew, she'd reject me all over again. He expelled the inappropriate emotions with a prolonged exhalation.

Following the thread through the nearly deserted streets, he wondered how he would get in and rescue Sara, once he discovered where she was imprisoned. First things first, find her. Good thing Kate didn't know his level of inexperience. She'd suffer more doubt than she already did, if she knew Mike was the only expert in the group.

True, Ray had spent countless hours developing his psychic skills by exercising under Mike's direction. But practice drill was a long way from the real thing.

He carried only one physical weapon, a silver-plated letter opener Mike had given him. Traditional beliefs about using silver against evil creatures had some validity. That metal did have the power to disrupt psychic vibrations.

The song led him through the fog past the borderline depressed areas around the church into a district that hung onto gentility. Mist drifted around apartments probably inhabited by retirees on fixed incomes and young couples watching their pennies; it shrouded the dimly-lit facades of stores where such people wouldn't be afraid to shop, even after dark. Ray followed the thread of Sara's voice to an elderly hotel with a purple awning over the main entrance and grapevines carved in stone embellishing the window ledges. He found a parking space on a dark side street and approached the building on foot.

He didn't want to enter through the lobby and coffee shop. For all he knew, the enemy might have an ordinary lookout posted there, armed with a description of Ray and Kate. He couldn't rule out the possibility of having been followed at some time when he'd been with her. Not tonight, though--he would have felt it.

Circling to the rear of the hotel, he turned down an alley and found a service entrance easily enough. He stepped inside, eased the heavy door shut. It emitted a creak and a pneumatic sigh. He held his breath, feeling his heart pound. Nobody here. Nothing but a concrete stair-well, illuminated by a bare bulb in the ceiling. A door bearing a G for "ground" faced him.

He closed his eyes, groping for the inner song that had almost faded. Sara, I'm here. Hang on, don't let me lose you.

Her song answered: Give me a boat that will carry two, and both shall row, my love and I. The melody seemed to float high above Ray's head.

So it's one of the upper floors. He started up the stairs. When he passed the door marked "1," the temperature abruptly dropped. The staircase felt as cold as a ski slope in January. Reeling from the shock, he leaned against the wall, then instantly jerked his hand away. The plaster felt like ice. He examined his palm, half expecting to see the top layer of skin peeled off. Nothing. Of course not, this is an illusion. If it's the best they can do-- He chopped off the thought, mindful of the hazards of overconfidence. Illusion or not, the unnatural cold felt real. The threadbare sweater borrowed from the priest provided no shield against this chill. Ray wrapped his arms around himself, shivering, as he trudged up the steps.

Sara's voice, though faint, didn't desert him. Maybe Mike could explain how some part of the child's unconscious mind could communicate from the depths of a coma; Ray just accepted the phenomenon and prayed it would continue. Already his fingers and toes grew numb, and the cold stung his nose and earlobes. He dragged his feet as if wading through knee-deep slush. It seemed strange to look down and not see snowdrifts.

At the third-floor landing, a blast of wind lashed his face. The gust carried a stink of decay that made him gag. He doubled over, clutching his stomach and gritting his teeth against the nausea. That won't work either, damn you! On top of the cold and nausea, he felt his throat close. For a minute he had to stagger to the rail and hang on, even though the illusory cold of the metal seared his skin. He gasped and choked, fighting to stay conscious. Over the buzzing in his head, he heard Sara's voice. The song had changed: Found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut just now....

The attacking wave receded. Ray chuckled aloud, knowing his expression probably resembled a gargoyle's grimace more than a smile. He resumed his climb through the turgid cold. He felt he was tunneling through a wall of fog somehow frozen solid.

Finally the icy cloud dissipated. He found himself on the fifth-floor landing. Staring at the door, he faced a spider the size of a mastiff, suspended in a thick web that covered the door like a cocoon.

"Another cheap trick," he said aloud. "Go back to Hell where you came from!" He stepped forward, one hand outstretched brandishing the dagger-shaped, silver-plated letter opener.

When the blade stabbed the spider, the thing burst into a flurry of motion.

Fangs like six-inch hypodermic needles sank into his flesh. His hand burned with a stab of agony that forced a strangled cry from him. He collapsed to his knees.

So it's like the cold. Illusion or not, it can hurt. Still, he had to maintain the faith that it was only a phantom. The pain could do no physical damage unless he cooperated by believing it could. Muttering a prayer, he charged the door and groped for the latch.

He thrust his way through a viscous gel. Strands of sticky webbing festooned his head and shoulders. Blinded, he jerked the door open and staggered through. All abnormal sensations vanished, except the fiery throbbing in his hand. He tucked the weapon into his belt. Opening his eyes, he scanned a commonplace hotel corridor, with dusty green carpet and faded floral wallpaper. He strove to pinpoint which of the silent doors hid his goal. Sara? He heard the song, more feeble and faltering now: Ate it anyway, ate it anyway....He spoke in his mind, trying to reach her with a simple, clear message. Can you show me exactly where you are? Try hard. The longer he stood here, the greater chance of some guest or staff member wandering past and getting curious about him.

A vision popped into his head: A severe-faced, dark-haired woman, a door labeled "517," a hotel bedroom. The scene moved through a connecting door into another room, its bed covered with a white spread, just as Ray had glimpsed in the vision Kate had shared with him and Mike. Headache, thirst, and the sting of a needle, followed by blackness.

When his eyes cleared, the telepathic song had ceased, too. No matter, before breaking contact Sara had conveyed all the information he needed. She must have awakened briefly while being carried in, and the woman had injected her again to subdue her.

Room 517. Ray flexed his fingers to make sure he could use them. The sting was fading. He walked briskly to the proper door as if he belonged there.

Now what? He hadn't the tools to break into a locked hotel room. How about a direct challenge? He could only gamble that the woman was guarding Sara alone, on the assumption that the paranormal defenses would block a rescue attempt. And they would have, if used against a man who came unprepared. Most people would accept the illusions as real and turn back or be disabled.

Ray knocked at 517. No answer. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on reaching into the room. He sensed Sara's comatose presence, plus the mind of a single other person. He knocked again. "I know you're in there. Are you going to let me in, or do you want me to kick up a racket in the hall?"

After a few more seconds of silence, he heard footsteps crossing the floor inside. "Who is it?" A woman's voice.

"That doesn't matter. Let me see Sara."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You must have the wrong room."

"Don't waste my time," Ray said. He kept his voice low, no more eager to attract attention than the enemy was. "I'm willing to settle this between us. If you won't cooperate, I'll yell for the manager and the police, and keep yelling until I wake up the entire hotel. Do you really want that?" He felt confident that his adversary would do anything rather than allow such publicity.

He heard the deadbolt click. "You won't get anywhere that way," said the woman. "With my word against yours, you aren't likely to be able to get my suite searched."

"Doesn't matter, does it? You don't want the attention."

The door inched open. "Who are you?" said the woman. She had a thin, meticulously made-up face, framed by a cap of sleek, black hair streaked with gray. "How did you...?" She pressed her lips together and assumed a calm mask. "I expected the mother. If she comes, I'll consider--"

Ray threw his full weight against the door. It flew open. Taken by surprise, the woman staggered back against a luggage stand. Ray slammed the door behind him and lunged at her. Scrambling to her feet, she swung her hand around in an open-palmed slap at his face. He dodged just enough to catch a glancing blow.

A sheet of flame billowed from floor to ceiling. The heat on his face drove him back. Through the fire he saw the spectral figure of the woman.

Sara's childish voice rang in his head. It's not real, it's pretend. The river is wide, I cannot see...

As her song receded into a tunnel of silence, the fire dwindled and vanished with it. Illusion, is that all they can do? thought Ray. She didn't expect anybody to get this far--and believed anyone who did would be an easy target. The woman's ice-blue eyes widened in astonished fury. She hurtled across the room to the bed and snatched up a large purse. When Ray saw her unzip it and reach inside, he acted without thinking. He grabbed the nearest object, a coat hanging in the closet alcove, and dashed forward, flinging the coat like a net. The garment swirled around the woman's head. She dropped the purse, raising both hands to paw at the cloth. Just as she wiggled free, Ray slammed his fist into her chin.

She slumped backward on the bed but immediately lurched to her feet. Her cool facade disintegrated into manic rage. He caught the hand she was raising to claw at him and hit her again, this time on the side of the head. With a bestial snarl, she writhed in his grip. He rammed his fist into her temple once more. She collapsed onto the rug.

He straightened up, breathing hard. His knuckles felt sore. Dear God, I've never hit a woman in my life! He hastily looked her over. Knocked out, but probably not for long. Retrieving the purse, he found the gun he expected. Wrapping it in a tissue, he dropped it out the window to the sidewalk, fortunately at the back of the hotel.

He rushed into the adjoining room. Sara lay on the double bed, just as she had appeared in the vision. Except for one thing, an elongated, silver-white object draped over the pillow. Ray tiptoed closer and swallowed against a spasm of nausea. The thing looked like a spectral centipede, faintly glowing. It lay across Sara's hair and rested its eyeless head on her brow. Its mandibles chattered continuously. He realized it was nibbling, no, grazing on her eyebrows. When he focused on the thing, he noticed a silver thread tapering from its tail end. The thread snaked down the bedside, across the floor, and into the next room. It dawned on Ray that this tether connected the centipede to Mrs. Martlet and transmitted whatever the creature was draining from Sara. He drew the silver blade from his belt. In a blaze of anger, he shouted a verse of a psalm that leaped into his mind, "The Lord is my light and my salvation," and sliced through the nearest section of the thread. Sparks flashed up the line, and the parasite vanished.

Putting away the letter opener, Ray hurried to Sara and leaned over to check her. Though deeply sedated, she breathed normally. No immediate danger. He gathered her into his arms, wrapping her in a blanket quickly stripped from the bed.

He exited directly to the corridor, rather than passing back through the room where the unconscious woman lay. The idea of tying her up occurred to him, but he decided the less concrete evidence he left, the better. Anyway, he felt an urgency to get Sara out of this place as soon as possible.

He walked to the stairs briskly but didn't run. As soon as he was safely out of the corridor, though, he clattered down the steps as fast as he could without falling. Every second, he expected the paralyzing cold to return, or some creature far more grotesque than the phantom spider. Nothing happened, though. The woman must have generated the defenses herself. If she'd had allies, human

or not, the rescue would have been harder.

She was expecting Kate, Ray reminded himself. They wouldn't have expected Kate to know how to fight defenses like that. Or maybe they meant to test how much power she actually has. I was lucky. If they hadn't underestimated us...

By the time he had Sara strapped into the back seat of his car, he was trembling from exhaustion. He hoped he could find his way back to the rectory, after driving the route in a light trance.

A gentle fingertip brushed his mind. Mike? Ray shook off his confusion and started the motor. Of course he could retrace the route. All the turns were stored in his mind, whether he'd been conscious of them at the time or not. Clammy with sweat, he put the car in gear.

A block away, he felt pressure building outside the windows, like the weight of an imminent thunderstorm. The predawn fog thickened to impenetrability in seconds. Instead of pearly gray like normal fog, it darkened to the shade of soot. Ray slowed the car to a crawl, muttering alternate curses and prayers. That woman must have come to and sent it after us, he conjectured. No more Ms. Nice Guy. He'd have wagered any odds that nobody else on the road could see this fog. He could plow into a building or another car, or even run off a bridge, with no way to prove afterward that he hadn't simply lost his mind.

He considered the alternative, to pull over and either wait for the mist to disappear or get out and walk. In either case, he'd be exposing Sara to whatever agents of the enemy lurked in wait.

Behind him, he heard a faint whimper. Braking, he turned to glance at Sara. Her eyes opened. "Hi, Dr. Ray," she whispered. "Where's the bad lady?"

"She won't bother you anymore." Wish I could believe that myself!

The child's gaze drifted to the windows. "That's not good dark, it's bad dark."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is."

"I don't like it, I want to go home." She sounded, not frightened, but annoyed.

Her fists clenched on top of the blanket. To Ray's astonishment, a luminous halo outlined Sara's body. She cried out, "Go away! Go away right now!"

The wall of fog vanished.

"Sara, what on earth did you do?" He stared at her. Her eyes were shut, as if she'd never awakened.

Good God, Mike said she had power, but I never suspected anything like that!

Heading for the rectory as fast as the speed limit allowed, he reflected, Mike probably didn't, either.

Chapter 6

Emerging from the trance, Kate shook her head and stretched her cramped arms and legs. Her brain reeled. Had she actually shared Ray's viewpoint while he found Sara and brought her back? Kate's vision of events had come in disconnected flashes, some of which she would prefer to dismiss as hallucinations. That dense, smoky fog, for instance, or the titanic spider.

"Father Mike, did it really happen? Is Ray on his way here with Sara?"

The priest removed the cat from his lap and stood up to stretch. "Why don't you just call me Mike? Ray should be pulling into the garage any minute now. How do you feel?"

"Weird." She rubbed her eyes. "Hollow inside."

"Literally, I'll bet. I'll whip up some breakfast as soon as your daughter's tucked into bed."

"I couldn't eat--" Stopping to think, she realized how empty her stomach was.

"Breakfast in the middle of the night?"

"Not exactly that anymore."

Kate checked her watch. After four-thirty! Then the sound of the kitchen door and a man's footsteps caught her ear. She jumped up from the chair and ran into the hall. "Ray?"

"Right here."

She ran to meet him as he came through the dining room, carrying Sara. Tears blurred Kate's eyes. Wrapping her arms around Sara and Ray together, she pressed her cheek against Sara's. The skin felt clammy. "How is she? Why isn't she awake yet?"

"She's been deeply sedated," Ray said. "It should wear off in a couple of hours.

For the best, actually. She won't remember much of anything."

Mike appeared beside them and palmed Sara's forehead. "Come on, we'll put her in one of the bedrooms on this floor."

"Can't you bring her out of it?" said Kate. She held onto Sara's limp hand while walking alongside Ray.

"Better to let her regain consciousness naturally," he said.

"I agree," said Mike. He led the way to a small guest room with a four-poster bed and matching bureau and wardrobe in dark wood. With Ray's help, Kate tucked Sara's inert body between the fresh-scented sheets. Mike placed Tigger next to the pillow. Kate gave him a tearful smile; she hadn't noticed he was carrying the toy.

For a second she was afraid to leave the room, remembering what had happened the last time she left Sara asleep. "Are you sure it's safe here?"

"Absolutely," Mike said. "If hostile forces 'look' in this direction, they find only a blank space. Less than that--no gap to draw attention; they just don't see this place at all."

Together, he and Ray maneuvered her into the hall, leaving the bedroom door ajar. "But how?" she said.

"One of many things you'll need to learn," said Mike. "To put it simply, we performed a ritual to shield the house, church, and grounds. Every time people get together here the way we did tonight, the barrier is strengthened."

"Not that an ordinary, mundane search can be ruled out," Ray said. By now they'd reached the kitchen. He helped Kate to a chair at the circular table. "But I promise you I wasn't followed tonight. Think of this as a fortress."

Kate bowed her head on her hands. "This is all too much for me." A wave of faintness swamped her.

Mike's hand pressed the back of her neck. "Rest your head on the table. You'll be okay."

When she straightened up, Ray handed her a glass of water. "Bet you need something to eat."

"Exactly what I was saying a few minutes ago." Mike started transferring eggs, butter, and milk from refrigerator to counter. "Working with extrasensory powers is still work. We need to refuel. How do you feel about French toast?"

"Fine." The swing from occult battle to breakfast left Kate bewildered. She tried to distract herself by helping with the meal, but Mike and Ray made her stay put. She gazed up at Ray when he paused to take the empty water glass from her. "I haven't thanked you yet. I can't bear to think about what would've happened if you hadn't been here."

"No thanks needed. I couldn't let anything hurt either of you." He touched the back of her hand in a brief, light caress that sent warmth radiating up her arm.

"I thought I saw you talking to Sara in the car. She gave off this--glow--and the fog disappeared."

"That's what I saw, too," he said, spooning butter into a frying pan. "We tried to tell you she had power. But I had no idea--did you, Mike?"

The priest looked up from whipping eggs. "No, I didn't expect anything like that. Most likely, she did it by instinct and won't remember it when she wakes up."

"Good!" Kate said. "I don't want her to know any more about all this than she has to. I want her to live a normal life." If she can. If we can.

Mike echoed her fears. "Power like hers acts as a magnet. So does yours. Your talent is obvious from the way you connected with Sara and enabled Ray to reach her."

Kate shook her head in adamant rejection. "You did that. You put me into a trance and carried me along. I couldn't have done anything like that on my own."

Mike gave her a long, steady look. "Please don't keep evading the truth. Power without training could be dangerous."

Pouring Kate a mug of coffee, Ray said, "This is no time to badger her about it. Let her make up her mind after she's had some rest and time to think."

Kate nodded her thanks to him. She kept her true thoughts to herself: My mind is made up. I don't want another thing to do with this weirdness.

After dishing up the food, Mike sat down with them and said grace. Kate felt a little self-conscious, after she'd told him she didn't believe in prayer, but he made the small ritual seem natural and matter-of-fact.

Having devoured a stack of French toast drenched in maple syrup, which she enjoyed more than she'd expected, she let Mike show her to the bedroom next to Sara's. After washing and changing, Kate checked on Sara one last time. At Kate's light touch, the child stirred and murmured in her sleep. Kate allowed herself to lie down and yield to her own exhaustion.

* * * *

Ray gazed across the kitchen table at Mike. Though bleary-eyed with fatigue, Ray suspected he wouldn't be able to sleep. Might as well dose himself with caffeine and stay available in case Sara woke up.

"Anything you want to tell me about?" Mike asked.

"I can understand why Kate doesn't want to believe half of what happened tonight. Good Lord, I went through it firsthand, and I'm not sure I believe it."

He rubbed his forehead, where a dull ache was taking root. "Hearing and reading about stuff like that is one thing, but I never expected to face it myself."

"Remember, I only got it secondhand," Mike said. He got up to clear the last of the dishes and load the dishwasher. "I caught images of cold from your mind, plus something that looked like a giant spider. In the car, on the way home, all that was pretty vague."

Ray told him in more detail about the struggle to climb the hotel stairs and

then about the wall of fog and how Sara had apparently dispersed it.

"Yes, that's what I thought I picked up from you," said Mike, "and Kate saw part of it, too. You did very well."

"For my first time?" Ray gave a weak chuckle. "Wish it could be the last, but they won't give up, will they?"

Since the question didn't need an answer, Mike didn't answer it. Instead, he said, "I worry about Kate, so resistant to the idea of learning about her talent. Both of them are so vulnerable, and we can't count on Sara bursting out with a spontaneous display of power every time."

Ray turned in his chair. "What are you planning? What are you going to suggest Kate should do?"

"Assuming she'll listen?" Mike dried his hands on the dishtowel. "Besides getting trained, I think she ought to move out of that apartment. Preferably somewhere heavily guarded."

"She won't go for that idea at all," Ray said. "God, I hate to think of them in danger. I'm crazy about that kid already."

"And her mother?" Mike sat down opposite Ray.

Evading the priest's steady gaze, Ray said, "It's too soon to think about that."

"When did that ever stop a man from thinking?" He reached over to pat Ray on the shoulder. "You're afraid of rushing her, aren't you?"

"Of course." Ray heaved a long sigh. "She only half trusts us, even now, and I don't think she's gotten over her husband yet. If I upset her, I could drive her to some rash move and get them into worse trouble. That's what I'm afraid of."

He thought of Kate as he'd seen her a few minutes ago when he'd checked on the guests. She slept with a small bedside lamp burning, like the one in Sara's room. He'd felt like a voyeur, not a doctor, surveying Kate's pale, exhausted face, disheveled hair spread over the pillow, and the curve of her breasts only half covered by the sheet. It has to be a side effect of the extreme circumstances. Nobody falls in love this quickly. But he knew he was lying to himself.

* * * *

For a minute after waking, Kate was disoriented. The high bed she lay on, the green wallpaper, and the lace curtains at the window meant nothing to her. Her pulse raced in her throat. Then she remembered that she'd fallen asleep in the rectory of St. Augustine's.

A knock sounded at her half-open bedroom door. She replied with an inarticulate murmur. Ray stepped in, holding Sara's hand.

At once Sara let go and skipped into the room. "Mommy, you're awake!" She plopped onto the bed and hugged Kate.

After an interval of pure sensation, savoring the warmth of the little body in her arms, Kate said, "How do you feel, sweetheart?"

"Okay. Let's eat breakfast. I've been waiting for you to wake up. Dr. Ray said it was time."

Ray, leaning in the doorway with his arms folded, smiled at Kate. "Guess that settles it. You have your marching orders."

Breakfast? Didn't we have that last night? Listening to the growl of her stomach, Kate decided she wouldn't refuse brunch. Sara waited in the bedroom while Kate took her overnight bag into the bathroom to dress. Once she'd cleared her brain with a splash of cool water, Kate registered the fact that Sara was dressed in the shorts and shirt hastily packed the night before. Someone must

have quietly raided the tote bag while Kate slept. Was I that far out of it?
After dressing, she asked the question whose answer she dreaded: "Munchkin, do you remember anything about last night?"
Kneeling on the bed, Sara frowned but didn't look alarmed. "I woke up, and a lady was in my room. A bad lady. I tried to call you, and she squeezed my mouth and grabbed my arm and stuck me with a needle. I guess I went back to sleep."
Kate struggled to keep her voice even. "Then what?"
"I dreamed you were talking to me, and then Dr. Ray was looking for me. I dreamed the dark tried to get us, but I made it go away." Her brow wrinkled again. "I guess it was a dream."
"And that's all?"
"Until I woke up. Dr. Ray was there, and so was Tigger. Dr. Ray saved me."
A lump swelled in Kate's throat. "Yes, he did."
Sara tugged her hand. "Let's go eat."
Kate's nerves went lax with relief that the child remembered so little.
Trotting down the hall, Sara said, "This is Father Mike's house. Did you know he has a kitty?"
"Yes. So you met Father Mike?"
Sara nodded. "I like him. He's a good man. His light is the right color."
She made this remark as they entered the dining room, where Mike worked on the thousand-piece puzzle still spread out on the formal drop-leaf table. "His what?" said Kate. "Uh, good morning, and thanks for taking care of her--us."
"You know," Sara said, "that pink light all around him."
Mike, wearing black trousers and shirt punctuated by the white of a clerical collar, greeted them with a nod. At Sara's remark, he raised his eyebrows in what appeared to be mild surprise. "She can see auras. Interesting."
Kate leaned over the table and nervously fiddled with a couple of brownish puzzle pieces. "Aura? I thought that was more Age of Aquarius mumbo-jumbo."
"It's not an invention of modern faddists, you know," said Mike. "The concept of the human aura has been commonplace in the Orient for millennia."
Kate remembered a few casual remarks from her daughter, to which she'd paid no attention at the time. "Sara, can you really see a--a glow around Father Mike?"
Sara tried to push two green pieces together. "Sure. Everybody has one. They come in different colors. Can't you see them?"
"No, and neither can most other people. You're special." Kate reminded herself not to transmit her own fears by giving Sara a negative view of this talent. I don't want her to feel like a freak. The moment the thought entered her head, Kate wondered whether she was in danger of considering Sara that way herself.
"Oh!" Sara gazed into the distance, obviously struck by this new concept.
"Everybody doesn't see the same things?"
"No, everybody sees the world a little different." There, that should be a safe enough statement. Kate thought she saw a gleam of approval in Mike's eyes.
The priest stood up. "How about some breakfast, or brunch as the case may be?"
At the kitchen table, Kate and Sara dug into toast and sausages while Mike and Ray scrambled eggs. Mike allowed Sara to feed Yasmin, delicately scooping half a can of cat food into the plastic dish labeled "Kitty." "Mommy, when can we get a kitty?"
"Someday, if we move out of the apartment into a house." Kate wondered again whether returning to the apartment would be safe. Yet how could she let them win by disrupting her whole life? With a trace of dismay, she contemplated the eggs, juice, coffee, and fresh fruit piled in front of her. When she started eating,

though, she found she had no trouble consuming it all. If I ate many meals here, I'd swell into a blimp. As she helped clear the table, a thought struck her. "Do you have an assistant priest, or what? Shouldn't you be in church on Sunday morning? I hate to think we've destroyed your normal schedule."

Mike laughed. "It's not morning anymore. The services ended before Sara woke up. It's after twelve."

For the first time, Kate glanced at the clock on the stove. "Good grief, it is! We should be getting home."

Mike's smile disappeared. "I wanted to talk to you about that. Sara, would you like to watch some cartoons? And I have a few puzzles somebody donated for the church nursery."

Once Sara was settled with a stack of puzzle boxes in the TV room, which turned out to be a former bedroom at the rear of the house, Mike invited Kate and Ray into the dining room for what he referred to as a "conference." He began diffidently, "I don't think you should go home."

"I agree," said Ray. "We talked about it this morning."

Kate glared at both of them. "So I'm outvoted, and that closes the matter?"

Ray shifted his eyes from hers. "We're not trying to tell you what to do, but..."

"You most certainly are!"

"Maybe a little," said Mike, "only because we're worried."

"Well, what do you think I am? It's my daughter who--" She swallowed the threat of tears. No more hysterics! Keep cool and use your head, woman. "All right, I'm convinced there's real danger. But where would you two masterminds suggest we go, if not home?"

"You do have a possible retreat," Ray said. "Your house in the mountains. And you did mention that your husband left some savings. Surely you could take a leave of absence from work, long enough for the enemy to get discouraged."

Kate decided this wasn't the time to ask whether those people would ever give up. She had plenty of other objections. "It's a small office; I can't just take off. And I'm not sure I'd want to live in Ardath. Not even sure why I've hung onto the cabin." She spoke the last sentence in an abstracted murmur, more to herself than to the men.

"Ardath, California?" Mike's ears figuratively perked up. "That's where Sara was born? I don't suppose there could be more than one--does it have a store owned by Sam and Jane Sutton?"

"Why, yes. You know them?"

"They're former San Franciscans--good people. From what I hear, the town is probably safe. Wouldn't be hard to make it completely safe."

"I'm not ready to move back. For one thing, I can't do much work for Mr. Boyle at long distance, and I won't risk draining our savings." Realistically, she knew that rationale was only half her motive. She didn't stand in imminent danger of destitution. What am I afraid of? Do I think the place is haunted?

Mike inserted a cluster of puzzle pieces into a gap at his elbow. "You and Sara could spend a few weeks here. Plenty of room."

Kate stared at him. Conventional protests about imposing didn't seem adequate to an invitation like that.

Ray brightened up. "Excellent idea. Temporarily, just until the heat's off, so to speak. And I could serve as a courier, bring you whatever work your boss wants done."

She turned on him. "There you go again, trying to plan my life! What makes you

think I want to hide out like a criminal? What do you think that kind of life would do to a four-year-old girl?"

"Damn it to hell, Kate," Ray burst out, "why do you have to be so damn stubborn? We're trying to protect you!" Both Kate and Mike stared at him, the priest with an expression of mild amusement. Ray gave them a rueful look. "Sorry. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to entertain Sara for a while." He added with a flicker of irritation as he left the room, "Mike, maybe you'll have better luck talking sense into her without me."

Kate bowed her head and clutched her temples with both hands. "I know you mean well. And I'm convinced Sara--not me, but Sara--has some kind of power. But I'm not ready to abandon our home and make her live like somebody in, I don't know, the paranormal witness protection program!"

Mike smiled but instantly became serious again. "I can understand that. Talent like hers, though--and yours, if you let it blossom--acts like a beacon. Once you've attracted the attention of those from Outside, they home in on you. They behave like moths to a flame, only far more deadly. I can't emphasize strongly enough, this is war."

"But I didn't do anything to attract their attention!" She caught her voice rising to a shout and forced herself to tone it down. "We didn't volunteer for this war; we're being drafted."

Mike shook his head. "I'm sorry to say you've been on active duty for years without knowing it."

She knotted her fingers in front of her on the polished table top. "I can't accept that. Look, no offense, but how do I know most of this isn't your fault? I do trust you now; I know you and Ray are trying to help. But what if the reason they started to notice me is that I've been in contact with you? Maybe you two are what's attracting their attention."

He sat back in his chair and said quietly, "I can't disprove that theory. I can only restate my conviction that they targeted you as far back as Sara's birth."

"If I trust my own theory," said Kate, "the best thing for me to do would be to take Sara home and stay away from this place from now on. Not that I don't appreciate all your help. But I have to think of her safety."

Mike sighed. "Of course I wouldn't try to force you into staying here. I'd feel better, though, if you'd agree to get some training so you can protect her better."

"I don't want training! I want to be left alone!"

He gazed into a far corner of the room for a minute before speaking. "Yes, I know how you feel."

"How could you? You volunteered! I'll bet you enjoy the challenge or something."

"No, I'd like nothing better than to lead a normal life." He drifted into silence again. A moment later he said, "I didn't volunteer. All this was forced on me, too. I'll tell you about it, if you want to listen."

She decided she owed him that much courtesy. "Go ahead."

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, running his fingers through his bird's-nest of white hair. "Did Ray mention that I was a doctor before I entered the priesthood?"

"Yeah."

"The Navy paid my way through med school, and while I served out my obligation, my wife trained to become a medical secretary." Mike leaned on the table, fiddling with puzzle pieces. "After I got out of the service, I practiced for a

few years, with Terri on my office staff. Barely got the money we borrowed for buying into the practice paid off, when I decided I'd picked the wrong profession." He gave a dry laugh.

"What did your wife think when you told her you wanted to become a priest?"

"Not a matter of wanting--I ignored the sense of vocation as long as I could.

Terri supported me all the way, God bless her." His voice trailed off. He blinked a couple of times and then continued. "She got a job in a clinic, while I knocked myself out at the seminary--in Tennessee it was--on a scholarship. No kids. We tried, but we never found out what was wrong. This was around 1950, and infertility wasn't the advanced specialty it is today."

When his pause stretched into another silence, Kate said, "What does this have to do with--with the enemy?"

"Nothing directly. Just background. However, in seminary I wrote a paper on cults, with special emphasis on a few obscure ones headquartered in New England, cloaking worship of the Ancient Ones from Outside in pseudo-scientific terminology. At the time I thought it was pseudo, anyway. God, if I'd just left it alone." He rubbed his eyes behind the bifocals. "One thing you caught onto, which is absolutely right. Attracting their attention puts one in danger. I got interested in the subject, pursued the research after finishing my term paper, collected photocopies of various esoteric texts. Even interviewed some former cult members. Then I put the material away and more or less forgot about it. But they didn't forget me."

"Are you saying they tracked you down and persecuted you just for showing a little curiosity?" Kate's skepticism about the whole background of this situation resurfaced. While she couldn't deny that something bizarre had entered her life, did Mike's theory about its source have to be correct?

"Not exactly. But later, when they wanted an instrument for a scheme of theirs--but I'm getting ahead of myself. After ordination, I served as assistant in a San Jose parish. Then I was called here as assistant to the old rector, Father Ryerson. When he retired, I took over. Terri didn't have a job at that point. In those days, a clergyman's wife was expected to act as unpaid staff, more or less. A couple of years into my tenure at St. Augustine's, a great-aunt of hers in New England died. The lawyer sent Terri a pendant supposedly left to her in the will. A copper medallion inscribed with occult symbols. I believe, after what happened, that the thing--the amulet--had never belonged to Terri's aunt at all. I think the enemy used the aunt's death as a pretext to get the artifact into Terri's hands, as a link through which they could attack her."

"All this 'they' sounds so paranoid. I'm sorry, even after what's happened, I have trouble accepting this stuff."

"I understand. Don't you suppose I considered every other possible theory, before accepting that the supernatural had invaded our lives?" His eyes flashed with momentary irritation. "As for why they picked Terri instead of any other woman, I believe it's simply because I attracted their attention. I'll carry that guilt to the grave." He smiled self-consciously. "A little too late for breast-beating now."

"She developed an immediate obsession with the pendant. I recognized the symbols on it as connected with the Ancient Ones--specifically a deity associated with orgiastic rites, commonly represented as a goat--but at first I didn't think much of it. I tried to convince myself that Terri's interest in the thing was just something to occupy her mind. She was too intelligent not to get restless in the role of supportive helpmeet in the background. She insisted on wearing

the necklace every day. Then one night--" He paused as if choking on the words. "She attacked me." He spoke in a strangled whisper. "I couldn't get through to her. Her mind, her self was gone. I had to tie her down until the ambulance arrived."

Kate looked down at her hands. She couldn't think of anything adequate to say. Mike continued in a steadier tone, "I thought of possession. She raved in a language spoken only in the rituals of the cult. She claimed to be the entity pictured on the amulet. Of course, as a physician, I should have exhausted all natural causes first. She could have picked up everything from the materials I'd collected. But that theory would mean she'd suddenly gone psychotic, when she'd never shown the slightest signs of mental imbalance. Possession seemed more plausible than spontaneous madness."

"What, like in that movie *The Exorcist*?" A boyfriend had taken Kate to see it back when it was first released, and she'd wished she hadn't. The film was a far cry from the tame black-and-white monster movies of the thirties she'd watched on Shock Theater as a kid.

"Something like that, but I knew perfectly well that if I tried to tell my bishop, I'd get nowhere. Just end up being branded as crazy myself. I tried an informal exorcism on my own. I figured that if her own mind had created this phenomenon, confronting her with symbols she believed in might enable her to shake off the delusion. And if it were real--" He stared into a corner of the room for a moment. "I used a cross I'd given her, which held memories of our love. It worked--I broke through to Terri's true self, and she cast out whatever was enslaving her."

"Do you believe she was actually possessed by some entity from another dimension?" Though Kate recognized the depth of his anguish, her skepticism about his viewpoint was building again.

"To this day, I don't know. However, I am sure what happened to her wasn't natural. Either that being took literal possession of her body, caging her in a small, dark corner of her mind, or through the amulet they induced the delusion of possession."

"But you did manage to cure her. Then what happened?"

Mike sighed. "I thought everything would be fine. She was weak and subdued, she needed time to recover, but she seemed like her old self. Then, a few weeks later, she told me she was pregnant."

"You wanted a baby, didn't you?"

He nodded. "She was in despair over it, though. She insisted it wasn't ours--that something from Outside had spawned in her. Remember, this was before *Roe v. Wade*. Terri couldn't just walk into a clinic and get an abortion. She begged me to do it for her. I couldn't bring myself to agree." He shook his head. "Suppose it really were ours?" He finished in a flat, bleak tone, "She tried to abort herself. She died."

Kate reached across to squeeze his hand. Alongside her pity for him, she felt renewed fear. She visualized a swamp stretching before her, carpeted with treacherous ooze and riddled with bottomless pits into which she and Sara might fall without warning. She had to break away from these people, however well-meaning.

After a minute of silence, Mike said in his normal voice, "Terri mentioned one more thing when she was trying to persuade me to end the pregnancy. She said that by contact with--them--she had tuned in to their motives. She claimed they targeted us because I was destined to become one of their active opponents."

Well, it turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thanks to what they'd done to Terri, my casual interest in their cult changed to a lifetime preoccupation."

"And all because you attracted their attention?" Kate withdrew her hand and stood up. "Can't you see why I don't want to do the same? Maybe it's not too late to stop the process. I really appreciate all your help, and I'll always be grateful for the way you and Ray saved Sara, but I have to get out of here. I have to keep her from any contact with--all this."

"I understand how you feel," he said again. "But I have a strong intuition that it probably is too late. My destined mission, the thing they were trying to block when they invaded my life over twenty years ago, is to protect and train you. You, Sara, and your future child. That's why I was tuned in, as it were, able to sense your danger and send Ray to you."

What future child? I don't have any plans to marry again, and I can't imagine wanting to! "That's what you believe, and I respect it. But I can't accept it for myself. I refuse to be drafted, much less allow my daughter to be."

She marched into the TV room, where Ray and Sara were playing checkers on the rug in front of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. "Sara, say goodbye and help me get your things together. We have to go home now."

Sara gazed wistfully at her, then at Ray. "Can't we finish the game?"

"Not today, we have a lot to do at home. Ray, thanks again for all your help, but she needs to be in her own house now. Me, too," she added wearily. For the first time in hours, she remembered the damaged bedroom window. If she reported it to the manager, he would surely call the police, and how could she explain her failure to notify them at the time of the break-in? She reached for Sara's hand.

The girl reluctantly stood up. Taking baby steps, she glanced back at Ray, who followed them down the hall. When Sara was occupied with stuffing her extra clothes and Tigger into the tote bag, Ray asked Kate, "Is this wise? I wish you'd consider staying at least a few days."

"I've been through all that with Mike. We're going back to our apartment. Please don't make it worse." Her head ached from unshed tears pressing at the back of her eyes.

After packing her own few things, Kate collected Sara and nudged her toward the garage. The anxiety on Mike's face didn't help Kate's mood. He hugged Sara and gave Kate, too, an unexpected hug. Sara held up her arms to Ray, who also embraced her, but he offered Kate only a handshake. "May I call you?" he said as he held the car door for Sara.

"Sure," Kate said. "That would be nice."

Sara looked up at him through the window. "Will you come over and visit me again?"

Ray locked eyes with Kate, about to get into the driver's seat. "Depends what your mom says."

"Maybe," said Kate. "When things get back to normal." She kept her own fear blanketed under layers of control. The thought of facing the outside world after what had happened chilled her to the core. Yet she couldn't crawl into a hole, no matter how affectionately prepared.

Double-checking the car's locks, she backed onto the street. Everything looked ordinary.

Sara didn't speak for a couple of miles. When she did, the remark had nothing to do with the bizarre events of the weekend. "I'm hungry again. Can I--may I have

a snack? Maybe french fries? A chocolate shake?"

All this uproar is going to turn her into a junk food junkie. "Sure, why not? Maybe even both." She recalled a fast food restaurant on their homeward route. A few minutes later she pulled in and stopped under the giant hamburger. Sara perked up as they got out of the car. The treat of burgers and fries didn't come her way often.

Kate held Sara's hand while crossing the parking lot. The child didn't protest as she normally might have. Inside, only two people waited in line, with a few more scattered among the bright molded plastic tables. After Kate placed the order, Sara tugged her arm. "Look, there's a playground. May I go on the slide?"

Kate glanced through the plate glass at the cartoon faces on the playground equipment. "Not this time. I want you to stay next to me." She inwardly chided herself for nourishing Sara's probable anxiety. Well, I'm anxious myself--heck, I'm scared. She wouldn't feel safe until she had Sara sheltered behind the locked doors of their apartment. Idiot, you keep forgetting the apartment is where it happened! Still, she wouldn't let them, whoever they really were, drive her out of her home.

Sara clutched her fingers again. "Mommy," she whispered, "somebody's coming." "What do you mean?" Kate surveyed the restaurant. Two teenage girls munched burgers at a table against the far wall. A black woman with a baby in a high chair and a little girl about Sara's age wearing corn-rowed braids sat near the exit. A young man in cutoffs with a blond ponytail was just walking out. Right after the door swung behind him, a burly man with crew cut brown hair and a slight paunch walked in.

"That man," Sara whispered. Her eyes grew wide with fear.

"Don't stare," Kate murmured back. She felt her face redden with embarrassment. The man didn't look frightening. Apparently in his thirties, he wore jeans, a plaid shirt, and a denim jacket. His eyes roamed around the room with a drift, a lost expression.

Abruptly Kate felt what Sara was trying to say. A dank fog, emitting an odor like a stagnant pond, hung around the man. The vision, thank God, wasn't as terrible as her vision the night of the accident. She didn't confront a blackness that blotted out normal sight. She could still see the man behind the fog, as his right hand crossed in front of him to grope for something under his jacket. He turned away from the counter to scan the tables and drew a handgun out of his belt.

The gun looked immense to Kate. For a second she stood paralyzed, staring at it. Then the first shot shattered the air.

She jerked Sara sideways and rolled to the floor. Her ears buzzing, she crawled crab-wise toward the nearest booth, dragging Sara by one arm. Sara scooted along on her belly until they were both crouching under the table.

Another shot assaulted Kate's ears. Behind the continuous buzz, she heard a baby's wail. She poked her head up between table and bench high enough to see the black woman slumped in her chair, one side of her head transformed into a red ruin. The little girl lay across the table, a spreading puddle of red under her chest. The man with the gun gyrated in the center of the room, his weapon tracing wild arcs in the air. He fired again, splitting the wall next to one of the teenage girls. Both of them sprang up, shrieking. One girl slipped, fell, and banged her head on a table. The gunman let off a shot at her companion, whose shoulder exploded in a fountain of crimson. Kate heard shouts and screams

from behind the counter. At that moment the man whirled in her direction. With her stomach churning, she ducked under the table and wrapped her arms around Sara.

The little girl's body shook. Kate felt the pounding of her own heart and became aware that her teeth were chattering. Sara whispered, "Mommy, we have to hide." Another shot. Kate clenched her jaws to still the tremors, then said, "Sweetheart, we're hiding the best we can."

"No, we can hide better." Sara's voice was ghostly-thin, barely audible. "Help me hide us."

Kate inhaled the acrid smoke in the air. She was about to voice some impatient dismissal of Sara's demand, when she felt a warm radiance, like the glow from an open fire, emanating from her daughter's body. Focusing her eyes on Sara, her head spinning with the shock and the noise, Kate was numb to the new shock of seeing a white light around Sara's body, a light that pulsed in rhythm with the child's breath.

Another shot. Kate heard a sickening, choked gurgle from somewhere behind her. She clutched Sara so hard her hands ached, pouring her strength into that white radiance the child generated. The effort produced a sensation similar to, though less intense than, the strain of birth.

The pearly aura spread to encircle her as well as Sara. The chaos in the room receded until the screaming and the gunfire were barely audible. Kate and Sara knelt inside a bubble that screened out sounds, as well as the stench of gunpowder mingled with frying oil.

"Hurry," Sara whispered, "before it goes away." She scrambled to her feet. Kate followed, distantly aware of bumping her knee against the edge of the bench. She let Sara guide her to the nearest door. The gunman's form rippled as if seen through distorting glass. His head turned their way, but his gaze swept past them. He can't see us, Kate thought. Somehow we've become invisible.

She and Sara scuttled out the door to the parking lot. Kate shoved Sara into the front seat of the car, slammed the door, and dashed around to the driver's side.

When their hands unclasped, the bubble burst with a pop like the change of air pressure at high altitude. Over the continued ringing in her ears, Kate heard the keening of sirens. She gunned the engine. Just as she swung around and accelerated onto the street, the first police car careened around the corner.

The traffic light at the intersection switched to green just as she reached it.

For reasons she didn't stop to analyze, she whispered a prayer of thanks that she'd gotten clear of the restaurant before rescue vehicles blocked the area.

Sara bounced in her corner, clinging to the armrest. "Seat belt," Kate said. Her voice sounded hoarse. "Put on your belt." At the next stoplight, she paused to fasten her own.

"Where are we going?" Sara sounded flattened, nearly exhausted.

The answer fell from Kate's lips before her mind analyzed it. "Back to Father Mike's, I guess."

Her muscles quivered as she automatically retraced the path she'd driven a few minutes before. Her pulse still pounded in her head. He was right, there's danger out here. We can't go home. She didn't stop to consider the illogic of connecting the random shooting with the priest's cryptic enemy. How did we escape? That was another question she didn't want to consider, but it flooded her mind, as if the dam of her stubborn rationalism had burst. What in God's name did we just do?

Chapter 7

Kate was still trembling when she braked in the parking lot of St. Augustine's. A second later, the garage door slid up. By the time Kate drove inside and shut off the motor, Ray was standing beside her door. She unlocked it and practically tumbled into his arms.

"I felt something was wrong. Thank God you made it back here--thank God!" His voice sounded choked with suppressed tears.

Momentarily she buried her face in the clean smell of his cotton shirt and pine-scented aftershave. Then she recollected herself and pulled away. Then why didn't you come charging in to rescue us? she thought with irrational anger. Of course, even if he were Superman, the battle would have been over before he got there. "Why do you have these feelings about me?" she asked instead.

"Maybe because when I called you back at the hospital, it formed a bond between us." He walked around to help Sara out of the car.

The child flung her arms around his waist. "Dr. Ray, a man tried to shoot us!" Kate noticed a muscle in Ray's jaw twitching. He said very quietly, "Come inside and tell Father Mike about it."

The priest was already standing in the kitchen doorway. Once seated at the table inside, Kate had a vague awareness of Ray pouring Sara a cup of juice, then leading her from the room. A glass of ice water appeared in front of Kate, who automatically closed her fingers around it and drank from it.

Her head had stopped whirling by the time Ray reappeared. "Sara's resting in the bedroom with Tigger and a stack of old Wee Wisdom magazines. Sometimes your pack-rat habits come in handy, Mike."

Mike summoned up a weak smile. "Not guilty. It was the Sunday school committee's idea to hang onto all those books and toys. Not my fault they're running out of storage space in the church itself. Lucky we haven't given the stuff to the battered women's shelter yet, the way we've been considering." He opened a cabinet above the refrigerator. "I don't think it's too early for a brandy, in the circumstances." He poured a shot for each of them. "Doctor's orders," he told Kate. "Now, what happened?"

Kate shook her head. "I feel like Sisyphus in the Greek underworld--no matter how hard I try, here I am back where I started."

Mike chuckled. "I hope this house isn't quite Hades."

She felt her face grow warm. "Sorry, of course I don't mean that. It's just so horrible to think of some unseen power pushing me around." She told the two men about the shooting. "I probably panicked even worse than the situation justified. I felt the attack was meant for us, but it couldn't be, could it?"

"It could." Mike's mouth was set in a grim line. "Not to say it actually was. We have no evidence either way. It would be a peculiar coincidence, though."

Ray popped out of the room, returning a second later with a portable radio. He turned it on and scanned the channels.

Kate felt hysteria rising in her throat and forcibly choked it down. "If these people or the creatures controlling them are that powerful, what's the use of

fighting? Are you saying they know where I am every minute? Or they know where I'll be in the future before I know, myself?

"Oh, no, I don't think matters are as bad as all that," Mike said. "Most likely, they were randomly searching for you, and when you left the shielded area around the church, they picked you up. When you entered the restaurant, they seized upon the nearest vulnerable person in the area and sent him after you. That's assuming the enemy had anything at all to do with the incident. Coincidences do sometimes happen, after all." He held up a hand for silence.

A male voice on the radio was saying, "... in a fast food restaurant downtown on..." Static. Ray fine-tuned the channel knob, and the announcer became clear: "Police have cordoned off the entire block, and paramedics are on the scene. The suspect is being brought out at this moment. According to our best information, the suspect shot himself and is alive but in critical condition. The number of dead and wounded has not been released. We'll interrupt our regular programming with further information as it becomes available." Ray switched off the radio.

Kate gulped. "Thanks. I don't think I'm up to moment-by-moment bulletins." She sipped the brandy, hoping its burn would soothe her queasy stomach. "If it was directed at us, then I'm responsible for those people's deaths."

"You certainly are not!" Ray's voice simmered with suppressed anger. "The people who chose to serve chaos and strike at you are responsible!"

"If the whole episode wasn't simply random," Mike reminded them again. "If the gunman recovers enough to talk, we may find out. Meanwhile, Kate, what do you plan to do?"

That hateful sensation of helplessness washed over her again. For a few seconds she felt as if she were drowning. "If there's any chance someone's out to get us, I can't risk Sara's life again. Does that invitation still stand, Mike?"

He squeezed her hand. "Of course. Stay as long as you need to. Ray will pick up clothes, toys, books, whatever you need."

"Also, I'll arrange to have that broken window in Sara's bedroom fixed. You probably don't want your landlord to know about it."

"That's right." Kate had forgotten this minor worry, which had nagged at her less than an hour ago. "When will it be safe to go home? We can't hide out forever! What about my job?"

Mike looked more distressed than before. "An idea did occur to me, a temporary measure that might deflect the enemy from your trail. I have friends at the newspaper. When the names of the dead are released, I could arrange for yours and Sara's to be on the list."

"What!" Kate shivered with revulsion.

"I know it sounds gruesome," said the priest, "but if they believe it, they might relax their surveillance, and you could resume your normal life."

"And if they don't? What do I do, spend the rest of my life holed up here? What about kindergarten for Sara in the fall? What about my friends who'll think I'm dead? What about my boss? Are you planning on our changing our names like I said before, the paranormal witness protection program?"

Ray patted her shoulder, drawing back when she shrugged him off. "It sounds like a good idea to me, too. As Mike says, it'll probably be a short-term thing. At least think about it."

Kate's head drooped, her hands covering her eyes. "And how would I explain it to Sara? It's bad enough that she had to see all that. She knew that man was dangerous even before he pulled out the gun. I saw a kind of murky cloud around him, but I didn't know what it meant."

Mike stared at her. "Cloud? Like a patch of darkness?"

"Not as awful as what I saw at the cocktail party, but it did remind me of that."

"The similarity suggests the man was possessed. All the more reason to keep you out of sight for a while."

"What Sara did--she not only warned me, she somehow hid us. Or I thought she did. It's turning foggy already. I can't believe it happened the way I thought it did."

"Tell us again," Mike said.

"It felt like she made a bubble around us, a shield so nobody could see or hear us. We walked right out as if we were invisible." Kate raked her fingers through her hair. "That couldn't have been real, could it?"

"It must have been," said Mike. "You're here, aren't you? And you mustn't start doubting your own perceptions."

Ray didn't accept this remarkable tale quite so serenely. "Amazing!" he said.

"Your four-year-old daughter pulled an Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

"Huh?" said Kate.

Ray shook his head in mock dismay. "You haven't seen Star Wars? You poor, culturally deprived thing. As soon as it's safe, I'll take both of you."

"You really think Sara could understand a science fiction movie?" Kate sighed.

"Why discuss it? It may never be safe for us to set foot outside again." She couldn't imagine such a restricted existence, and trying to picture it filled her with despair. "How can Sara be capable of these things? What happens when she gets older? Will I even be able to understand her?"

Mike said, "To use a cliché that holds a lot of truth, take it one day at a time. For the moment, let me suggest that diagnosis and training of your own abilities as well as hers would help you comprehend." He stood up. "Right now, let's get you settled so you can rest."

Kate retrieved the overnight bag from the car and followed him to the room where she'd slept the night before. She plastered on a smile as she told Sara their plans, while trying to make herself think of the cozy Victorian bedroom as a second home, not a prison cell.

* * * *

By Sunday night, she'd decided to go along with Mike's plan of faking her and Sara's death, if only for a short time. She insisted that Ned Boyle and Mrs. Pacheco be told the truth. Though it made her uncomfortable to visualize her other acquaintances believing she was dead, she had to accept Mike's argument that the fewer people who knew, the safer her secret would be. When she read the Monday morning paper's update on the shooting, she was glad she'd agreed to the ruse. The murderer, now in stable condition, claimed to remember nothing about the episode. An out-of-work electrician, he'd had frequent fights with his wife since losing his job. Following an argument around midday Sunday, he'd stormed out of the house and gone for a drive in his truck to unwind. According to the news article, he claimed that he hadn't intended to stop at all until the compulsion overwhelmed him. He'd felt he had to go out for burgers, even though he wasn't hungry. Something had made him bring along the .45 automatic he carried in the pick-up for protection--illegally, of course. The same something had cautioned him to hide the gun under his jacket until he got inside. At that point, he claimed, his memory ended.

"Everything went black," the paper quoted him. "Next thing I know, I'm lying in the hospital hooked up to the machines, with this pain in my head."

With Father Mike at her elbow, Kate read the rest of the details. The gunman had killed six restaurant customers and staff members and wounded several others (names withheld pending notification of families). A few rounds had gone wild, ripping holes in the walls. The next-to-last had taken down one police officer, who was still in intensive care. Apparently, in the midst of his frenzy, the killer had deliberately saved a round for himself. He'd emptied the last bullet into his left temple, but the attempted suicide had failed. His hand had faltered at the last instant, knocking his aim off center.

"Further evidence," Mike said, "that the man didn't really want to kill himself--his own will managed to interfere with the possessing entity."

Kate tossed aside the paper as if it were coated with slime. "You believe it actually was a form of possession?"

They were sitting near the empty fireplace in the drawing room, where he'd taken her to show her the article. "We'll never know for sure," he said, folding the newspaper and laying it aside on a marble-topped end table. "He might be setting the scene for an insanity plea, but that sounds equally far-fetched. He didn't know any of the people he shot and had no motive for violence toward that particular fast-food outlet. If he did, the paper would have mentioned it. And what does that 'everything went black' remark remind you of?"

Kate had to think for a minute before she realized what Mike was hinting at.

"Oh--the man who ran me down in traffic said the same thing."

Mike glanced at the doorway, as if to make sure Sara hadn't decided to wander in. "That's why I believe this killer, too, was being--not exactly possessed, but controlled--by a person or entity hostile to you. His angry, agitated frame of mind made him susceptible. That and his physical proximity doubtless caused them to pick him as their tool. Again, because he has no link to you, nobody would suspect your death of being anything but random bad luck."

With the moment of danger in the past, Kate gave little thought to her own intended death. The important point was, these monsters wanted to kill Sara.

"You were right all along," she said. "We have to stay hidden if there's the slightest chance these attacks weren't random. What we discussed last night, about having Sara and me reported dead...?"

"I've already taken care of it," said Mike. "I spoke to my friend on the paper, and when the names of the victims are released, you'll be on the list. No need to tell Sara about that, by the way. All she needs to know is that you're staying here for a while, where it's safe."

Kate thanked him, relieved that he agreed with her on that point.

"I have a number of appointments today," he said as they went to check on Sara, "but I'm clearing a few hours a day for the rest of the week to start working with you two."

"Working?" said Kate. She didn't like the sound of that.

"Determining the scope of your abilities and teaching both of you to handle them."

"I never said I'd decided to learn any of that."

Mike must have heard the strain in her voice, for he paused in the middle of the hall and said softly, "You need to get over this fear of your own talents, not to mention Sara's. How do you think it would affect her, if she sensed how you feel?"

Kate pressed her lips together, aware that she mustn't argue where Sara might hear. They found that the little girl had abandoned the TV room, where she'd been listening to nursery rhyme records, and was sitting at the dining room

table with the white Persian on her lap. A cluster of sky pieces from the puzzle lay in front of Sara. She fitted another one in place and looked up at Kate.

"The kitty likes me. Her name is Yasmin."

"I'm glad she likes you, munchkin." Dear God, how long can I pretend this is just a friendly visit and keep her from seeing how scared I am? "Do you enjoy being here?"

"Yeah, I like Father Mike's house. I never saw a house this big before. Will you play hide and seek with me?"

"Sure, if Father Mike doesn't mind." What else could she do, Kate reflected, but sit around in nerve-racking idleness?

"That's a wonderful idea," said the priest. "Relax and make yourselves at home. Tonight I'm inviting another friend over to meet you."

He refused to explain, and Kate didn't want to press him in front of Sara.

When he'd left, Sara demonstrated that she hadn't forgotten the terror of the previous two days. Her left hand constantly stroking the cat while she shuffled puzzle components, she said, "Mommy, are we safe in this house?"

"Yes, Father Mike says we are, and I believe him." For the most part, she did. If she weren't able to accept the priest's assurance, she would go crazy fighting off the nightmares.

"I thought so. This feels like a good place. Will we ever go back to our real home?"

Kate swallowed, hoping Sara didn't notice the moisture in her eyes. "Of course, just as soon as we can."

Kate found the day as tense as she'd expected. To ease the jangling of her nerves, she turned in desperation to the bookcases that lined almost every room. She unearthed a copy of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. If monsters from other dimensions were real, Kate felt both she and her daughter might need whatever lessons about fighting evil the book could teach. She read it to Sara until her throat became hoarse. Ray came over for dinner, which Kate insisted on helping to prepare. Again they ate in the kitchen to avoid disturbing the jigsaw puzzle. Afterwards they cleaned up, with Sara safely engrossed in the puzzle project. Kate was amazed to see that her daughter actually found an occasional connection amid the heap of amorphous fragments of colors. Reluctantly, Ray showed Kate an update on the shooting in the evening paper.

This time, victims' names were listed. She felt a chill when she read "Kathryn C. Jacobs, of San Francisco, and her daughter Sara, age four."

"So you guys really pulled it off," she said, wringing the dishcloth in both hands. "Okay, but I can't let Mrs. Pacheco and my boss continue to believe this. That's final."

"I don't like that, but I accept it," Ray said. "You ought to know whom you can trust to keep quiet. Call your neighbor if you want, but let me talk to Mr. Boyle tomorrow on my lunch break, all right? I'll explain as much as I safely can and arrange to bring you work if possible."

So Ray understood how she hated sitting around doing nothing. "Okay. Thanks." She didn't care for the compromise herself but accepted the unpleasantness as necessary. Shutting herself in the priest's home office, where she trusted Sara wouldn't overhear, Kate phoned Mrs. Pacheco. She kept the conversation short and vague, only assuring her neighbor that the information in the paper was a "mistake." "But some strange things are going on, so I'm taking a short vacation. Please don't tell anybody we're really all right, not right away." Mrs. Pacheco's bewilderment was obvious, but she promised to keep quiet as Kate

asked. Kate's stomach cramped with anxiety by the time she hung up.

"I hate lying to people. I'm not cut out to be a paranormal secret agent," she said to Mike, who stood across the desk watching her.

He smiled at her attempted joke. "That's better; I like to see you keep your spirits up. 'All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.'"

"Say what?" In the circumstances, the remark sounded pretty silly to her.

"Dame Julian of Norwich, medieval English mystic," said Mike. "Following a severe illness, she had a number of visions, in some of which she saw Christ as a mother figure--you might think of her as a sort of proto-feminist. She spent most of her life in a tiny cell attached to the outer wall of the cathedral, where people came to ask her for prayer and guidance."

Kate said with a lopsided smile, "Yeah, easy for her to say. What did she have to worry about?"

Ray, with pen and notepad, intercepted her on the way to start Sara's bath.

"Kate, if you'll write me a list, I'll pick up anything you need from the apartment tomorrow. How far is your rent paid up?"

She blinked at his brisk efficiency. "To the fifteenth of next month."

"Good, then we don't have to worry about what to do about it for the immediate future."

"What to do?" she echoed. She accepted the pad from Ray and jotted down a miscellany of items, uneasily aware that she was further committing herself to "hiding out" at the rectory.

Mike said, "While we hope your stay here won't have to be prolonged, we have no way of knowing. I still think you should consider spending a month or two in Ardath, where you'd more likely be out of their reach. But we can discuss it later."

Kate couldn't shake her irritability over people making plans and scheduling critical "discussions" for her. Yet she also felt guilty over that reaction, since they were sincerely considering her welfare. And I have to accept help for Sara's sake, no matter how bad it feels to be a burden.

In the first-floor bathroom, she bathed Sara in an aged claw-footed tub, scoured white except for hard-water stains. Just as she was drawing the nightgown over Sara's head, the sounds of Mike's voice and a woman's reached her from the foyer. Kate's heart stuttered; then she remembered Mike's remark about a friend who'd been invited for the evening.

The priest took Sara's hand when she and Kate emerged from the bathroom. "Kate, if it's all right with you, I'd like Sara to meet this friend of mine before she goes to bed."

Kate nodded, puzzled but seeing no reason to argue. In the living room at the front of the house, which she'd barely glimpsed up to now, Ray sat on the damask-covered couch with a woman who looked around thirty. The visitor, with blonde hair shaped in a pixie cut, had a matching elfin face that showed the hint of a double chin. She wore a powder-blue pantsuit.

"Kate, I want you to meet Arlene Grant," said Mike. "She has a special talent that I'd like you to observe. Arlene, this is Kate Jacobs and her daughter, Sara."

Standing up, Arlene offered Kate a soft, plump hand to shake, then crouched down at Sara's eye level to greet the child.

"Hi, we're sleeping over at Father Mike's house," Sara announced. "He has a kitty named Yasmin. Do you have a kitty?"

"I have two kitties, a cocker spaniel, and a myna bird," the woman said.

"What's a myna bird?"

Arlene resumed her seat on the couch. "A black bird sort of like a crow. He talks a little. Maybe someday you can come over and see him."

Kate prompted Sara to say goodnight to the three adults. In the back bedroom, Sara said, "That lady's nice. I hope I can go see her animals someday."

The remark reassured Kate, who was beginning to accept Sara's judgments on people as accurate. Better be careful, she cautioned herself. That could get dangerous. After all, she's still just a little girl, not an oracle. After reading a few more pages of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Kate tucked in Sara and went back to the living room.

Mike had poured mugs of coffee all around. Helping herself to sugar from the tray on the coffee table, Arlene said, "Father Mike told me a little bit about your troubles, Kate. Try not to worry--he helped me out, too, so I know whereof I speak."

Kate cupped her hands around her mug. Before these disasters had come upon her, she hadn't realized what a comforting anchor the rituals of eating and drinking provided. "He mentioned to me that you have a--talent."

"Yeah, but that didn't have anything directly to do with my problems, unless the potential attracted the man I got mixed up with. He was one of my college professors back in Virginia, where I grew up. He belonged to an offbeat cult, which I didn't know until he had me so tangled I couldn't tell which way was up. Several of the senior faculty at this place were into it. Just another small liberal arts college, but lift the veil and there they were, like bugs under a rock." She giggled. "If that isn't a mixed metaphor! I had an affair with this professor. He dominated me, and I got in deeper and deeper--who knows what would've happened if he hadn't been reported by another student and thrown out." Arlene shook her head. "Messy. I was about ready to kill myself from guilt. After several months of therapy, my shrink suggested a change of scene. I came out here to visit relatives and met Father Mike. Thanks to him, I uncovered my talent. I also found a job I liked, so I decided to stay. That was a few years ago, of course."

Kate didn't know whether it would be polite to ask bluntly what "talent" Arlene practiced. "Does your job have something to do with your gift?"

"Not a thing. I manage a pet shop."

To Kate's relief, Arlene didn't resemble her idea of a medium or any kind of psychic. On the other hand, I don't look like one, and Mike claims I am. What was the woman, then?

"If you're all ready," the priest said, "and Sara's settled down, I'd like to start the demonstration. Okay?" He glanced at Arlene.

"Sure, anytime. Where?" She stood up.

"The kitchen table has plenty of space."

Carrying their mugs, they all trooped into the kitchen. Kate watched, puzzled, while Mike sent Ray to the study for supplies--several sheets of white paper and a black felt pen. "I haven't explained because I don't want you to have any preconceived notions," Mike said to Kate. "Also, I want to assure you that I haven't told Arlene more than the barest outline of your experiences. Do you believe me?"

"Of course. If I don't trust you by now, I never will. What's all this about?"

More mystification. She was getting so tired of it.

"You'll see." Mike placed them around the table. Arlene sat with paper and pen

in front of her, her coffee mug set aside. "Comfortable?" the priest asked her.

"No problem, I'm ready when you are."

Mike explained to Kate, "Arlene has taught herself to slip into a light trance at will, so please stay quiet."

Since Ray seemed to accept this set-up as routine, Kate nodded acquiescence. At least nobody was turning lights off, so probably they weren't planning to invoke spirits. Anyway, she remembered Mike saying something about how it was dangerous to communicate with the dead.

So what are they doing, if not a séance?

Arlene held the pen loosely in her right hand, which rested on the paper. Her head lolled to the side, leaning on her left hand, her eyes covered. Her breathing slowed. Several tedious minutes of silence crawled by.

Her right wrist twitched. The hand glided toward the top of the page and hovered there. All at once the felt tip of the pen started dancing across the blank paper. A cryptic spider web of black lines appeared.

Mike whispered to Kate, "She's never had an art lesson."

Watching the pen-strokes, Kate saw a gestalt emerging from the network of marks. A portrait. A woman of indeterminate middle age, with dark hair molded into a severe cap around a thin face with skin stretched too tight over the bones to show wrinkles. The eyebrows and lip outline looked meticulously penciled. Arlene's hand strayed to the edge of the paper, leaving a jagged line across the page. Mike immediately slipped the paper out from under the pen, exposing the next blank sheet. Arlene resumed drawing, with no indication that she'd noticed the change.

The priest handed the picture to Ray, whose eyebrows arched in wonder. "That's her, all right." He passed the drawing to Kate.

Mike whispered, "I asked him to concentrate on the woman he saw guarding Sara."

Kate studied the face. It made her uneasy, like ants crawling over her skin. She turned it over on the table and looked at the new drawing. A sketch of Sara, hugging Tigger. Despite Arlene's friendliness, Kate felt a prickle of distaste at seeing her daughter's likeness appear in this spooky way.

Mike quietly told her, "Concentrate on remembering the face of the man you saw at the cocktail party. Not the emptiness, the mask he wore."

She felt her chest tighten at the thought. Forcing herself to breathe slowly and deeply, she cast her memory back to that night. She wanted to tell Mike that she couldn't possibly visualize the man's face, for she'd never seen it except as a patch of darkness. But Mike had already removed the drawing of Sara, and Arlene's pen was jittering across a fresh page.

Kate shut her eyes and slowed her breathing, reluctant to watch the face take shape. She had only the priest's assurance that the thing she'd seen wore a human mask at all; perhaps the artist would produce a fanged or tentacled monster. But that would be a mask too, wouldn't it? If the thing is what Mike says it is, it doesn't have a true physical form at all.

Mike's fingers brushed her arm. "Look."

She opened her eyes, and he slid the page toward her. The sketch showed a man with light hair--whether blond or gray, of course she couldn't tell--beginning to recede, leaving a sleekly combed widow's peak on the forehead. Sideburns and a thin moustache were the only other distinctive features of his broad, smooth face.

"Ever seen him before that night?" the priest murmured.

Kate shook her head.

"He looks familiar to me, somehow," said Mike. Ray?"

Studying the picture, Ray said, "Me, too, but I can't place him."

Arlene's hand traced aimless loops on the final remaining sheet of paper. "She's running down," Mike whispered.

Abruptly, while her head still drooped on her left hand, the movement of her right became purposeful again. Instead of light strokes, the pen scrawled dark lines diagonally across the page. It took Kate a second to recognize the marks as letters. K and S, repeated over and over.

Mike stared in surprise that reflected her own astonishment. "Arlene's never done this before!" He whipped the scribbled page away and replaced it with the drawing of Sara, turned over to the blank side. The pen etched "Kate" in heavy slashes, then "Sara." Kate goggled at the next words that appeared: "Take care--J--J here--watch--guard--dark--D--"

It's a trick, it has to be! Mike told her more than he admitted! Kate knew, though, that the priest wouldn't have lied to her. Arlene had picked up the initial "J" from some less mundane source.

The frantic zigzag of the pen died down. In a loose but controlled grip, Arlene's hand shifted it to an unmarked bottom corner of the page. She wrote something in script, and her hand slid off the paper.

Mike touched her wrist. "Arlene, you're finished now. You may awaken."

The artist lifted her head and blinked her eyes. She rolled her head back, rubbing the nape of her neck. "How'd I do?" Glancing around at Kate and Ray, she said, "That bad, huh? I'm sorry if whatever came out was a shock--I never know, myself, what I'm drawing."

"I know," Ray said. "It floors me every time I see it."

"What was that?" Kate whispered.

"Automatic drawing," said Mike, as if he were talking about nothing stranger than a talent for whistling. "And this time, automatic writing, which is brand new for Arlene." He picked up the last page she'd scribbled on. The muscles around his mouth tightened as he examined it. He silently passed it to Kate.

The handwritten lines in the corner read, "Listen to Mike and Ray. I'll help you watch over Sara. Beware of the unfolded tesseract. Love, Johnny."

The handwriting was Johnny's own.

Chapter 8

Kate leaned across the table and grabbed Arlene by the shoulders. "How did you do that? Dammit, tell me how you did that!"

Arlene flinched, her eyes wide with alarm. Mike's hands closed over Kate's.

Arlene folded her arms across her breast. "I know how this must look to you, but I swear I didn't plan it. I never know ahead of time what I'll draw--I'm not even aware while I'm doing it." She glanced down at the paper. "And I've never written words before."

Watching Arlene's fearful reaction, Kate realized how her outburst must have sounded. "I'm sorry. That scared me, and I took it out on you." She sank back

into her chair. "It's his writing--Johnny's. What do you think, could he really be trying to communicate with me?" She cast appealing looks at both men. Mike's steady gaze didn't waver. "What do you think?"

Kate pressed her hands to her temples. "How should I know, you're the expert! Couldn't all this stuff," she waved at the scattered papers, "come from information Arlene unconsciously picked out of my mind?"

"Not impossible," said Mike. "But the appearance of a verbal message, contrary to her usual pattern, suggests genuine communication."

Ray gave Kate's shoulder a quick pat, as if he wanted to comfort her but feared the contact would make her more nervous. Or so she interpreted his gesture; she did feel stressed over how much closeness to accept from him. "Didn't you tell me something about Sara," he said, "that she claimed your husband talked to her?"

Kate nodded. "If Johnny's really nearby, trying to tell us something important," she said, "why doesn't he say it straight out, instead of mystical hints? And what on earth is the 'unfolded tesseract'?"

Ray said, "A tesseract is a four-dimensional figure."

"Yes, I was just reading about it a little while ago," she said. "A hyper-cube--but that's science fiction."

Mike shuffled the papers, then squared them off into a stack, with the drawing of the man on top. "I believe I know what the reference means."

"Whoa." Arlene pushed away from the table and stood up. "I don't want to hear any more. If I need to help Kate again, it would be better not to have background knowledge. Like you said," she told Kate, "maybe I could accidentally catch suggestions from your mind if I'm too familiar with the situation. Anyway, I admit it's scary for me, too--I don't want to know." She clasped Kate's hand. "I hope I'll see you again sometime."

Kate's head ached with confusion as she watched Mike leave the room to walk Arlene to the door. If she hadn't worked past her initial mistrust of Mike and Ray, Kate would have suspected this whole session of being part of a scam. Fake psychics often concocted elaborate, convincing scenarios, she knew. But she did believe in her new friends' sincerity, so the message must actually originate with Johnny. Unless it popped up from my unconscious mind, or even Sara's. That's a little easier to swallow, though not much.

When Mike reappeared, he carried a brochure printed on slick paper. "Here's the unfolded tesseract," he said. "Unfolded to display four dimensions in three--or actually, two." He dropped the brochure on the table in front of Kate. The front bore the title, "National Institute for Research in Nontraditional Cosmology," with a peculiar geometric figure underneath. It looked like a heap of transparent, partially interlocked cubes.

"I see," Ray said. "Like picturing a cube as six squares." He flipped the top drawing over to sketch first a transparent box, then six squares in the configuration of a collapsed box.

Kate frowned at his sketch and the pamphlet. "Uh-huh. To show a tesseract on the flat surface they have to knock it down to a two-dimensional figure, which distorts its real shape-- if tesseracts are real shapes. So why would Johnny--if it was Johnny--bother to warn me about this?"

"Wait a minute," Ray said. "I think I saw the head of this so-called institute on a local talk show last year."

"Yes, that's where I remembered the face from, too," said Mike. He opened the brochure to show Kate a photo on an inside page. The black-and-white print

portrayed the man Arlene had drawn in her trance. The caption identified him as Eugene Martlet, Founder and President, National Institute for Research in Nontraditional Cosmology.

Kate tapped the picture with a fingertip. Somehow it didn't give her the chill Arlene's sketch had; the slick advertising mode of the pamphlet didn't crackle with the energy of the artist's occult gift. "You think I saw this Martlet at Sandoval's party?"

"It's the simplest explanation, isn't it?" Mike said. "How did his image get into this drawing, if not from your repressed memory of his human facade?"

"Facade?" Kate shook her head. "I still have trouble with that idea. Where did he get a human body? Did he possess someone else's?"

"Unlikely. I suspect he constructed a human shell from raw matter, like a golem. As for why he picked this particular appearance, who knows? He probably wants to look dignified and authoritative, but not too extraordinary."

"Okay, I accept that he's the man I saw. No need to get tangled in any worse complications. What's this Research in Nontraditional Cosmology about? Doesn't sound like a satanic cult."

Ray's mouth twisted in distaste. "Of course not. They like to sound scientific. They catch more suckers by pretending to be objective fact-gatherers."

"And it's not a cult," said Mike, "not the part open to general membership, at least. I wouldn't know whether they have an inner circle or just funnel likely prospects into some allied organization. According to the brochure and Martlet's public statements, they collect evidence for all kinds of offbeat systems--flat earth, hollow earth, cosmos as one great sentient being, you name it--without passing judgment on the truth of any."

"Your monsters from an alternate dimension would be one theory they objectively examine?" Kate said. "And people who show special interest in that idea would get initiated into their secrets?"

Mike's nod confirmed her guess. "Rather like a Communist front organization."

"So if Eugene Martlet isn't human, the way you suggested, does that make him the head of the movement--or whatever you'd call it?"

Mike cleared away the coffee mugs and leaned against the kitchen counter. "He would claim to be. The enemy camp tends to splinter into dozens or hundreds of competing cliques, each one representing itself as the vanguard of the new order. They fight among themselves as much as they attack our people."

"Satanic Mafia." Kate almost giggled but quashed the impulse. "The Christian church, not to mention all the other great religions, does its share of splintering and competing, too."

"Don't make the mistake," Mike said, "of thinking 'our side' is coterminous with the church. Most church members know nothing about those from Outside, and many Christians would say believing in their existence, or worse, using extrasensory powers ourselves, puts us in danger of damnation. On the other hand, lots of people I'd recognize as faithful allies belong to other faiths."

Kate shook her head in confusion. "My family was Episcopalian, and you don't act or talk like any priest I've ever met."

"Most of them are fortunate enough never to have seen the things I've seen." He spoke in the flat, detached tone that Kate now recognized as a defense against his memories.

Ray said, "Mike brought me back to the fold, so to speak, from a facile agnosticism. I've seen enough strange things myself to force me to believe the spiritual realm exists, God included. But that doesn't mean I have to believe

other religions are worthless."

Mike chuckled. "You see, I've turned him into a heretic, too."

"This is too deep for me at this time of night," said Kate. "I'm more interested in how long we'll have to hide from these people."

Ray leafed through the papers on the table. "It would be nice to know who this woman--Sara's kidnapper--is, and what role she plays in Martlet's organization. The warning from your husband, which Sara's apparent communication with him makes me think is authentic, scares me."

"Scares you?" said Kate.

"That makes it unanimous," Mike said. "His urgency makes me wonder if you two are safe enough here. In my opinion, you need more than a short-term retreat. You should move to Ardath."

"I told you, I don't want to quit my job. And I sure don't want Sara to think she has to spend the rest of her life running."

"You may not have a choice, for the immediate future," Mike said. "Furthermore, I have another idea." He shifted his eyes, as if suddenly riveted by the pattern on the linoleum. "It concerns Ray. You won't like it--neither of you."

Ray folded his arms and gave the priest a suspicious look. "If you admit that straight out, I know I won't like it. Well?"

The priest smoothed his bristling white hair. "Stipulating that you'd be safest in Ardath, at least for a while." He raised a hand to cut off her protest. "If you took that route, you'd need someone to arrange for subletting your apartment, collect your mail, hand-carry work from Mr. Boyle every week or two. Ray is the logical person for these tasks. Not to mention any other legal or financial problems that might come up. It would simplify the situation if you pretended you're planning to get married."

"What?" Kate yelped as if he'd slapped her.

Ray sprang up from his chair. "Are you out of your mind? If you're joking, it's in lousy taste."

Mike stared at the floor again. "It would be a way of avoiding questions from people like Kate's boss and her friends in Ardath. It would even provide a plausible, harmless explanation for the move."

Ray's face reddened, with anger or some other emotion Kate couldn't identify. "Absolutely out of the question. Dammit, Mike, where did you come up with a half-witted idea like that?"

"And how do you think Sara would feel?" Hearing the quaver in her voice, Kate swallowed hard. "She's too bright not to notice our so-called engagement. Can you imagine how confused and hurt she'd be when we didn't get married after all?"

"If you do decide to relocate to Ardath," Mike said, "at least consider doing it that way. You would need to give Ray power of attorney, to get things done while you're in hiding. A temporary 'engagement' would make that appear logical."

Kate stood up and shoved her chair under the table. "I told you, I'm not going to Ardath, and I'm certainly not getting into any fake engagement." She jerked out of Mike's reach when he tried to pat her shoulder. Was Ray in on this? Couldn't be; he disapproves as much as I do.

"Very well, I'll drop the subject," said the priest. "Not that I don't think the idea has merit, but I respect your scruples."

Offering him a barely civil goodnight, Kate had the feeling that he hadn't given up on the scheme.

* * * *

Kate didn't sleep well. She dreamed over and over of hunting for Sara down drafty, dimly-lit mazes of corridors with locked doors and no exits. Several times she woke in the dark, momentarily bewildered about where she was. Each time, she checked on Sara in the next room, only to find the child asleep.

By breakfast, Kate had gotten over her indignation at Mike. He meant well. He greeted her cheerfully and didn't bring up the argument.

"I've cleared my schedule today," he said over the frozen waffles, "to start testing you and Sara."

"Testing?" Kate's stomach fluttered. "Do we have to?"

"The sooner the better," Mike said. "The sooner it's demystified for you, the easier you'll be able to accept it."

Sara glanced from Mike to Kate. "What's testing?"

"Finding out all the things you can do," Mike said. "Like games, really. Lots of different games. But I want to start on your mom first."

"Okay. Can I play outside while you're playing with Mommy?"

Kate didn't correct the "can" to "may" this time. She groped for a way to refuse without frightening Sara. "No, this isn't a good neighborhood to play outside. There's no park." On weekends she and Sara enjoyed visiting a playground two blocks from their apartment. Since Sara didn't go to preschool, those excursions provided her only contact with other children, as well as her only chance to play outdoors.

Mike said, "Your mother's right. I don't even have a yard, and you can't play in the parking lot. We'll find plenty for you to do inside."

For the moment, Sara accepted that decree. Mike unearthed a huge box of blocks from storage and set her to building a village for a herd of plastic dinosaurs.

Kate followed Mike into his study, which she'd only glimpsed previously. She noticed a heavy oak desk, a couple of armchairs upholstered in black leather, and walls lined with books. Sitting on one of the chairs, poised nervously at the edge of the seat, she said, "Come to think of it, won't your parishioners object to my staying here? Pretty scandalous, isn't it?"

Taking a seat in the swivel chair behind the desk, Mike smiled. "Don't worry about that. I've got enough of a reputation for eccentricity to get away with anything. And I'm rector for life, so they can't throw me out for less than high crimes and misdemeanors, so to speak. Anyway, this is the seventies. I've offered shelter to abused wives and children before, without the church roof caving in. If anybody notices you're here, let them assume that's why."

Kate nodded. She couldn't think of any other topic to raise, by way of postponing his planned "tests."

He separated a stack of cardboard rectangles from the scattered heaps of papers and supplies on the desk. "Incidentally, I'd feel better if you'd stay away from the front windows of the house. And needless to say, don't step outside. I'm glad you got that across to Sara without alarming her. Don't allow any exceptions."

"Okay, I hear you." She gazed at the cards in his hands. "What are those?"

"Rhine cards," he said. "Standard equipment for studying psi phenomena. This deck has five each of five different symbols." He cleared the center of the desk and fanned several of the cards face up. They showed simple figures, such as stars, squiggles and crosses, black on white. "They can be used to test either clairvoyance or telepathy. We'll start with clairvoyance."

Kate realized her hands were clenched, white-knuckled, in her lap. She forced them to relax. Mike sounded as cool as if he planned to measure her height,

weight, and blood pressure. "What's the difference, where cards are concerned?"

"I don't want to complicate matters with the possibility of your reading the answers from my thoughts, so I won't look at them, either. Also, that approach will lay to rest any fears of fraud you may still have."

Kate blushed. "I trust you, but I still think you're wasting time with me.

Sara's the prodigy."

"Objective tests will decide that." Mike seemed to have endless patience with her dithering. "First, let me help you lose some of that tension. May I touch you?" She nodded. He walked around the desk, sat on the edge of it, and stroked her wrists. "I want to induce light hypnosis, lighter than that night we searched for Sara. Nothing to be afraid of. Relax and listen only to my voice. Concentrate on your hands. Make them heavy. They're heavy weights lying on your lap."

She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations in her hands. She found it easier than before to induce the feeling of weight he described.

His voice droned on, just above a whisper. "Feel how heavy and limp they are. The right hand, then the left. You can't lift them, and you don't need to. You are completely relaxed." His fingertips brushed her wrists again. "Now the right hand is less heavy. It's still limp, but your arm is getting lighter. Imagine a balloon tied to the index finger. That finger is so light that it's about to rise into the air all by itself."

Kate did sense buoyancy in her right hand. Her mood lightened to match, as she drifted into an unworried, floating state.

"Your right arm is limp, relaxed, weightless," Mike continued. "Your whole arm is slowly rising from your lap. It's floating in the air. You're completely relaxed."

Though her arm did feel light, as if packed loosely in cotton that barely tickled the fine hairs on her skin, she thought her arm hovered only an inch above her knees, not high in the air as Mike said. But it didn't seem worthwhile to open her eyes and look.

"Now it's getting heavy again. Slowly it sinks down, down, and comes to rest on your lap." Kate felt her hand obeying his instructions. "Very good. Now it is time for you to come out of the trance. When you awaken, you will be rested and alert and calm. You'll be ready to learn quickly and do your best. Now I'll count backwards from three. When I reach 'one,' you will be completely awake. Three--feeling returns to your limbs; your eyelids no longer feel heavy.

Two--you're becoming more alert; you can move under your own volition. One--open your eyes and wake up."

For a second Kate felt disoriented. Then she realized she was refreshed, calm, more serene than she'd felt in weeks.

Mike smiled at her. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"But it didn't work right, did it?" she said. "My arm hardly moved at all."

"Oh, yes, it did. Your hand was way up here." He held his own hand above shoulder level. "You're an excellent subject." He returned to his swivel chair and pushed a pen and yellow legal pad across the desk. "I'm going to shuffle the cards and lay the deck face down." He did so. "Neither of us has any natural means of knowing what order they're in. All I want you to do is write down the twenty-five cards in a column."

Kate stared at the blank paper. "That's it? No ritual incantations or mystic passes? This is weird--how can I do something like that? My mind's a blank."

"Good." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms in a casual posture.

"Don't strain--don't try to 'see' anything. Just take your time and jot down whatever pops into your head."

With a resigned sigh, she obeyed. She scribbled the names of the five symbols at random, as instructed, not even stopping to count whether she'd listed five of each. Mike waited with no sign of impatience. When she finished, he picked up a pencil and checked the list against the order of the deck. His expression gave her no clue to her performance. He then dug a pocket calculator out of a drawer and entered a few numbers.

"Well?" she said. In her relaxed state, she found his earnest calculations mildly amusing. Despite her recent experiences, she didn't expect to discover any occult powers in herself.

"The percentage of hits is no better than chance." He didn't sound disappointed.

"Well, a single run doesn't mean much. Brace yourself, we're going to do it multiple times."

Kate shrugged. "You're the doctor, Doc." If she couldn't do anything useful while cooped up here, she might as well cooperate with Mike's agenda. She owed him that much, after all his help.

Writing sequences of abstract symbols over and over soon lost what limited appeal it had. After the ninth try, she said, "You see, I have zero talent for clairvoyance. You might as well stop wasting your time on me." She didn't state her relief at the negative result, though she knew Mike probably noticed it.

"I'm not convinced yet," he said. "Let's try again." He shuffled the cards, squared the stack, and passed her a fresh notepad.

Frowning in mild irritation, Kate dashed off yet another list. When Mike checked off the "hits," his eyebrows rose in surprise. He pursed his lips in a silent whistle and looked up from the page. "Interesting. On this run, you got every single item wrong."

"There, that proves it." She squashed her mean-spirited sense of vindication.

After all, proving her abilities seemed important to Mike. "You've been barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh, I doubt that." He looked almost smug. "Consistent low scoring is well-documented in the literature. It's known as 'psi-missing,' and it's just as significant as consistent hits. Missing this thoroughly is a tremendous performance. Random odds don't permit a hundred percent failure, any more than a hundred percent success. A lab would run the experiment a couple dozen times more, but I'm convinced."

She clamped her sagging jaw shut. "Are you saying I got them all wrong on purpose?"

He nodded. "Unconsciously, of course. When normal error didn't discourage me, something inside you got impatient and decided to go for broke. As I suspected, you have a powerful gift."

"But I wasn't trying to miss--honestly, I wasn't trying either way!"

"I know that. As I said, it was unconscious." He stashed the cards in the desk and took out a pair of dice.

Kate shook her head. "I'm seeing it, but I'm still not sure I believe it. It all sounds so, well, nutty." She finished with an apologetic half-smile.

"Then we're all nuts. It's been said that we live in 'a sea of telepathic suggestions.' Some people remain oblivious to it; others pick up hints only from close relatives; a few, like you and Sara, can learn to read the distant, hidden, or unseen like the proverbial open book." He rolled the dice on the desk blotter. "Are you up to continuing?"

"Sure, whatever you say, teacher."

"My intuition is that your gift is mostly for knowing, as it were. Sara may turn out to be both a 'seer'--in the occult sense--and a 'doer.' That bubble she created...I've heard of things like that, but I've never actually met anyone capable of it. Right now, I want to try you on telekinesis."

Kate rummaged in her memory for the word. "Moving objects by mental effort?"

"Right. You may have no talent for producing change in the environment, only foreseeing it, or you may possess a little of both. How this experiment works, I roll the dice twelve times for each run. You concentrate on making the score turn up either high or low. Interestingly, hits, if they occur at all, tend to turn up either at the beginning or the end of a run. Nobody knows why. Ready?"

Kate shrugged. "Anytime." At least Mike's experiments contained no frightening elements. If anything, they had the potential for becoming tedious.

"First, let's try for highs," he said. He began rolling, while Kate dutifully focused on the dice. He wrote down each total. This process continued through several groups of twelve. Kate had trouble keeping her mind from straying to irrelevancies, such as what Sara might be doing or the humor of a priest's expertise with gambling tools. When she did try to concentrate, she wasn't sure how to go about it. How could she make a pair of dice do her will? The task seemed as impossible as wiggling her ears, with no muscles suited to the job. As far as she could tell, she wasn't accomplishing any marvels.

Without comment, Mike said, "Now visualize the numbers coming up low." He resumed casting dice. She lost count of how many runs they'd gone through. Finally Mike fed the figures into his calculator. "Better than chance, but not much. Inconclusive."

"What I expected," said Kate. "After all, if I had the power to move things by thinking about it, wouldn't I have noticed by now?"

"Not necessarily." He returned the dice to the drawer. "Though it does confirm my intuition that you're more of a 'seer' and Sara more of a 'doer.' Perhaps your gift isn't readily amenable to conscious control. Maybe it surfaces mainly under stress. Though I admit a telekinetic talent usually shows itself in adolescent poltergeist phenomena."

"Good grief, do you think that will happen with Sara?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? We haven't tested her for telekinesis yet. And training should give her enough control that what power she has won't run wild." He stood up. "How about some lunch?"

Checking her watch, Kate was surprised to find that the morning had fled. Suppressed anxiety about Sara welled up to consciousness. She hurried to the TV room/playroom, where Sara greeted her rapid breathing and flushed cheeks with a puzzled hug.

After lunch, Mike said he wanted to continue with Kate, rather than start testing Sara. "Haven't you analyzed me all you need?" Kate said. "It seems pretty clear that my abilities are strictly limited."

Mike smiled at her balkiness. "Not at all, I've barely scratched the surface. Unless you're too tired to work anymore this afternoon?"

Kate realized she did feel tired, as if she'd undergone physical exertion. Not enough to admit the weakness and loaf the rest of the day, though.

"I'd like to try something less conventional," he said, escorting her to the parlor with the fireplace.

That rigmarole was conventional? she thought.

Mike took a rectangular mirror with a scalloped gilt frame, about one foot by

two, off the wall. When Kate was settled in one of the armchairs, he said, "I've been wondering whether you have any gift for scrying."

"What's that?"

"You'd know it best as crystal gazing. That's only one method. Adepts use water, pools of ink, flame, anything to focus the eyes and mind. They might view distant places and events or future events."

"Crystal gazing? Come on, aren't those people fakes? Carnival acts." Sitting in an overstuffed chair in a comfortably shabby room with a faintly musty scent in the air, Kate didn't find peeking into the future very plausible. Manipulating cards and dice, that may have some scientific basis, but this is too wild. She didn't let herself speculate on where Arlene's drawings fit into a scientific rationale.

"The majority are bogus, I'm sure," said Mike, "just as in any other area of the paranormal. Some people, on the other hand, do have reliable visions."

She laced her fingers on her lap. "Not me."

"Have you forgotten what you told me, about your visual premonition of your husband's death?"

"Yes, I managed to forget it for a while. Did you have to remind me?" She clenched her fingers so tightly they ached.

"Sorry." He sat opposite her with the mirror on his lap. "You don't have to do this if you're not up to it."

She unclasped her hands and spread the fingers to banish the cramps. "Now's as good a time as any. If it's real, I have to face it. What do I do?"

"I won't direct you to any particular place, time, or subject matter, because I want to determine what your mind will do on its own. Also, I want to minimize the chance of your simply reading my thoughts." He held up the mirror, propped against his chest. "First I'll guide you into a light trance again." He fiddled with the angle of the mirror until it caught a ray of sunlight from a side window, producing a bright spot near an upper corner of the glass. "Once you're relaxed, you'll try to use the mirror as a surface to show you whatever your unconscious mind wants to see. Focus on that spot of light, please."

She allowed the gleam to draw her into the depths of the mirror. The priest's rhythmic voice lapped around her like wavelets in a tide pool. Her hands and feet grew limp, heavy; her breathing slowed to a succession of long sighs dragged from the bottom of her lungs. She didn't know whether to be glad or worried about how easily she'd learned to respond to hypnosis.

From a distance, it seemed, Mike said, "Sink into the mirror. Search for what lies below its surface."

Like Alice? she mused. I don't think I want to enter Looking-Glass Land.

The cold glass seemed to dissolve. She wasn't looking at the mirror, but into it. Her reflected face became insubstantial, semi-transparent. Ripples blurred it to a shapeless phantom. She could see the room behind her, the wallpaper and the closed door, through her own reflection. Then the room disintegrated into a wave pattern, too.

A new picture coalesced. Kate saw a different room, with a hearth trimmed in brick and stone instead of marble, with a braided rug on the floor. It couldn't be winter, for a potted plant sat in the fireplace. Kate recognized the living room of the cabin in Ardath. The dark windows rattled, and lightning flashed. A man lay on the rug, face up, his arms and legs flung wide. His eyes were closed, his skin almost luminously pale in the eerie, fragmented glow. She studied him for a few seconds before she realized he was Ray.

She covered her eyes. A high-pitched moan escaped from her throat.

Mike's hand stroked her hair. "It's all right. You don't have to look anymore."

Opening her eyes, she saw that he'd laid the mirror glass down on the floor. "I did see something," she whispered. "If I have to put up with this precognition, why do I always see terrible things?"

"What you saw may not be destined to happen," Mike said. "It could represent a possible future, a warning of a danger you can avoid by careful preparation. Can you tell me about it?"

"I saw Ray. I think he was dead." She described the setting of the vision. "If it's a real warning, how can he avoid his fate? Never go to Ardath?"

"Precautions like that tend to backfire," Mike said. "Remember Oedipus. When he left home to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother, he caused the very disasters he was trying to prevent. All I can say at this time is, what you saw may have been symbolic rather than literal, or it may embody your own fears instead of an actual danger. Or it may be one very unlikely future out of many."

"It it's that indefinite, what use is it?" Without waiting for an answer he probably couldn't give, she said, "I've had enough for one day. Can we stop?"

"Of course." He helped her up from the chair. She started to protest but discovered that she felt exhausted and lightheaded.

She spent the afternoon building block castles with Sara and evading the child's questions about Father Mike's "games."

* * * *

When Ray appeared after supper, Kate was vaguely annoyed at herself for being so glad to see him. I'm mostly a fascinating case to him, to both of them. I can't expect the friendship to stay this close after--God willing--the crisis ends.

She'd already elicited Mike's agreement not to tell Ray about her vision.

Sara, too, was delighted with Ray's visit, especially when he showed her the toys, books, and clothes he'd collected from Kate's apartment. "You brought my Winnie the Pooh and Big Bird!" she said. "And my Goodnight Moon book. Mommy's reading me a book called A Wrinkle in Time. Will you read it to me, too?"

"Sure," he said with a keen glance at Kate. "Catching up on your science fiction reading, I see." He told her that he'd hired a workman to replace the broken window. In addition to Sara's supplies, he'd brought two suitcases full of Kate's clothes and toiletries, as per the list she'd made. As an unexpected bonus, he'd also rescued the window-box of potted herbs from the kitchen. With both arms full of plants, Kate shook her head over the stuff piled in Sara's temporary bedroom. "I feel like a refugee. I don't know how I'll ever repay you and Mike for going to so much trouble for us."

"Now, cut that out," said Ray. "What with getting the window fixed, I didn't have time to visit your boss. I'll go talk to Mr. Boyle tomorrow."

"Thanks. I don't know how I'll be able to explain to him about pretending to be dead. I'm still pretty confused about it myself." Hearing Sara trotting down the hall toward them, she dropped the subject.

"Let me show you something else I brought," Ray said, digging into a shopping bag. He handed Sara a pair of workbooks, reading and arithmetic, for kindergarten-age children. "Games for you and your mom to play. Plus these." From the bottom of the bag, he produced lead pencils, colored pencils, scissors, and the Crayola box of sixty-four crayons.

Sara bounced up and down. "New crayons, oh, wow!"

Kate gave Ray a rueful smile, "Come on, how can a mere mom compete with this."

Ray grinned back at her. "Hey, don't I get to have some fun, too?"

Leafing through the math workbook, Kate wondered whether Sara could handle the material. She didn't want to put extra stress on the child. On the other hand, Sara's response to Sesame Street suggested she would have no trouble with more advanced letter and number work. Kate thanked Ray heartily; at least the activity books would fill the hours--anything to smother boredom and fear. After Sara fell asleep, Mike cornered Kate with a new suggestion. "We haven't done anything with telepathy so far," he said, "and I'd like to test you on that." They were sharing a pot of coffee in the kitchen, giving Ray an edited version of the day's testing. "Sleep provides a good opportunity," said Mike, "and I also wanted Ray to hear the conditions. An objective third party, so to speak."

Kate wrapped her arms protectively around her chest. "Now what?"

"Tonight I'll concentrate on a picture," Mike said, "and you'll focus on trying to dream about it--picking it out of my mind. People are highly receptive in sleep; it's the ideal visionary state."

"Absolutely not," she said. "No more visions." She glanced at Ray, who kept his expression resolutely neutral. "I won't go into it, because you know why." The prospect of getting trapped in a scene like the one she had viewed that afternoon terrified her. So did the ease and clarity of the visualization, as if a flood of supernatural perceptions, dammed up for years, were bursting forth to drown her. "There's a limit to my guinea pig role, and this is it."

Chapter 9

Ray stared down at the table, apparently embarrassed to witness the argument. Mike said, "We can talk about it later, then. I'll show Ray what I'm thinking of anyhow, in case you change your mind."

While he escorted Ray to the front door, carrying on a low-voiced conversation Kate couldn't understand without blatant eavesdropping, she cleared away the mugs and rinsed the coffeepot. Her hands shook with the urge to bang and slam things. Calm down, I'm not here to wreck his kitchen. He's only trying to help. A contrary voice raged, Oh, yeah? How can he ask me to go through that again so soon? Or ever?

When Mike re-entered the room, he spoke softly, as if reading her mind. "It's like getting back up on the horse that threw you. Don't let fear of the fear itself rule your life."

She flinched, startled, and turned on him with an indrawn hiss of annoyance. "Easy for you to say! You don't have this so-called talent, do you?"

"No, I'm weaker than you in most areas. I just happen to have accumulated more information about the process. Will you at least discuss it?"

Kate dried her hands and reluctantly sat down to listen.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," he said, "that the more you ignore or resist your power, the less you'll be able to control it?"

She gave him a grudging half-nod.

"If you go on the way you are, it'll keep running wild, overwhelming you when you're least prepared. If you learn to rule it, you should be able to summon and dismiss it at will."

"Maybe that makes sense," said Kate. "But deciding ahead of time what I'll dream about--come on! If it happens, if I read your mind while I sleep, it happens. I can't imagine trying to make it happen. How could anybody control their dreams?"

"The same way people get to Carnegie Hall," he said with a tired smile.

"Practice, practice, practice. You'd be surprised at the normally involuntary functions that can be brought under conscious control. I'm not asking you to walk on a bed of burning coals or stop your heart and go into suspended animation, just work on what's called lucid dreaming."

"What's that?"

"On the simplest level, to be aware you're dreaming while you're doing it. Once you know you're not awake, you may be able to steer the action of the dream in a desired direction, or command yourself, ahead of time, to dream of a certain thing. Some people claim the ability to script a detailed plot in advance or pose a question to themselves and get the answer in sleep."

"Sounds like a handy talent." Kate didn't try to hide her skepticism. "Can you do any of this stuff?"

"Sometimes I can shape the content of my dreams in advance, at least within broad limits. I'm not very accomplished at it, no. Tonight I'll concentrate on dreaming about the photograph I've shown Ray. If you tell yourself, as you fall asleep, that you'll tune in to my dreams, it may happen."

"How the heck can someone practice knowing when he's dreaming, much less shape the contents?"

"The first step is remembering it after you wake up." He took the dishtowel she was wringing and hung it up. "How many times have you awakened with the feeling that you've just had a terrifying nightmare, but already the details are slipping away leaving you with nothing left but scraps of images?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean." But who wants to remember nightmares anyway? Give the man a chance. That was just an example. Don't they say everybody dreams for hours every night, even if we forget most of it?

"The instant you wake up in the morning, ask yourself whether you've dreamed, and collect the memories and recite them to yourself before they drift away. If you want to work on it seriously, you could write down your dreams before you get up--many people do."

"And then what? Reread them for occult messages? A dark man on a black horse spells disaster? A huge empty house means returning to the womb?"

"There's no universal code to crack," said Mike. "Even Freud didn't go that far. And most modern psychiatrists think classic Freudian theory is too rigid. The contemporary view, from what I know of it, says every person's dream symbolism is individual." His hand rested on her shoulder. "Another aid to lucid dreaming is to train yourself to be automatically aware of whether you're awake or asleep. At odd times during the day, you might ask yourself whether you're dreaming at that moment. And don't accept an instant 'no.' Check your surroundings for logic and consistency."

She twitched to dislodge his hand. How could she accept comfort from the person who was forcing her to face all these bizarre possibilities? "By that standard, I've been dreaming ever since the night I went into the hospital."

"Believe me, I wish I could say that's the truth." His expression lightened.

"Except then I wouldn't have met you and Sara, which would have been a shame. I'm sure Ray would agree with that."

Kate blushed. Yes, she wouldn't want to have missed knowing Ray. But is it worth almost getting killed twice?

Mike said, "You look tired. I won't burden you with any more demands tonight."

Smothering a yawn, she trudged off to a shower and bed. Tucked in at last, after a final check on Sara, Kate mused, Now I'm supposed to tell myself to zero in on Mike's dream? Good grief, can't I even rest when I'm asleep?

* * * *

She found herself at the cabin in Ardath, on a summer morning. She and Sara sat on the edge of the porch, with Johnny between them. He had an arm around each of them. When he nuzzled Kate's cheek, she felt the tickle of his beard. The breeze carried the fragrance of pine and mown grass.

Sara snuggled against her father's chest. "Daddy, I'm glad you came back. Why did you stay away so long?"

It occurred to Kate that something about this scene didn't fit. Johnny had never seen Sara except as a baby. Why not? What am I forgetting? She decided she didn't want to remember.

As if he'd read her thoughts, Johnny said, "Beloved, you know we aren't really here. This is a dream."

"No, it isn't." She felt his shoulder and the cotton shirt he wore grow insubstantial beneath her head.

"Remember, Father Mike told you to notice when you're dreaming." Johnny vanished out of her embrace and reappeared standing a few yards away.

"Why can't this be real?" she cried. "Why can't all those other terrible things be the dream?"

The mare Johnny used to ride appeared at the edge of the woods and trotted up to him. He bounded onto her back like a stunt rider in the movies. When he turned the horse and cantered away, Kate looked wildly around for Sara. The child had disappeared.

Kate became a disembodied eye hovering above the mountain landscape. Below, she saw Johnny guiding the mare along one of the familiar hillside trails. For some reason she couldn't remember, terror made her heart race. She needed to scream a warning, but a warning of what? Fear constricted her vocal cords. She saw a cloud of blackness drift from the stream bank toward Johnny. The horse reared, squealing in panic.

Kate found her voice. "The dark, Johnny! The dark!" The cloud billowed toward horse and rider, engulfing them. Black nothingness covered the world. When it cleared an instant later, Kate saw Johnny lying beside the trail, his hair matted with blood.

I've seen this before! she silently wailed. Why do I have to see it again?

Remembering that she was dreaming, she recalled what Mike had said. I'm supposed to be able to change the direction of the plot, so why couldn't I stop that? Why can't I make him live?

The picture faded. Next, she stood on the bank of the stream. A little girl lay face down in the rushing water. Though the motionless body looked four or five years old, Kate knew at once that this child wasn't Sara. For one thing, the hair flowing in the ripples was medium brown, though highlighted with honey-gold streaks. Yet Kate sensed that this girl meant something to her, and grief swelled in Kate's chest. The tactile sensation of tears trickling down her face felt as real as if she were awake. Kneeling by the stream, she reached for the

girl's limp arm. Impossibly, the rapids dislodged the body and swept it away. Kate tried to scream for help--and woke.

* * * *

Checking her wristwatch on the nightstand in the dim bedroom, Kate found that the time was almost five in the morning. She retold the dream to herself before stumbling to the bathroom. That can't be Father Mike's telepathy, she mused while gazing at her bleary face in the mirror. He's never met Johnny or even seen a picture of him. Back in the bedroom, she turned on the light for a minute to comfort herself with the sight and scent of her herb plants on the windowsill. As she drifted into sleep, she felt an obscure satisfaction at the failure of the experiment. Maybe now the priest would be convinced of her limitations and quit nagging her to develop her powers.

She slogged through breakfast that morning feeling as if she'd hardly slept all night. Fortunately Mike didn't interrogate her about her dreams at the table. She certainly didn't want to narrate that vision in Sara's presence.

Watching Kate pour milk into a bowl of Wheaties, Sara asked, "Mommy, what's D milk?"

Kate blinked. "Huh?"

Mike froze in the act of setting down a plate of toast and stared at the carton in Kate's hand. "Maybe she means this?" He tapped the carton.

Kate scanned the words printed in block capitals and read aloud, "Vitamin D milk? Sara, you read that by yourself?"

Stirring her cereal, Sara showed no sign of excitement at her own feat. "What's it mean?"

"It just means the milk company put in extra vitamins, especially vitamin D for strong bones."

"Oh. Can we read my new books Dr. Ray brought me?"

"Sure," said Kate, putting the carton in the refrigerator with care, afraid her sluggish reflexes would make her drop it. "We'll start on the workbooks right after I help Father Mike with the dishes." And talk about dreams, she thought, reluctant but knowing she would have to get the conversation over with.

When she'd emptied her bowl and cup, Sara said, "I want to play outside. When can we go to a park?"

Kate busied herself rinsing dishes so she wouldn't have to meet her daughter's eyes. "I don't know, munchkin. For now, we have to stay here where it's safe."

"So nobody will try to shoot us? Okay."

Kate blinked back angry tears at Sara's matter-of-fact tone. I try for four years to shield her from violence, even TV shows and rock lyrics, and what did it get us? God, wherever you are, it's not fair!

Sara docilely accepted Kate's need to help the priest and retired to the TV-playroom with her workbooks when ordered.

"At this rate," Mike remarked, "she'll read halfway through the kindergarten volume before you get there."

Kate didn't share his humor at the idea. "I can't believe she's teaching herself to read."

"At the age of four? It's not unheard of, and she's obviously exceptionally bright."

"I just want her to have a normal, happy life." Kate shook her head. "Guess we already established that's impossible."

She accompanied him to the more private surroundings of the main parlor. He said, "I have to get over to my office, but first I wanted to check on the

success of our little experiment. I get the feeling, from your mood, that something did happen."

"If you mean it wrecked my sleep and I feel lousy, your intuition is accurate." Mike sat down in his usual chair by the hearth. "I'm sorry to hear that. Tell me about it."

Taking a seat on the arm of a couch, as if to emphasize that she didn't intend to spend much time on this conversation, Kate said, "What I dreamed can't have anything to do with your telepathic broadcast. It was about Johnny, and you never knew him."

"Not a broadcast, more of a narrowcast, strictly for you. Describe your dream, at least the main outlines, and I'll tell you whether we scored a hit."

"What's this 'we'?" She had to smile at the sour note she heard in her own voice. She narrated her dream, omitting the emotional overtones, which felt too intimate to describe. "So you see, it can't have had anything to do with whatever you were concentrating on."

"It's a hit, all right." Mike walked over to a two-tiered end table on the other side of the room and picked a magazine from a stack in the bottom of the table. He folded the magazine open and handed it to Kate. "This was the focus I used." She examined the photo, a full-page ad showing a mountain stream, with a cottage among the trees in the background. Her shoulders drooped. "You think my dream echoed your meditation--or whatever--with my personal details added." He nodded. "Feel free to check with Ray. He'll confirm that this is the picture I showed him last night."

She tossed the magazine onto the couch beside her. "Never mind, I don't suspect you of lying. But what does it all mean? I can understand why I saw Johnny with Sara..." She swallowed a lump that threatened tears. "A natural fantasy. What about the little girl drowning in the stream, though?"

"Who knows? It doesn't have to represent anything factual in your life, much less a premonition of the future. It could be purely symbolic of some anxiety within you."

"In the dream, I had the feeling I should know who she was, that she was important to me. But it wasn't Sara, I know that." Noticing she was wringing her hands again, she pulled the fingers apart. "Why do these so-called gifts seem to be welling up to the surface all of a sudden? I never had any trace of them before, unless you count what happened when Johnny died."

"Maybe the near-death experience acted as a catalyst. Especially since the time was approaching when you'd need all the power you could summon. God gave you these talents for a purpose." He touched her hand. "Try to relax and get settled in. Concentrate on taking care of Sara. I'll set aside a few hours tomorrow to start her testing."

Another thing I'd love to avoid, thought Kate as Mike left for his office across the parking lot in the church. If the so-called talent was a gift from God, she wished Heaven had a refund policy. She mentally listed fun activities she and Sara could share, using the workbooks Ray had bought. Teaching a four-year-old to read and add, though not strictly conventional, sounded much pleasanter than teaching her to pluck numbers and symbols out of people's minds.

* * * *

Ray tried to ignore a nervous rumbling in his lower abdomen as he drove to the offices of Golden Apple Press late that afternoon. After an emergency had consumed his lunch hour, he'd had to scramble to get on the road in time to reach the publisher before the end of the work day. He was about to interfere in

Kate's life again. Though he was making this visit with her permission, he knew she'd tend to resent it as manipulation. Especially when he admitted telling her boss about their "engagement." Making that claim seemed the easiest way to win Boyle's confidence. Ray expected an uphill climb against the publisher's suspicion, given the newspaper announcement of Kate's death. He might try to get me arrested on suspicion of kidnapping, and how could I blame him?

Thinking about Kate's distaste for this whole situation plunged Ray into gloom. Not only did she resent her dependence on him and Mike, underneath the more civilized emotion of gratitude, she also couldn't help but associate her two protectors with the terror of the threat they defended her against. Once the crisis ended, she would probably want no reminders of it. And she might well include Ray in that category.

Damn, why did we have to meet this way? He slammed an open palm against the steering wheel. Behind him, a horn beeped. Startled, he glanced up to notice that the traffic light had switched from red to green. He accelerated, still brooding. Why couldn't he have met Kate through some ordinary channel, with no connection to the forces menacing her? In that case, a permanent relationship might have grown between them.

As matters now stood, a fake marriage was the closest he was likely to get. Self-centered S.O.B., aren't you? he rebuked himself. Is that all you can think of, while Kate and Sara are in danger of death or worse? He deflected his thoughts into more productive channels, rehearsing what he would say to Boyle, while he hunted for a vacant parking meter near the publisher's office building.

Inside the high-rise, he spent a couple of minutes perusing the directory by the elevator. Stalling--he already knew the correct floor. Unable to produce another excuse for delay, he rode up. In the outer office of Golden Apple, he gave his name to the middle-aged woman at the desk. A temporary, no doubt; they couldn't have replaced Kate so fast. Ray asked her to announce him as a friend of Mrs. Jacobs.

That password got Ray into Ned Boyle's office. The publisher, a loose-jowled man with receding ginger hair and a walrus moustache, got up to offer Ray a minimal handshake, then resumed his seat behind the desk. "So you knew Kate, Dr. Benson, is it? What can I do for you?" When Boyle removed his horn-rimmed glasses to polish them on a tissue, Ray noticed his eyes looked bloodshot.

"I have to tell you something that's going to be a slight shock." Without an invitation, Ray drew up one of two padded chairs and sat across from Boyle.

The publisher responded with an incurious stare.

"Mr. Boyle, Kate isn't dead."

"What?" Boyle allowed the glasses to slip from his fingers onto the desk blotter.

"The statement in the paper was a case of mistaken identity. She and Sara are all right."

Instead of showing relief, Boyle said in a voice that bristled with suspicion, "If that's true, why hasn't she called me? And where do you come in?"

"It's complicated," said Ray. "She has reason to believe she and Sara are in danger. For the time being, she doesn't want the mistake corrected. They're in a safe place for the moment, and Kate asked me to fill you in on the situation."

Boyle rubbed his glasses once more and put them on. "And as I said, who are you?"

Ray knotted his fingers together in his lap. "Kate's fiancé."

Boyle leaned across the desk, eyes narrowed as if studying Ray's face. "She never mentioned you."

"We haven't been engaged long," Ray said. "But I assure you, her welfare is the most important thing in the world to me."

Boyle made a quiet "Hmph" sound. "Maybe. The idea of her being alive takes a little getting used to. God knows I want to believe you and I can't think of any reason why you'd lie. But I'd like to hear it in Kate's own voice."

Ray unlaced his cramped fingers. At least the man wasn't throwing him out or calling the police. "I'll ask her to call you. I know she'll want to talk to you. She didn't want to let you think she was dead at all, but it just wasn't safe for her to be seen in public. And we thought it would be easier to explain in person than over the phone."

"Doctor, you haven't explained anything yet. But I almost believe you." Boyle's fingertips drummed on the desk for a moment. "The paper said that shooting incident was random. What makes Kate think she's in danger?"

"Threatening phone calls," Ray said, "last week, at her home. She didn't take them seriously until what happened Sunday." He had to justify the deception to the man somehow, and he could hardly tell Boyle about clairvoyance and occult conspiracies.

"Oh?" Boyle stiffened like a hound pointing at a pheasant. "We've had some odd phone calls here in the past two days. Someone keeps asking for Kate, won't leave a name or number."

A chill settled in the pit of Ray's stomach. "Man or woman?"

"Woman, if that matters. Any idea who?"

Ray shook his head. "It just confirms my belief that someone is trying to find out whether she and Sara are alive, and therefore they have to stay hidden."

"But why the hell would anybody want to-- Oh, never mind that." Boyle stood up.

"When Kate talks to me herself, I'll trust you. Meanwhile, I can't see any good reason to. You might be one of these mysterious enemies yourself, trying to trick information out of me." He shook his head. "Listen to me, making like double-oh-seven."

"A reasonable precaution," Ray said. "I could be one of them, for all you know. I'll have Kate call--and thanks for listening, at least."

That didn't go nearly so bad as it could have, Ray thought on the way down in the elevator. His shirt felt sticky with tension-sweat. The news that the enemy was suspicious enough to harass Boyle for clues to Kate's status didn't reassure him a bit. Ray debated whether to tell her. Why frighten her any worse?

He was still mulling over the problem as he walked out of the lobby onto the sidewalk. He didn't notice the woman keeping pace with him until she stepped into his path.

"I need to talk to you for a minute," she said. "Perhaps I can persuade you to be reasonable."

He took in her thin face, eyes and mouth precisely mascaraed and lipsticked, her sculpted cap of gray-streaked black hair. She wore a tailored burgundy pantsuit and carried a small leather shoulder purse that matched her shoes. She didn't look like what he knew her to be. He kept his face blank and tried to restrict his thoughts to the same blandness. "Excuse me; you've mistaken me for somebody else."

She frowned like a stern teacher hearing a preposterous excuse for missing homework. "I'm sure you remember our meeting Saturday night. I certainly do." Concentrating on his mental barrier, Ray walked around her. Building a stone

wall around his thoughts required most of his energy. He possessed little innate psychic power, and Mike had had the devil of a time teaching him this much. "Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about." He kept moving toward his car, half expecting her to extract a gun from her purse and threaten him.

The woman apparently didn't want to risk violence on a public street, though. Her wedge heels clicked on the sidewalk as she marched along beside Ray. "Really, there's no point in your wasting time like this, Mr.... What is your name?"

So they don't know who I am! Ray struggled to keep the surge of hope from showing on his face. This woman must have been watching the Golden Apple office and, simply by chance, seen and recognized him. If Kate had come here in person... His heart lurched at the thought. "I don't know yours, either."

"You don't need to. It's enough to know that the man I represent wants information you have. Give it to me, and he won't disturb you any further."

Ray didn't answer until he reached the car. He leaned against the driver's door, his right hand clenched around the keys in his hip pocket. "I don't have anything to say to you."

The woman stepped off the curb, paused a couple of feet from him, and shook her head with an exasperated air. "Simply tell me where Mrs. Jacobs and her daughter are."

"They're dead. You should know that."

The woman didn't attempt to deny the implied accusation. "My--associate--isn't certain whether the report of their death was accurate. You're the best source of confirmation or denial we've found. Where are they?"

Could she read in my mind that I lied? He reminded himself not to relax his barrier. She had to hit a uniformly blank wall, or she would become more suspicious. "Your associate killed them. Isn't he satisfied with that? Can't you leave her friends to mourn in peace?"

"Stubborn." She shook her head again, lips pursed. "I can't pierce your defenses. My superior can. If you won't answer voluntarily, he'll be forced to deal with you in person. You wouldn't enjoy that."

"You're wasting your time. I can't help you."

"I could hold a grudge against you for assaulting me," she said, "but I do not. You're probably working under the influence of some misguided individual with powers greater than your own. If you stop obstructing us, we'll leave you alone."

"You'll leave me alone anyway, or I'll have you arrested for harassment." Could she perceive how empty that threat was? Ray wouldn't dare to attract attention, especially from the police, any more than she would.

"You won't get many more chances to cooperate freely." She folded her arms across her chest. "My superior could easily hire 'muscle,' I believe, is the slang expression, to bring you to him. And he is always hungry. He would relish dragging the truth out of you and then draining your life."

The statement should have sounded ludicrous, the matter-of-fact lunacy of a paranoid who believed her own surreal world-view. Behind her, oblivious citizens walked up and down the sidewalk or waited at the traffic light. The sun glared off the tinted plate glass window of an office building. A pigeon pecked at a potato chip, then fluttered out of the path of a teenage girl pushing a stroller. A mundane scene, but Ray didn't feel like laughing at the occult threat. He fumbled behind him for the car door handle. The woman's cool stare held his eyes.

"Tell Martlet to go back to Hell where he came from."

The woman's eyes widened, a subtle but gratifying reaction. So we did identify him correctly, Ray thought. She continued to stare at him without speaking. Her figure shimmered like a heat mirage on blacktop. The high-rise and pedestrians behind her melted and puddled like ice cream left in the sun. The street Ray stood on turned to slush, then evaporated. Aside from the solid bulk of the car at his back, nothing supported his weight. He was sinking into the void under his feet. Vertigo and nausea seized him.

He fought the dropping-elevator sensation. It's not real, not real, not real.

His thumb found the latch on the car handle. The metal began to melt like snow.

His fingers sank into it, feeling it dissolve in his clutch. That's not happening, the car is still here! Closing his eyes to reject the impossibility he saw and felt, he applied pressure where the latch ought to be. Panic threatened to swallow him when he felt no resistance to his squeezing fingers.

It's working, just believe it's working. He heard a click and sensed the handle growing solid again. He wrestled the door open with a sweat-slicked hand. He heaved himself into the driver's seat and slammed the door. The latch didn't click firmly, but he let that go for the moment. He groped for his seat belt and struggled to fasten it with one hand while digging out the keys with the other.

When he opened his eyes, the world looked ordinary again. His peripheral vision caught the woman standing on the curb. Aware that her gaze had plunged him into the illusion, he didn't look toward her. His stomach still churned. He started the engine and pulled out, barely glancing back to check that he had room to barge into the flow of traffic. As he accelerated, he opened his door and slammed it shut more firmly.

Only then did he scan the rear-view mirror for his pursuer. He saw her break into a trot until she reached a blue sedan about half a block away. A minute later, she zigzagged away from the curb and started after him.

Ray fumed, contemplating the downtown traffic that kept him from racing ahead of the woman. She might trail a block behind him indefinitely. He turned left at the first legal opportunity, on a yellow light, hoping she would get trapped by the red. When he threw a look over his shoulder, though, he saw her still following, several cars behind. She must have run the red light. Where were the cops when you needed them?

I can't lead her to the church! Though St. Augustine's might be impenetrable to a psychic probe, if one of the enemy physically followed him there, a paranormal barrier would become irrelevant. What about his own apartment? No, if they knew where he lived, they would never leave him alone; eventually they would manage to trace Kate through him. He had to lose the follower.

Ray worked his way out of downtown by a series of turns, catching the change of the stoplights whenever possible. Somehow the blue sedan hovered a few car lengths behind him. Where did she learn to do that, the Paranormal University of Illusion Projection and Surveillance Driving? Sweat trickled down the nape of his neck. He picked up 19th Avenue and headed north toward Golden Gate Park. On a stretch of fast-moving road, he whipped in and out of holes in traffic with a daring he normally never displayed. His sports-car days lay far in the past, and his Volkswagen rumbled in protest at some of the surges of acceleration he demanded from it. The occasional squeals of brakes and honking of horns from offended drivers barely penetrated his consciousness.

When he checked the mirror again, he could still glimpse the woman's car in the distance. Damn it, is she prepared to follow me all the way to Sausalito? He

didn't want to cross the Golden Gate Bridge, since the holdup to pay toll might give her a chance to worm in closer to him. How about detouring into the park? No left turns allowed in this area--Ray took the next right, hoping the woman would miss the sudden move and be unsure which intersection he'd taken. He circled around the block, crossed 19th at the light, and drove into the western half of the park. A minute later, he saw that she had managed to catch up with him again. Good God, I can't keep this up forever. He made a couple more turns and found himself headed toward Spreckles Lake. For the moment, the enemy was out of sight.

Then a man's voice spoke: "Dr. Benson, you'll never get rid of her that way. Better let me help."

The mellow baritone sounded so distinct it might have come from the back seat. Ray's heart stuttered. He jumped, involuntarily jerking the wheel sideways. Straightening the car, he glanced over his shoulder. Nobody back there. Of course not, I would've noticed a man hiding in the back--I'm not that confused! "Where are you and who are you?" The next idea that came to mind was a transmitter somehow hidden in the car.

"John Joseph Jacobs. You might as well call me Johnny, and I'll call you Ray. But we don't have time for socializing, and this takes a lot of energy."

Ray slacked off the accelerator, afraid of crashing the car in his emotional turmoil. "Why should I believe you?"

"Come on, man, what do you feel?"

Against his mundane judgment, which said any technological wizardry should be believed rather than a ghost, Ray responded to that argument. None of the crawling revulsion he'd experienced when facing the enemy lingered now. Instead, the voice sounded like that of a trusted friend. "Okay, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Don't you know how to cloak?" When Ray remained silent, the voice said, "The way Sara did, that night when you saved her."

That remark went a long way toward confirming Ray's belief in the speaker. No living human being besides Mike knew about that event. "No, I don't have powers and abilities beyond those of mortal men. Compared to Sara, I'm a strictly a novice."

"Then I'll show you. It's not hard once you catch on to the trick."

Ray thought he saw fog thickening around the car. Not the pale gray of normal fog, but a luminescent cloud. "What's this?" he said, pumping the brake. "What good is something that keeps me from seeing out?" Was the ghost an imposter after all, luring him into a trap?

"Open your mind to me," Johnny said. "You may have to do this by yourself sometime. Don't worry, you'll be able to find your way. It's a kind of instinct. Later you should be able to maintain the veil without relying on the fog image."

Ray fought his first impulse to seal his barrier tight. Instead, he visualized his brain as a fortress and imagined lowering the drawbridge, opening the gates, raising the portcullis. A rush of warmth surrounded him like a spring breeze blowing into the car. The pearly, glowing mist around him became translucent, so that the objects surrounding him showed as dark silhouettes. The road unrolled like a shadowy ribbon ahead of him.

"Accelerate," Johnny said. "You're safe for the moment."

As Ray threaded a route through the park, back to 19th Avenue, he found himself guided by a sort of internal compass. He knew the directions of north, south,

east, and west with a confidence that made up for the spectral quality of what his eyes saw. He couldn't tell whether this directional sense had welled up from his own depths or been imposed on him by Johnny. Right now the question seemed irrelevant.

Finally he turned onto 19th and eased into the flow of southbound traffic. Trees and cars outside the window still resembled wraiths. When Johnny spoke again, Ray could imagine, if he didn't turn to look, that the other man sat beside him in the flesh. "You're all right now," said the disembodied voice. "She's circling the park, trying to figure out what happened to you." A sensation like the brush of dry fingers tickled Ray's mind. "You're cloaked from both paranormal and physical sight. If necessary, you could do one without the other. Let me show you how it's done--let me imprint the technique on your neurons." A shiver went through Ray. He gritted his teeth and ignored it. "Go ahead." He visualized flinging open the inner doors of his mental fortress. A curtain of multicolored light rippled before his eyes. He could almost feel and see the electricity leaping between his synapses. His foot jammed the brake. Horns blaring around him jolted him back to normal vision. "Damn!" He jerked the wheel to veer around a car whose bumper loomed in front of him. A hint of a chuckle sounded in Johnny's voice. "Sorry. My contact with the material plane is a bit shaky."

"If you can talk this way," Ray said, not bothering to keep the annoyance out of his voice, "why haven't you been guiding us all along? And why don't you speak to Kate and convince her of the danger she's in? Better yet, tell her how to get out of it!"

"I told you, this direct communication takes a bundle of energy. I can't do it often or keep it up for long. And some people are easier to contact than others." Johnny's tone held a trace of--weariness? Sadness? "Sara's young enough that she doesn't know it's supposed to be impossible. Among adults, trained mediums, those who aren't pure fakes, can sometimes hear. Kate isn't one, and if I'd tried, she might've thought she was going nuts. At the least, she'd have been terrified."

"I see. You're probably right." Ray maneuvered through downtown streets in the direction of St. Augustine's. Periodic checks of the rear-view mirror convinced him that he really had lost the pursuer.

"She needs time to get used to the idea. And too much closeness between us wouldn't be good anyway. She has to let go of me." The voice was definitely growing fainter.

"You must miss her, though. It must be a temptation." Ray caught himself feeling a mixture of sympathy for their grief and jealousy of the love they hadn't yet "let go of."

"Damn straight." Ray blushed, sure Johnny had sensed his emotions. The voice continued, "But taking care of her and Sara is your job now. Do it right, you hear?"

Upon the last word, Johnny departed. Ray felt his absence as palpably as if a man-shaped vacuum had displaced the air in the passenger seat. "I hear," Ray said to the emptiness. "I will."

"You told him what?" Kate heard the strident tone of her demand but didn't feel like apologizing for it.

Ray's face reddened. "Claiming we're engaged seemed like the best way to get your boss to trust me. If you don't want to go ahead with this deception, you can tell him I exaggerated."

"Exaggerated!" After a glance toward the office doorway to make sure Sara hadn't decided to wander in, Kate folded her arms and said, "What other stories did you feed to Ned?" She extended her suspicious glare to Mike, sitting behind the desk with an expression of detached patience.

Ray perched on the arm of a chair, his hands flapping nervously as he talked. "I said you were hiding because you'd received some threatening calls."

"For a guy who hangs out with a priest, you lie a lot," said Kate.

"It turns out he actually has gotten anonymous calls, asking for you. Some woman who wouldn't identify herself."

Mike sat up straight, gripping the edge of the desk. "They suspect they didn't succeed in getting rid of you, Kate."

Ray nodded. "That's right. When I left Boyle's office, a woman was waiting for me. The same one who took Sara."

Kate pressed a hand to her chest. She felt as if her heart hammered against the bone. "She threatened you?"

"In words only," said Ray. "And she cast an illusion over me. She seems to be good at that. I broke out of it. When I drove away, she tried to follow me."

Kate sat down hard, fighting vertigo. She realized a second later, though, that Ray's calm tone meant the enemy hadn't succeeded.

"How did you lose her?" said Mike.

Ray threw a harried look at Kate, then spoke directly to the priest. "I heard a man's voice, guiding me. He identified himself as John Jacobs. Certain indications led me to trust him."

Kate said in a hoarse whisper, "Johnny spoke to you from beyond the grave? That's ridiculous."

Mike fixed his eyes on her. "After everything else you've experienced?"

"And I'm here, aren't I?" said Ray. "I don't have any other explanation for my escape."

Sensing his embarrassment, Kate suspected he was suppressing part of the incident. She had no desire to cross-examine him, since the little he'd said gave her more than enough to deal with. "Why would Johnny talk to you and not to me?"

"He said it would have scared you, and you wouldn't have believed in it."

"Dear God, he's right. I would've thought I was losing my mind." Tears welled up in her eyes. She impatiently rubbed them away.

Ray stared at the floor. "He also said something about temptation."

"Contacting you might be the worst move he could make," Mike said quietly.

"Communication between the living and the dead can be a snare for both. The living have duties on earth, and the dead need to move on."

Kate shook her head. "I don't want to think about it." The very idea that she was bad for Johnny lacerated her heart. She turned to Ray. "Anonymous phone calls, people following you... All right, I guess I have to do what you two

suggested. I'll retreat to Ardash." The very words tasted bitter. "I can't risk Sara anymore. And your other suggestion makes sense, too. I'll tell people, the few who have to know I'm alive, that Ray and I are getting married. It'll be simpler that way, especially with old friends like Ned."

Ray blushed, and she felt her face heating in response. "Mr. Boyle wants you to phone him to confirm that I wasn't lying. And by the way, you probably shouldn't give the receptionist your name. Once your boss has heard from you, he'll be glad to send you manuscripts to work on, using me as a courier."

"Makes sense. I shouldn't be receiving any mail in my own name here." She was already assuming the habit of secrecy; what kind of person would it change her into?

"I can collect whatever shows up at your apartment," Ray said, avoiding her eyes, "and I'll tell Mrs. Pacheco the same story. I think you'll have to give up the place, though--what if they investigate and find out you haven't?"

Kate felt a stubborn look settling on her face. Mike said, "He's right. If you're going through with this, half measures would be a waste of effort."

She covered her eyes for a few seconds. "Oh, all right. Break the lease. Tell the manager I'm dead or swear him to secrecy, I don't care."

Mike touched her hand lightly, instantly withdrew. "Ray, when you confronted that woman who tried to follow you, did she say anything that might be useful to us?"

"She didn't reel off a full confession, if that's what you mean. Nor did she deny what she was after. And the conversation confirmed that Eugene Martlet is behind her."

Mike visibly perked up. "Well, that's something. Any idea who she is, what's her connection with him?"

"Nothing definite. She called him her associate and her superior. That could mean almost anything." With a sidelong glance at Kate, as if he didn't want her to hear the next sentence, he said, "She made one remark that puzzled me, though, something about Martlet draining my life in the process of interrogating me."

Kate stifled a gasp. "Ray, did she try to--"

"Abduct me or otherwise physically harm me? No, I think all she came prepared for was reconnaissance. She implied that next time I wouldn't get off so easily. Thank God Johnny taught me that cloaking trick."

"What trick? You mean, like what you claim Sara did for you?"

Ray frowned. "Damn, I didn't mean to let that slip. I don't want to trip your credulity scale too far at one sitting, when you're still trying to assimilate all this. Your use of the word 'claim' proves you still--"

"Quit trying to shelter me!"

Mike interceded to defuse the conflict. "About your question, Ray--if Martlet is what we suspect, an entity from Outside wearing a human mask, he would eat ordinary food only as camouflage. His true nourishment would be life-energy, preferably human. He wouldn't be able to absorb much from his henchmen without weakening them beyond the point of usefulness."

"Then the most nourishing life-force probably wouldn't come from a lesser power like me," said Ray. "He'd prefer somebody with--" He stopped abruptly, as if suddenly realizing what he was saying.

"With special abilities, like me or Sara, right?" said Kate. "Don't try to play coy, Ray. I can figure it out; I'm not that stupid. Great. I'm not only a target, I'm a gourmet snack!"

"We won't let that happen," said Mike. "Once you're back home, at the cabin, you and Sara should be safe. But you can't rush up there on a moment's notice. There are things to do, especially shielding the area. Ray and I will take care of that, when you've made the more mundane arrangements."

"Shielding?" Her head felt clogged with undigested information bits.

"The same as this house," Ray said. "Once Mike and I complete the ceremony, Ardath should become as invisible to the enemy as St. Augustine's is."

Mike nodded. "But I wouldn't feel safe sending you and Sara away from here without some training. Also, you have to get your financial affairs straight. If we want to maintain the fiction of your death, Ray better handle those matters. For instance, they might think to check whether your bank account is still active. Give Ray power of attorney--well, we'll discuss it later."

"Good." She'd been nagged by a headache all day, a result of fragmented sleep. Every night she woke up several times, wondering why she wasn't at home and having to orient herself before she could settle down again. She had to force herself to refrain from obsessively checking on Sara each time.

Mike, pasting on a cheerful expression, emerged from behind the desk. "I've invited Arlene Grant to drop in for a bridge game after dinner. You mentioned that you used to play."

Yes, Kate recalled casually mentioning that fact in one of their conversations. She felt half-grateful that Mike had remembered, and thought of arranging a distraction for her, but half-annoyed that he assumed she needed entertaining. Well, she had to admit she did. She'd spent most of the day working on kindergarten level skills with Sara, who'd treated the exercise books as an amusing game. No fear, so far, that she felt pressured by the work. Instead, Sara's leap into the realm of reading, like a fledgling bird flapping its wings, made Kate feel vaguely negligent that she hadn't started lessons earlier. Still, this activity didn't keep the hours from dragging by or completely dam the undercurrent of fear. She missed her normal routine and productive work. She managed to thank the priest for arranging the diversion, then sought out a phone extension in a private nook for her call to Ned. Though she felt a bit silly taking the precaution, she announced herself by her maiden name, as "Ms. Birch." The relief in his voice, as he thanked the Lord she was all right, made her feel a little better. Her face warmed with self-consciousness when she explained about her sudden engagement to Ray. Good thing she didn't have to spin this line face to face, for Ned would certainly realize she was lying. She confirmed the fictitious phone threats she'd supposedly received and listened to what few details Ned was willing to offer about his own set of anonymous calls. After Kate explained about the forthcoming move to Ardath and arranged for Ray to act as a courier between her and Ned, she hung up with profound gratitude at having the ordeal over with. It didn't help that Ned expressed such heartfelt joy for her fresh start and satisfaction that she'd found a nice guy to take care of her.

Over baked chicken at supper--Kate had insisted on helping, loathing her non-paying guest status--Sara asked, "Mommy, are you and Dr. Ray getting married?"

Kate blushed at the enthusiasm in her eyes and voice. Ray turned red, swallowed iced tea the wrong way, and spluttered into a napkin. Mike looked inquiringly at Kate; he didn't show the least contrition for his role in this awkwardness.

Darn it, I should've been more careful talking to Ned. "No, munchkin, you must have misunderstood something you overheard." Her daughter's expectant gaze told

Kate that evasion wouldn't work. "You know we have to hide for a while?" Sara nodded. "Dr. Ray is going to help us, so we're going to pretend we're getting married. Just for now." Kate wondered why the pretense bothered her so much. Not just because of Sara? Oh, Lord, it can't be that I'm attracted to him, can it? Sara's shoulders drooped. Her obvious disappointment made Kate resent Mike and Ray for suggesting this scheme. A second later, Sara brightened up. "Maybe when we stop hiding, you can get married for real."

Kate's cheeks burned, and Ray's embarrassment mirrored hers. Abruptly the funny side struck her, making her giggle. Ray grinned back.

Mike, apparently taking pity on the two of them, said, "It's not that easy, Sara. If you're finished eating, why don't you go look for Yasmin?"

After Sara left the room, Mike excused himself and headed for the front of the house. They'd eaten in the kitchen again, since the Grand Canyon puzzle still covered the dining room table. Kate wondered whether Mike ever used it for meals. He reappeared with the evening paper. "I thought you should know about this." He handed her the newspaper, folded open to an inner page.

The relevant headline immediately trapped her gaze: MASS MURDER SUSPECT DEAD. The man who'd perpetrated that slaughter on Sunday had died while under guard in a hospital intensive care ward. To all appearances, his death wasn't related to his self-inflicted bullet wound. Instead, he had suffered an unexpected and unexplained heart attack.

Kate's first reaction was relief that he couldn't endanger her again. Disgusted with herself, she quickly skimmed the relevant facts and thrust the paper away.

Ray scanned the article more slowly. "You don't think it's natural, do you?"

Mike said, "Impossible to tell, but he had no history of cardiac disease. The enemy could have decided to eliminate him by an undetectable method."

Kate rubbed her forehead. The headache behind her eyes was coming back. "Why bother?"

"Maybe they were concerned that he'd remember too much," Mike said, "or remember a voice ordering him to aim for a woman and a little girl. Or maybe killing him was just a standard precaution for them."

"It's so hard for me to get used to the idea of people--creatures--who have such powers," Kate said, "or view killing so casually."

"If they're not human," said Ray, "human life or death would mean nothing to them except as related to their convenience. And lots of human beings, unfortunately, devalue life, too."

"I know, I know," said Kate, "but I never met any before."

About the time Sara got into her pajamas, Arlene arrived for the bridge game. This time she brought a golden cocker spaniel on a leash. Yasmin, who'd been curled on the living room couch, emitted a resentful hiss and darted under a chair.

"I thought Sara might like to meet one of my pets," Arlene said. When Kate called Sara from the bedroom, Arlene introduced the dog as Bilbo. Sara sat on the rug with the spaniel in her lap, fondling his silky ears and giggling when the plume of the wagging tail tickled her feet.

"Can you bring your kitties to visit next time?"

"Cats don't enjoy car trips very much," Arlene said, "and Yasmin wouldn't like it. Maybe someday you and your mom can visit my house."

"Okay," Sara agreed, "after we finish hiding."

Tears stung Kate's eyes at the child's casual remark. Will she have to grow up thinking that's what the world is like?

Having finished *A Wrinkle in Time*, Kate started reading the first chapter of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* before tucking Sara in. Kate had a faint memory of reading part of the Narnia series in elementary school and abandoning it. Since she'd run across the entire set in Mike's collection, she decided this would be a good chance to discover what she'd missed.

Once Sara was settled, Kate joined the others for cards in the kitchen. She expected Ray and Mike to update Arlene on the enemy's latest moves. Mike, though, seemed to take seriously Arlene's earlier statement that she didn't want to know the details. Instead, the visitor told anecdotes about pets she had owned over the years or housed in her shop, like the Siamese cat who loved watermelon. Kate found herself forgetting about her troubles for five or ten minutes at a stretch.

When Arlene and Ray finally left together, Kate didn't feel sleepy. All evening, she'd been bracing herself--whenever the conversation and game failed to distract her--for an experiment she planned to try. She'd had enough of her own cowardice; Ray's reported experience had convinced her that she needed to develop a firm grip on her powers. She hated the idea that the other side, whatever they actually were, could slap her around like a leaf in a hurricane. What would happen if she took the offensive for a change?

Kate had decided to try that mirror-gazing trick Mike had demonstrated. And this time she'd work without him. If she could get results alone, she would know for sure that the talent belonged to her, not stimulated by unconscious input from the priest. She needn't tell him about the attempt unless something noteworthy emerged from it.

She strove to ignore the fear that cramped her bowels. She wouldn't necessarily view some terrible future this time. What she saw, if anything, might show a brighter alternative. And just possibly, by demonstrating her openness to other dimensions of reality, she might merit contact with Johnny.

She didn't know whether she desired or fear that.

As soon as the faint sounds of Mike walking to and fro on the floor above her ceased, she sat cross-legged on her bed with a hand mirror on her lap. Over her shoulder one bedside lamp glowed, the only light in the room, hitting the mirror at an angle. Wouldn't a candle work better? She decided not to bother, since Mike hadn't used any special paraphernalia.

Breathing slowly and deeply, she focused on the spot of light. She narrowed her eyes against the glow. Imitating the process she'd undergone with the priest's guidance, she relaxed her muscles, from the toes up. As each appendage went limp, warmth stole through her, and she became lightheaded. Why not enjoy the floating sensation and forget about crashing the barriers of the unknown?

This is no time to chicken out. Get your mind on the job. Without Mike's help, how could she trigger a vision? I forgot to ask him for the magic words. She suppressed a giggle and corrected the breathing rhythm that the mental lapse had disrupted. She squinted, fragmenting the reflected light.

The mirror clouded. At first, the surface fogged, as if she'd breathed on it too heavily. Then swirls of mist gathered and thickened inside the glass. Kate's eyes ceased to blink. A miniature whirlpool within the cloud spun more and more rapidly, until it split and widened. Through the gap, she saw a pair of human figures in a forest.

Two young women, or perhaps teenage girls. They wore outfits of green and autumnal brown, in styles reminiscent of the popular image of Peter Pan or Robin Hood. Each carried an unsheathed sword. Each had light brown hair with

honey-gold highlights, the younger, slimmer girl's a little darker. She wore a long braid, while the other girl's hair was trimmed to shoulder length.

That one, apparently the older, turned and stared over her shoulder, as if she could see through the glass and meet Kate's eyes. Kate gasped. The scene rippled and almost dissolved, so that she had to breathe deeper and concentrate to recover it.

The girl had Sara's face, fourteen to sixteen years older.

Then who's the other one? The two girls resumed walking, light-footed and quick, as if confident of their goal. Kate glimpsed the younger one in profile; her features showed kinship with Sara. Refusing to speculate, Kate blanked her thoughts and laid herself open to the vision.

At least this one isn't scary, so far. The forest looked wild but not immediately dangerous. The young women threaded their way among trees as massive and tall as the oldest redwoods of the Northwest. Their shade precluded a tangle of undergrowth; the girls stalked on a carpet of leaves. Incongruously, the lower limbs of the trees drooped with green tendrils like Spanish moss. Lichen and fungus were layered on their trunks. The scene suggested moisture, fecundity, and stillness. No sounds came from the girls' steps or the waving of their arms to clear away branches or cobwebs. Kate could have imagined she was watching a silent movie set in a twilight realm.

What's the point of this? Nothing's happening. Yet the grown-up Sara and her companion seemed to be heading for a predetermined destination. It occurred to Kate that this must be a symbolic forest, like the "dark wood" at the beginning of the Divine Comedy, and the girls wielded allegorical swords. The weapons foreshadowed danger, which might be real in this context.

Shortly the two arrived at an outcropping of rock with a cleft in its side. Sara slipped into the gap, followed by the other girl. Kate wanted to scream at them not to go in there, but her trance paralyzed her voice. Besides, at the back of her mind she recognized the futility of speaking to figures in a vision.

The scene changed to the inside of a cave. The swords emitted a golden glow that splashed onto slimy walls. It's everybody's favorite monster lair, straight from Hollywood. Recognizing the source of the imagery, though, didn't quell the fear rising in Kate's throat. She knew a genuine danger lurked in the depths of the cave, whatever form it might wear. Sara and the other girl tiptoed over the irregular, slippery floor. The passage narrowed until their shoulders brushed the sides. They traced its twisting path to an arch that opened into a hollow chamber whose ceiling was invisible in the dark overhead. Most of the cavern floor was covered by a pool of oily-looking water.

The two women marched to the verge of the pool. No, don't do that! Kate silently cried. She knew the monster hid there.

Sara opened her mouth in a shout that made no sound, like everything else in the vision. A trumpeted challenge, Kate thought. The water of the tarn began to bubble. The girls held their swords ready. Something erupted from the water. Kate's eyes couldn't seize it. She got an impression of tentacles, which writhed so violently that she couldn't count them. She thought it had one giant orb of an eye; the next moment, she glimpsed dozens of eyes, faceted like an insect's. At the creature's heart glittered a whirlpool of light that made her head ache when she tried to focus. It looked greenish most of the time; when she stared directly into it, though, the color oscillated from one end of the spectrum to the other. The web of rays irresistibly drew her to trace its Moebius pattern. Frustrated though she was, yet she was also grateful that she couldn't see it

clearly. The fragmented impressions that reached her made her dizzy with terror, though she couldn't pin down anything specifically horrible about the thing's shape. Some people might even call it beautiful--

The thing surged toward the two figures on the bank. Sara and her companion thrust their weapons toward it. It stretched out to engulf them--

With a stifled cry, Kate dropped the mirror on the bed. She felt the mattress sway and vibrate beneath her. For a second she thought an earthquake was assailing the house. Then she realized the sensations were within her. She clutched the bedspread and breathed deeply to steady herself. Her eyes burned from staring.

Should I tell Mike about that? She decided there was no point in discussing such a cryptic experience with him. She'd accomplished her main goal of discovering that the vision came from inside her, that she didn't unconsciously use Mike's talent as a crutch. As for the content of the vision, it made about as much sense as the ravings of the Delphic Oracle, stimulated by breathing poisonous vapors from a crevice in the earth. And like those ancient prophecies, Kate's ESP needed an interpreter. I sure can't figure it out on my own, so what good is it? She'd gained nothing from what she'd seen except an impression of danger that only increased her emotional turmoil.

I'll have to let Mike train me. Sara, too. No matter how much I detest the idea. Gritting her teeth on that resolution, she turned off the light and tried to sleep.

* * * *

Mike cleared the following afternoon for testing Sara. Kate spent the morning in a dull fog of combined boredom and impatience. Aside from kindergarten instruction for Sara, which she didn't want to overdo, she lacked useful occupation. Ray hadn't yet brought any work from Ned. Sponging off Mike and St. Augustine's parish made her feel tangled in a sticky net of enforced gratitude. A hired woman came in to clean the rectory once a week, so Kate couldn't lend any help that way. She did take over the cooking and dishwashing as much as Mike would allow, since she knew better than to offer money for her keep. Still, that left her nothing to do but play with Sara most of the time. Much as Kate loved her daughter, she feared a few more weeks of the child's nearly exclusive company would drive her stir-crazy. Especially when Sara was already complaining about being confined to the house. At least their apartment had a nearby park for outdoor play.

By early afternoon Kate almost welcomed Mike's ESP trials. As soon as he'd changed from his running outfit--she'd discovered he jogged on his lunch break several days a week--he invited Kate and Sara into the office. "Sara, we're going to start with some card games," he said. "But first I want to help you get into the right mood. Will you look very closely at this for me?" He reached into his pocket for a large cat's-eye marble, which he rolled in the palm of his hand.

"Okay," Sara answered. "That's pretty." She sat in a small chair Mike had brought into the study especially for her. Mike leaned in a casual pose on the edge of the desk, with Kate sitting in the background, watching. She clenched her fists in her lap when she realized that Mike intended to hypnotize Sara. I mustn't project anxiety to her. She thinks this is fun; let her keep thinking so.

Sara gazed at the marble in Mike's hand while he counted slowly backwards from ten. The child's eyes became fixed, her hands limp on her knees. The immediate

response surprised and dismayed Kate. Mike gave her a half-smile of attempted reassurance. "This just means she really wants to cooperate. It's a positive sign." To Sara he said, "Now we're going to try some experiments, just to find out what you can do. You'll be wide awake but completely relaxed. Everything is just fine. You're going to do your best and have fun. All right?"

Sara nodded. When Mike counted to three, her placid face regained its normal alertness. "What are we going to do now, Father Mike? May I play with that marble?"

"Why don't you just hold it in your left hand," he said, "while we do our experiments. Do you know which one is your left?"

"Sure." She held up the correct arm. Mike gave her the marble, and she closed her fingers around it.

"That will help you think," he said. He stepped behind the desk, sat down, and took out the deck of Rhine cards. "Look carefully at these and try to remember what they look like. Can you draw these pictures?" He handed Sara a notepad and pencil. She frowned in concentration, sketching each of the symbols. Kate stood up for a second to look over Sara's shoulder. Considering her age, Sara reproduced the squiggles and circles quite recognizably.

"Now, I'm going to mix up the cards," Mike said, "and you won't be able to see them. I won't either. You try to guess what order they're stacked in." He shuffled as he talked. "When you feel ready, start drawing the pictures in the same order you think they are in the deck. All right, any time now." He laid the cards face down on the desk.

Kate wondered if Sara could actually understand the instructions. Mike used a pretty sophisticated vocabulary for a preschooler. Yet the child didn't seem fazed. After closing her eyes for a minute, she opened them and began scribbling on the pad. She hummed the Sesame Street theme under her breath, as she sometimes did when coloring in her workbooks. A few minutes later, she stopped. "All done."

Mike reached for the pad. Sara looked unconcerned as she passed it to him. To Kate's relief, so far Sara didn't think this exercise was any big deal. Mike flipped the cards over, checking each against the penciled list. Kate saw disappointment cloud his face, though he avoided showing it too obviously. So perhaps Sara didn't have the fantastic powers he expected. After the first scan of the deck, though, the crease smoothed from his forehead, and he ran through the cards again. "Well, will you look at this!"

"Did I do it right?" Sara asked.

"Just fine," said Mike. "Kate, I've never seen a result quite like it. She positioned each symbol two cards ahead of where it actually is in the deck, but the order is perfect." He grinned at Sara. "You almost had me fooled for a minute."

Sara giggled. "Can we do it again?"

"Let's try something different. Kate--" He sorted out ten cards and handed them to her. "Shuffle them up nice and random. Sara, I'm giving you ten cards with the same pictures your Mommy has." He arranged the cards fan-style and placed them in Sara's hands. "When she looks at each card, you put the one just like it on the desk, starting over here." He touched the desk top at Sara's left.

"Do I get to peek?" she said.

"No, that's the game; you have to look with your mind. Kate, focus on each symbol so she can pick it up from your thoughts."

"All right, I'll try." After shuffling her cards, Kate gazed at each one in

order, then turned it face down on the cushion beside her. Even after all she'd seen she felt a bit silly trying to transmit brain waves to her daughter. Why can't this stuff have some practical use, like keeping track of where she is when she goes out and calling her for lunch without yelling? The depressing thought intruded: I wonder when she'll be able to go outside again?

"Let's see what we've got." Mike took the cards from Kate and laid them in a row above the row Sara had made. Kate stood at his side, watching his every move. If he was using sleight of hand, it was too tricky for her to follow. Anyhow, she trusted him. And she couldn't deny that all ten cards were accurately paired with Sara's choices.

"This is fantastic," Mike chortled. "I'd loved to hook up both of you to an EEG and see what happens to your alpha waves when you do that. Well, maybe some other time." He put away the cards and produced a pair of dice.

Over the next couple of hours, Kate watched Sara make the dice pop up "snake eyes" twelve throws out of a dozen and reel off every detail of a photograph Mike was looking at out of the child's sight on the other side of the room.

After repeating these performances several times, Sara didn't seem tired.

Instead, she complained that the games were too easy. Mike placed a Coke bottle on the desk and handed Sara a red rubber ball too large for the bottle's neck.

Seated two or three yards away, she focused on the ball cupped in her palm. It vanished--and reappeared in the bottom of the bottle.

Sara turned to face Kate's dumbfounded stare. "It's okay, Mommy. That was fun." She especially enjoyed transforming a row of paper clips into a spaghetti-like tangle, without touching them. At an offhand suggestion from Mike, she made the mass float several inches into the air. She kept it hovering for over a minute before it collapsed onto the blotter. "I'm sorry, Father Mike, it wouldn't stay up anymore."

"That's perfectly all right, honey, you're doing wonderful," he said. He looked slightly shell-shocked himself. Kate was glad that something could surprise him, and also obscurely relieved that Sara's talent had limits. What a monster she could become if she caught on to what she could do with this stuff!

Mike had apparently thought of that possibility, for he said to Sara, "This is very important. You mustn't try any of these things by yourself. I have to be here to help you. Do you understand?"

Sara nodded. "Daddy already told me that. He's glad you're teaching me."

"Why don't you go play now?" Mike said. "You've worked enough for one day."

After Sara left, Kate said, "She still thinks Johnny's speaking to her. It gives me the shivers every time she comes out with something like that. I can't help it."

"It doesn't necessarily mean she hears a voice, as Ray did. More likely she gets an overall impression of affection, approval, guardianship. Is that so fearful to contemplate?"

"I guess not," Kate said. "Maybe when I have a few minutes to relax, I could even get used to it."

"It makes sense, after all. Some of the genes that gave her this talent must have come from your husband."

Kate shook her head. "Johnny never showed any sign of clairvoyance or--or anything."

"No?" Mike's quiet voice and steady gaze challenged her. "Not even as a premonition of his own death?"

Kate closed her eyes and mentally shoved away the image of Johnny's unusually

serious farewell when he'd left for that fatal ride. "He couldn't have! If he'd sensed it ahead of time, he wouldn't have left the house. He wouldn't have deserted us!"

She spent a while lying down in her bedroom, refusing to let herself yield to tears. After all this time, she ought to be far beyond fits of hysterical grief. And resentment. Would she ever stop resenting Johnny for dying? It was a downright stupid attitude. Maybe I should get therapy. She muffled damp-eyed giggles. As if I could afford it! And if I started telling a shrink about my clairvoyant daughter and the monsters chasing us, I'd find myself in the hospital so fast I'd leave skid marks.

She washed her face and looked for Sara in the TV room. Sara switched off the set as Kate entered. "I've seen this Sesame Street already. Mommy, I want to play outside. Can you take me to the park before supper?"

Kate heaved a sigh. Sometimes she had trouble remembering that her daughter was only a four-year-old, with limited understanding, no matter how bright and talented. "I've explained why we can't go out. I hope it won't be much longer, but for now we have to stay outside."

Sara tugged Kate's arm, and a whine sneaked into her voice, which was very unusual for Sara. "But I did everything right for Father Mike, didn't I? Why can't I go to the park now?"

"For heaven's sake, can't you leave me alone for one minute?" Kate grabbed Sara by the shoulders and gave her a vigorous shake.

Sara's eyes widened in alarm. Kate's grip went slack, and Sara scrambled backward out of arm's reach. "I'm sorry, Mommy!"

Kate fell to her knees, her eyes blurred with tears, and gathered Sara into her arms. "I'm sorry, too. Everything will be all right, don't be afraid!" She kept babbling until Sara eased out of the embrace, her normal composed self.

"Want to read my number work I did today?" Sara asked.

Kate admired the workbook pages from that morning, then retreated as soon as she could gracefully manage. She hadn't stopped feeling scared by her own outburst.

I might've hit her. I could have given her whiplash just doing what I did!

She found Mike in the kitchen, chopping carrots. Kate drooped into a chair and hid her face in her hands while she muttered the gist of what had happened.

She looked up when she felt his hand on her shoulder. "You must have spanked her sometimes in the past."

Kate sniffled. "Sure, when she was too little to understand anything else. And I've even yelled at her before. But always for a reason! Never like that!"

"Kate, all parents lose control sometimes, and you have more reason than most. Don't let it get you down."

"She's sick of being cooped up, and so am I. I don't know how much longer we can stand it." She rubbed her eyes. "Not that I don't appreciate everything you've done here."

"We'll get you moved to your own home up in the mountains soon. Meanwhile--" He paused, frowning as if unsure whether to continue. "Well, there's a kind of escape or vacation we could try. It would keep Sara distracted, and it's something I'd want to experiment with sooner or later anyway." He pulled up a chair next to her at the table.

"What are you getting at?" Somehow she knew he didn't mean an excursion on Amtrak.

"Do you know anything about astral projection?"

Chapter 11

Kate frowned. The words sounded familiar, but she couldn't get a grip on the meaning. "No, but I have a feeling I will soon."

"Various cultures and religions have different ideas about the composition of the human self. Some are more complicated than our twofold 'body-soul' division. The ancient Egyptians, for instance--" Mike broke off with a fleeting smile. "I didn't mean to launch into a lecture on comparative theology. Myself, I suspend judgment. We don't know the exact truth about these matters, so why pretend we do? The point is, many people believe in an astral body, an ethereal analogue of the self that can separate from the physical body and travel at will. For some people, anyway. Most of us can leave our bodies only in moments of crisis, such as the point of death. In a few individuals, the astral self is more loosely attached to the physical 'shell.'"

Wait a minute, this sounds a lot more serious than card-guessing! "You believe this?"

"I've never been able to accomplish it myself, but I've seen what I consider authentic instances."

She felt as if she were wading into deep currents again. "Is there anything you haven't seen?"

He leaned forward in his chair. "You and Sara should both attempt this. I think you're capable of learning the technique, and if so, you need to master it. Like any of these other powers, it could run away from you if you don't know how to handle it."

"Sara? You want Sara to project her spirit out of her body?" Kate was too baffled by the notion, at first, to be alarmed. "Couldn't it be dangerous?"

"Not with proper safeguards. This house, as I told you, is shielded. I think she would enjoy the experience. The exercises we tried today don't pose enough challenge." He gazed speculatively into the distance. "I've never met anyone like her before. Hard to imagine what she'll be capable of as an adult."

Kate tried to visualize the act he was proposing. It sounded like sheer fantasy.

"You think she'd enjoy it?" Sighing, she answered her own question. "Yeah, she probably would. She'll think it's a great new game. She's too young to recognize the impossible when she sees it."

Mike nodded as if congratulating Kate on getting the right answer on a pop quiz.

"That's one big reason why these things come so easily to her. Children are flexible and imaginative. They learn astral projection much more readily than adults do, I've been told."

"I don't know. How can I make decisions like that?" Two weeks previously, her heaviest problem had been whether she could afford to get the car tuned without dipping into the savings account. "You advise me to let her try?"

Mike thought over the question for a minute. "Yes, I do. I foresee no danger, and she'll need to understand the phenomenon, even if she seldom has reason to use it."

"You've been right so far. Okay, I'll let you try." Kate sensed a nagging voice

at the back of her mind that suggested she'd agreed only because, even after all that had happened, she didn't really believe this disembodied travel could be done.

* * * *

All the next day, galley proofs dropped off by Ray gave Kate a welcome relief from the occult, in the form of routine, familiar work. Mike set aside the evening, after supper, for the astral-projection exercise. This time he chose Sara's bedroom as the site, the part of the house where she would feel most secure.

Before they began, he explained to Kate, "The usual method of training this ability proceeds in stages: First, the subject is made comfortable with the hypnotic state. Sara has already achieved that, quicker and easier than I've ever heard of a child doing. Second, you'd be taught to produce sensory hallucinations, if you will, imagine you're going outside your body to observe it. The third stage sends the subject into more distant places, if only an adjacent room, to observe and describe in detail. Finally, the trained traveler can actually visit and communicate with other people on the astral plane. I've never personally met anybody who claimed to be able to do that."

"Thank goodness," Kate muttered. She took her place on a straight-backed chair near Sara's bed, where she arranged her arms and legs in a relaxed but alert posture, as Mike directed.

"Please don't interrupt, whatever you witness," he said. "Your role is to be a calm presence in the background."

Calm, yeah, right. She steadied herself with the deep-breathing exercises he'd been teaching her. I shouldn't have given up watching the yoga lady on TV; that stuff would come in handy now.

Mike left the bedroom to bring in Sara, barefoot in a nightgown. "We're going to try a new game," he said, "a new experiment."

"Experiment," she repeated, savoring the multisyllabic word.

Kate wondered how much of Mike's explanations Sara could absorb. He had told her earlier that Sara probably understood more than either of them suspected. "As your mother, you tend to forget how gifted she is. I wouldn't be surprised if she had a genius-level IQ."

Now he said, "I want to help you take a little trip. It's a special kind of trip, though, one you take with your mind, while you'll be sitting right here."

Sara's eyes lit up at the mention of a trip. "Do I get to go outside?"

"Only with your mind, not your body. And only as far as the front porch, no farther."

"Oh, goody, I can look at the yard."

Mike helped her onto the bed and directed her to sit cross-legged on the quilt.

"Listen carefully, Sara, this is very important. You must never try this by yourself, not until I say you're old enough. You need somebody to keep you from getting lost. Understand?"

The warning gave Kate a sudden chill. She hadn't thought of that factor before. A child wandering out of sight in a park or a shopping center was scary enough; how could she deal with a child who might get the notion to leave her body and flit around in ethereal form? That's too far-fetched! Let's just see if this works at all, before we start worrying about anything that wild.

Impressed by Mike's solemnity, Sara nodded, wide-eyed. The priest glanced toward the door. Following his gaze, Kate saw Yasmin padding into the bedroom, plumed tail held high. Mike extended his hand toward the cat as if he'd been waiting

for her. He scooped her up and placed her on Sara's lap. Instead of jumping off the bed, as Kate expected, Yasmin curled up with her tail and paws tucked under her chin.

"Yasmin will help you," Mike told Sara. "The first thing you'll do is get into that special kind of sleep, the way you did last time we played."

"I'm not sleepy yet," Sara said.

"It wasn't regular sleep, remember? We started by counting."

"Oh, yeah, awake-sleep."

Awake-sleep, Kate mentally echoed. And nobody even tried to explain hypnosis to her. Looks like I'm wasting my time; this kid should be teaching me.

"Put your hands on Yasmin's back. Feel how warm and soft she is." Mike ran his fingertips down Sara's arms, barely brushing the skin, and finished by stroking the curve of the cat's tail. "Now you have to make your arms floppy like spaghetti. Long, limp pieces of spaghetti."

Sara giggled for a second; then her facial muscles went slack as Mike traced the lines of her arms again. "That's right," he said. "Long, skinny strands of spaghetti. Your fingers feel like wet noodles. Next, imagine you're watching TV. What's your favorite show?"

"Sesame Street." The words were faint but clearly enunciated.

"Pretend you're watching Sesame Street. What do you see?"

The mundane topic not only relaxed Sara, it also lulled Kate to drop her guard. Exactly what he has in mind, I'll bet, she thought. Why was he using a more elaborate induction ritual this time? Did Sara have to sink into a deeper trance to accomplish this "astral projection" trick?

"I see Big Bird," Sara answered.

"What is he doing?"

"Singing. Dancing with Snuffy."

"Good." Mike lowered his voice. "Watch them dance. Watch the picture shrinking--getting smaller and smaller--very, very little--so little you can't even see Big Bird's face. Just a teeny dot of light in the middle of the screen. Keep watching that dot of silver light."

Sara acknowledged the instruction with a dreamy nod.

"Very good," said Mike. "Let the dot disappear. Now it's time to take a trip with your mind. Are you ready?"

"Okay."

"Look at the dresser. Imagine you see yourself standing over there. Pretend you see another Sara standing in front of the dresser." After a pause, he said, "Do you see you?"

The child nodded again.

"What do you look like?"

"Like me."

Mike cast a self-deprecating grin at Kate and tried again. "What are you wearing?"

"My dark green shirt," she murmured, "and my sky-colored shorts. And a green bow on my ponytail."

Kate blinked. Sara was indeed describing the outfit she wore at that moment.

"What are you doing?" Mike said. "Just standing there?"

Sara's mouth quirked in a momentary smile. "Hopping on one foot."

"Now pretend--" For a second Mike's voice quavered. "Pretend you, this real you, is inside the you standing over there. Can you do that?"

Sara's forehead creased in concentration. "Okay, I'm over there."

Mike emitted an almost inaudible hiss of breath. Despite his advice to stay calm, Kate found herself clenching her fists on her thighs. He said, "Sara, can you see yourself sitting on the bed?"

"Sure. I'm petting Yasmin. She looks asleep. I look sort of sleepy, too."

"Can you see me?"

"I see the back of your head in the chair," she said.

Mike threw Kate an exultant glance. She didn't understand why he looked so triumphant but was afraid to interrupt with questions. Sensing her puzzlement, he leaned over to whisper, "She's literally outside herself. No child her age can imagine that kind of perspective." Then he said to Sara, "Try to move around now. Walk to the door and into the hall."

"I don't have to walk," the child said. "I float. Feels funny, like in a swimming pool. I've got a long blue leash."

Kate was mystified by Mike's renewed elation. "Good, that's important. Make sure your leash stays tied to the you on the bed," he told Sara. "Are you in the hall?"

"Yeah. It's kind of dark."

"Go into the room next door, please. Not your mother's bedroom, the other one. What do you see?"

"Blue rug--big chairs--it's not very light in here, either."

"Try to go into the kitchen," he said. "The lights are on there; it'll be more interesting."

"Okay, I'm floating down the hall." Sara smiled again. "This is fun. Like flying." A pause. "Now I'm in the kitchen. There's a broken plate on the floor. I bet Yasmin knocked it over."

"I'll bet she did," Mike whispered to Kate. "I was in a hurry to start this and stacked the dishes without rinsing them." Aloud, he said to Sara, "Do you want to come back? Are you getting tired?"

"Course not. This is neat." Sensing Sara's delight even through the dreamy monotone, Kate felt better about this "experiment." So far, it didn't appear dangerous.

Sara said, "Can I go outside now? On the porch?"

"I did promise, didn't I?" the priest muttered. "Very well, Sara, you may open the door and move onto the back porch. But only the porch."

"Don't hafta open the door," she said. "I just float out." Her drowsy eyelids drooped farther, until her eyes became mere slits. "It feels good out here. I see the parking lot and the fence way back there. I smell the flowers around the porch."

"Roses," Mike said.

"I want to see the roses in the front yard, too. I'm flying around the house."

"Be careful," Mike said. "Stay very close to the walls."

"I'm okay." Sara's placid tone didn't vary. "I still have my leash. Now I'm on the front porch. The roses and the grass smell nice."

"It's time to come inside now." Kate heard tension in the priest's voice. "Float in through the front door."

"Not yet. I want to play in the grass, please."

"Sara, wait--"

"I'm in the front yard now. The grass is wet--tickles." Her forehead crinkled.

"My leash looks thinner."

"You'd better come back." His voice sounded tight, as if he restrained his fear with a strangling grip.

Kate pressed her knuckles against her mouth to keep from endangering his concentration by crying out.

"I like it out here," Sara replied, though uncertainty crept into her tone. "I like the wind--"

"Sara, come inside!" Mike's voice whiplashed with urgency. "Come back here at once!"

"It's getting dark!" Sara moaned. "Where's the house? And I can't see my leash anymore! The Dark--Mommy, Father Mike--the Dark's in front of the house!"

Kate twisted the hem of her shirt in both hands. Terror choked her.

Mike clasped Sara's shoulders. "Listen to me. Come back to me as quick as you can. Follow my voice. I'll hold the end of your leash. The Dark can't stop you from coming back."

Her face contorted with fear, Sara cried over and over, "Father Mike--Father Mike--" Her hands flailed in the air.

The priest captured them in both of his. "Come to us, Sara. Bring the two parts of you back together."

The child only continued her writhing. "She doesn't hear or feel me," Mike whispered. "Kate, I'm afraid you'll have to go after her and guide her in."

"What! How can I?"

He momentarily looked away from Sara to impale Kate with a keen stare. "You've done it before, you know. Those two near-death experiences."

"You mean that was--" A rush of anger blinded her. If she'd known that was an instance of astral travel, she never would have allowed him to coach Sara into it! Kate trampled the emotion underfoot and forced her attention to the present crisis. "Fine, what do I have to do?"

"Give me your hand." He guided her to the bedside, where she knelt so that he could place her hand on Yasmin in Sara's lap. "Close your eyes and count to ten with me. When you reach ten, you will be in trance, as you were the other times."

Taming her breath to a steady rhythm, Kate did as he ordered. By now, she knew how to slip automatically into a light hypnotic state. When she felt the detached, drifting sensations envelop her, Mike said, "Now you must reach for Sara. Step out of your body and search for her. Meanwhile, anchor yourself on the sound of my voice. You must remain tied to your physical self."

A spasm of fear paralyzed Kate. She had to fling herself into the void that had almost swallowed her twice in the past. I have no choice--Sara's out there! Her whole being surged outward in quest of her daughter. Abruptly, without any sense of change or motion, she found herself hovering in midair. Gazing down, she saw Sara cross-legged on the bed with Yasmin in her lap, the priest leaning forward in his chair, his eyes fixed in concentration, and herself kneeling motionless on the floor. A glowing blue ribbon trailed from her ethereal abdomen to her body below.

"Yes, I'm attached to my body," she said. She noticed the lips of her physical body moving as she spoke.

"It's very important that you preserve that link," Mike said. "Can you find Sara?"

Kate heard Sara's cries with more than her physical ears. If anything, the call sounded clearer in this form. Moreover, Kate felt herself tugged as if by a magnet toward the front of the house. She flowed unimpeded through doors and walls. She emerged on the front porch. The house and yard looked recognizably themselves, yet ghostly, not solid.

When she rotated to orient herself on Sara, a black wall sprang up in her path. She knew this piece of Dark intended to bar Sara from the house and keep her from saving her daughter. Kate yelled a wordless challenge of anger and frustration. She beat against the blackness but felt no change.

Sara's thoughts touched hers, thought. "Mommy, you're here, make it go away!" So at least Sara could feel her presence.

"Sara, I'm trying to get to you! Hold out your hand. Can you reach me?"

"Can't feel anything--the Dark--"

Still hammering against the barrier, Kate glimpsed from the corner of her eye a tentacle oozing out of the mass. The pseudopod elongated in her direction. It's trying to sever my ribbon, she thought. It'll cut off my astral leash, like it did Sara's. Or was the breaking of the link an illusion meant to terrify them into getting lost? Either way, Kate didn't know how to reverse the effect.

"Help us!" she cried. "Somebody, for God's sake, help us!" She felt a warm clasp, like the touch of Mike's hand back in the bedroom, light-years distant. She might as well have been adrift in interstellar space, for all the concrete help he could lend, yet the gesture did tame her panic.

At that instant, a flash of blue-white light shattered the wall of darkness. She glimpsed Sara's face in the afterglow. A glittering strand of blue coruscated from Sara's chest to a man's hand. Kate's vision was too dazzled to make out anything but the hand, which thrust the ribbon at her.

She grasped it and tugged. Sara floated toward her. Mike's voice faintly called, "Now, Kate! Bring her in, quick!"

With a firm grip on Sara's lifeline, Kate backtracked her own leash to the porch. Once there, she felt the house's shield close around her like a tangible fortress wall. Still, she lost no time in rushing to the bedroom, with her daughter in tow.

A stunning jolt knocked out Kate's breath. For a second, blackness filled her eyes, and nausea hit her in the pit of the stomach. It passed immediately, though, leaving her free to open her eyes. Sara, still holding the cat, shivered. The girl's face settled into its familiar lines like a picture jarred into focus.

Mike said, "Sara, you're back."

"Yes, I'm here now," she said in a tiny voice.

"I'll count back from three," he said, "and you can wake up. Everything is all right now. Three--two--one."

Sara nudged Yasmin off her lap and reached for Kate, who wrapped her arms around the child and squeezed so hard that Sara snuffled in protest. "I'm okay now, Mommy. Daddy helped you find me."

Of course it had to be him--why didn't I realize? Kate thought. She glowered over Sara's head at Mike.

"We'll talk about it," he said quietly. "Better put her to sleep now." He patted Sara on the back.

"You were right, Father Mike," said the child. "I'll never, ever go out again unless you say so."

He bent to kiss the top of her head. "Someday, when you're grown, you'll know what's safe, and you'll be strong enough to do anything you want."

"Yes. G'night." She seemed calm already, as she watched him leave the room.

After Kate read to Sara, helped her change for bed, and tucked her in, she stormed down the hall in search of Father Mike. She found him in the living room, leaning back in an armchair, his eyes closed, with a Bach cassette playing

softly on the stereo.

She snapped off the music. "Damn it, how could you do that? How could you risk my little girl that way?"

Mike gazed up at her with red-rimmed eyes. "Believe me, you can't be much more shocked than I am. I never expected she would do so remarkably the first time, much less--" He visibly shuddered.

"Sure, you can talk, you didn't have to see and touch that dark thing." Her stomach lurched.

"Please, Kate, sit down."

She flung herself into a chair. "Damn you, Father, you claimed this house was safe!"

"It is. The house and its periphery are shielded. Sara wandered outside the boundary."

"It's not safe anymore." Kate turned cold as this thought struck her. "They know where we are now."

Mike shook his head. "I don't think so. By all indications, they're just groping. They probably have their antennae out for you and Sara all the time. Once she drifted outside the protected area, they fastened onto her. But that shouldn't mean they can place her physically. Now that both of you are back inside the shield, the enemy is blind to you again."

"I don't get it. Why can't they get a fix on our physical location?"

"As I understand it, the world as visible to occult sight--inner sight, as many people often call it--doesn't superimpose like a road map on the everyday world. The most they could've gained would be a general sense of your location, your distance and direction from them. That you're somewhere in downtown San Francisco, for example." He leaned over, wearily resting his head on his hands. "Nevertheless, I think the sooner we get you two out of here, the better. Lots of preparations to finish, like giving Ray that power of attorney so he can cover your tracks. This weekend, he and I will have to drive up to Ardath and get the whole town shielded."

And I'm supposed to have confidence in that, after what just happened? Yet Kate sensed that Mike, at least, sincerely believed they were safe for the moment and that he could make Ardath a secure haven. In spite of her rebellion against this whole business, it seemed her psychic talent--her intuition, at least--was expanding and making itself useful.

* * * *

That Friday, Arlene came over for another bridge evening. While Kate appreciated the gesture, the attempt at distraction didn't work too well because her worries about the imminent changes in her life kept her from concentrating on cards. Awareness that Ray and Mike planned to spend Saturday fortifying her mountain home preyed on her mind. So it was just as well that a headache forced Arlene to go home early.

Ray didn't leave; he was spending the night at the rectory to get an early start with the priest. When Mike muttered something about paperwork and withdrew into his study, Kate suspected a set-up. On the other hand, why would he make a point of leaving her alone with Ray? Matchmaking?--don't be silly. She blushed as she wondered what had put that idea into her head. You'd think I'd been considering it myself, which I haven't. I've got enough to worry about!

Never mind, she did enjoy having a chance to relax with Ray. He'd proved himself a good friend. She'd discovered that very day how much she'd come to trust him, when she signed multiple copies of a general power of attorney without a qualm.

Mike had witnessed them; he turned out to be a notary public, too. Ray would close out her checking account, break the lease on her apartment, store her household goods, and pay off her utility bills, and she felt not a second's hesitation over trusting him with all those vital details. He could strip me of all my assets and throw me out into the street. But she knew the chance of that was zero.

Now she sat with him, a few feet apart on the couch, in the dim living room. They'd turned off the lights in order to open the curtains and windows for fresh air, with minimal danger of Kate's being seen from outside. The floodlights of the church parking lot shed faint illumination into the room.

"You look pretty down," he said. "Not that I could blame you."

Kate nodded. "Did Mike tell you about his latest experiment?"

"The astral projection? Yeah. He said it turned out textbook classic, the glowing blue umbilical cord and everything."

Kate narrowed her eyes in distaste. "Now you sound like him. That's what he was so excited about before it started going wrong. He did tell you all of it, didn't he?"

"Yes. Kate, you know he would never have gotten you and Sara into that if he'd suspected danger."

"I think I know," she said. "I think that's what he thinks, anyway. But sometimes he sounds like some horror-movie mad scientist, not considering anything but this brave new world he's uncovering."

"No, Kate!" Ray sounded hurt on his friend's behalf. "I've known Mike a long time. People come first with him, always. Sure, he can get carried away. I would've gotten pretty excited if I'd been there, myself--even more so, maybe, because I have next to no talent of my own." He cleared his throat. "Actually, I envy you. I'd like to be able to explore that brave new world."

"Well, I wish I could give it to you!" Angry tears stung her eyes. She brushed them away. "I'm turning into a marshmallow lately! I've got to stop all this weepy stuff! I never asked for it! Why me, anyway? I don't want to be Wonder Woman, and I never expected my daughter to be Supergirl."

Ray leaned toward her and lightly touched her fingertips. "Would you want Sara to be different from what she is? Less intelligent, less gifted, not the same child?"

That angle on the question hit Kate between the eyes. "Well, when you put it that way-- Of course I want her to be everything she was meant to be, whatever will make her life fulfilled. But I don't want her threatened!" She covered her eyes for a moment.

"You couldn't have kept her safe for the rest of her life, anyway." Ray's tone held a hint of amusement.

"I know, but I was thinking more of threats like wild boyfriends with fast cars." She stared at the dim outline of his face. "How much longer can we live this way, without it changing her? Changing both of us? She's tired of being cooped up, and I'm getting sick of it, too! It's like being under siege; heck, that's what it is. And who wants to live in a fortress, even a comfortable one like this?"

"Ardath should be different," Ray said softly.

"Except we'll still be restricted, in hiding. And you and Mike can't give me a clue how long we'll have to stay that way." Feeling her nails dig into her palms, she deliberately unclenched her fists. "The wolf is at the gate--now I've seen it for myself. How long will I have to live in fear of it huffing and

puffing and blowing the walls down?"

She heard a smile in Ray's voice. "Quit worrying. We're going to build you a house of bricks or die trying."

That final thoughtless cliché gave her an unwelcome shiver, which she tried to blot out with humor. "It can't come in, not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin."

"That's the spirit." His hand tightened on her shoulder, then instantly withdrew. "Let me show you something to make you feel less restricted."

He stood up, and she followed his lead. "Like what?"

"Have you had a chance to climb up the tower?"

"No, I didn't want to poke around without Mike. Seemed like trespassing."

"Come on, then." He took her hand. She involuntarily flinched, hoping he didn't notice. Not that she found his touch unpleasant, just the opposite. And the pleasure of the warm contact took her unawares.

Ray escorted her up to the third floor. At the end of a corridor, he opened a door that revealed a steep, narrow flight of stairs. A flick of a switch turned on a bare bulb that shed a low-wattage light on them. Ascending, Kate had to trail behind Ray, their hands still linked. "I would've expected this to lead to the attic," she said.

"That's the other end of the house." He steadied her with a light grip on her elbow as she stepped into the tower room. In the dark he was only a silhouette. The visual limitation seemed to enhance her other senses, making her acutely conscious of his slightly labored breathing and the lime scent of his after-shave. She told herself that she breathed heavily only because of the steep stairs. She heard Ray fumbling along the wall, and another dim overhead light flickered to life. For a second she thought the bulb was about to burn out.

"The wiring up here could use some attention," said Ray. "Well, how do you like it?"

Kate sneezed. Obviously the cleaning woman didn't visit the tower too often. It comprised a hexagonal room about eight feet in diameter, furnished only with cushioned benches all around. Each projecting alcove held a tall, narrow, multi-paned window. "Oriel windows," she murmured, remembering the term from what little she'd read of Victorian architecture. She moved to one of the window seats and knelt in it. The light behind her stirred no fear. Even on the remote chance that any passer-by glanced up, she would appear a human-shaped blur from the ground. This staying out of sight business is too extreme, anyway. Good grief, Mike's got me acting as if the enemy is some kind of omnipresent, all-seeing deity. They can't be watching every building in the city all the time.

She dismissed the worry from her mind and focused on the view. The fog hadn't thickened enough to veil the city's lights. They sparkled below her for miles. In the distance, moonlight splashed on the surface of the bay, and the outline of the Golden Gate Bridge rose like an otherworldly artifact preparing to soar to the stars. Tears splintered the lights into myriad fragments. This time she let the drops spill over. Inspired by joy instead of rage or fear, they cleansed.

She became aware that Ray was sitting beside her. His arm encircled her, and she buried her face in his shirt front. When she stopped weeping and looked up at him, he said, "The world doesn't look quite so terrible up here, does it?"

She waved in the general direction of downtown. "There's a heck of a lot of

sorrow and violence behind those lights, though."

"Granted, but that doesn't invalidate the beauty." His free hand cupped her chin. She felt the pulse in her neck race under his fingertips. "Ah, Kate, I wish I could fix it all for you."

Wedge into the window seat with him, she leaned on the solid bulk of his chest, a kind of shelter she hadn't known for too long. She became conscious of the pressure of his rib cage against her breasts. Her nipples peaked and tingled.

Wait a minute, what's this? Ray's mouth descended upon hers. He brushed her lips, tasting, waiting for her reaction. The rush of heat she felt scared her.

But the momentary panic didn't stop her lips from parting.

His mouth tasted like coffee. As his tongue teased hers, Kate felt a sharp, throbbing ache that she thought had gone dormant forever. Since Johnny's death, no man had stirred her. On the rare occasions when her body wasn't too tired to protest the deprivation, she'd had no trouble relieving the tension on her own.

Now she remembered how much better it was with a live man in her arms.

What am I thinking about? I hardly know him! Honesty compelled her, though, to admit that wasn't true. However short a time since she'd met Ray, in that time she'd become closer to him than to any other adult in her life. After all, we've been through a lot in a few weeks. This isn't just an ordinary friendship.

Nor could it be love, not yet. Not when the extraordinary situation had her emotions in such turmoil that she couldn't be sure how she felt. She might be succumbing to loneliness, fear, the need for security, the craving to be cared for. Or plain old lust, for that matter!

As if sensing her doubts, Ray broke off the kiss. "I won't rush you, Kate. If you want to forget this ever happened, that's okay. I don't want anything to spoil our friendship."

Trembling, she got to her feet. "It won't. I don't need to forget it."

* * * *

Saturday morning, setting out from St. Augustine's at dawn in Mike's car, Ray felt dazed, and not only because he was still half asleep. Kate had responded to his unplanned advances better than he would've dared hope. He knew he had to move slowly. It'd be a louse to try hustling her into bed just when she's vulnerable. So he wouldn't pressure her, not until this crisis was settled.

Doesn't mean I can't think about it. Thinking caused a tightness in his groin that could prove embarrassing. He rolled down the side window to let a cool breeze blow in his face.

He had plenty of immediate problems to occupy his mind, mainly the ceremony he and Mike were going to perform in Ardath. Ray had never participated in such a rite before. As Mike had outlined it to him, the ceremony itself shouldn't pose a problem. No bizarre occult rituals involved. Ray knew that neo-pagan organizations, who practiced what they called Wicca, had special liturgies and implements for warding or shielding people and places. Mike had decided against a cross-cultural leap into that realm. Instead, he planned to use the familiar Great Litany from the Book of Common Prayer. The shielding power would arise from his own talent, poured into the words. Nebulous though the plan sounded, it had obviously worked for St. Augustine's.

Still, Ray was nervous enough that the breakfast sandwiches they snatched at a drive-through on the way out of the city lay heavily in his stomach. He expressed his misgivings to Mike.

"We should have a head start with Ardath," Mike said. "As I told Kate, I know a couple who live there, and from what I've heard from them, the town has

spontaneously become a place of peace and refuge. The right kind of people seem to gravitate there, and the others stay away. I suspect decades of unconscious warding have been going on."

"It's really myself I'm worried about," Ray said. "What use can I be, with my conspicuous lack of psychic power? I'm afraid I might even end up being a drag on you."

"All I'm expecting from you is your spiritual strength, lent to reinforce mine. Anybody can furnish that; all it takes is sincere goodwill. Besides, you're not totally ungifted; you mastered that cloaking trick, didn't you?"

"The Obi-Wan Kenobi gambit?" His own joke reminded Ray of his intention to take Kate and Sara to see Star Wars God willing, it would soon be safe to do so.

"Only after the ghost of John Jacobs--God, I still have trouble believing that happened to me!--showed me how. But, as a matter of fact, I've been practicing."

He made this admission with a trace of embarrassment.

Mike gave him an approving and apparently unsurprised look. "Did it work?"

"Yes. It's as if the first experience, with Johnny's help, imprinted the technique on my brain. All I've had to do is refine my control. I guess all along I've had more power than I realized. I've even reached the point where my vision of the outside world doesn't blur." Instead, he now saw a faint nimbus around himself and, if he was driving, his car, which assured him of success.

"I'm impressed," said Mike. "I can't do that."

"I'm not too comfortable with it, though. To tell the truth, it kind of scares me." Ray fidgeted in his seat and stared down at the bay; they were crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, amid dense but fast-moving traffic. "If I make the car invisible while driving, what's to stop those other drivers who can't see me from hitting me? It hasn't happened yet, but I don't like not knowing whether it could."

Mike thought a minute before answering. "I don't think it works that way. You can't be literally invisible; I don't believe mental power could distort the path of light rays. Cloaking, as I understand it, makes you unnoticeable. On a subconscious level, the people around you know you're there. They just don't register or remember it."

"That's a relief." He found he was able to relax a bit; the priest had seldom steered him wrong on these matters.

They spoke little for the next hour. Ray was in no mood to discuss the main concern on his mind, his feelings for Kate, and anyway both he and Mike were still less than fully awake. Mike filled the silence with a Handel cassette on the car's tape deck. They were climbing into the mountains when Ray began to sense an intrusive element creeping around and under the music.

The back of his neck itched. He fought the urge to look over his shoulder. When he finally succumbed, the road behind was empty. Yet the prickly sensations didn't fade. Imagination? Or were they being watched?

"Mike, could somebody have picked up our trail?"

"Why? Do you sense something?" He spared Ray a quick glance, then returned to negotiating a curve.

"Maybe."

"After your run-in with Martlet's confederate, they have your 'scent,' so to speak, and they might very well make random sweeps, checking up on you. If they sense you're moving out of the metro area, which isn't your normal pattern--"

Mike raised his head as if listening. His eyes went blank for a second, and the car drifted toward the shoulder. With a yelp of alarm, he swung the wheel back

to the left.

"I believe you're right," Mike said. "We are being tracked. It's stronger now, can't you feel that?"

Ray opened his mind and felt as if a giant bird of prey swooped overhead, trapping the car in the shadow of its wings.

Chapter 12

"Raise your shield, for God's sake! Now!"

Mike's shout broke into Ray's fear-induced paralysis. Gathering his energies like scattered threads, he wove the protective cloak he had practiced many times in the past week. To his relief, the drills had implanted a reflex that enabled him to shield the car instantly. He saw a faint shimmer outlining the metal. The threatening shadow he'd sensed receded. He thought he felt it circling above his head, casting probes like shots in the dark at its suddenly invisible quarry.

"Well done," Mike said. "You'll have to keep it up until we get to Ardath, I'm afraid."

"No problem." Ray's palms felt clammy. He was glad that maintaining the cloak didn't require much energy. He just had to devote a corner of his mind to visualizing it. He'd never done it for more than a few minutes, though.

Descending a slight grade, the car began to vibrate. "Mike, what's wrong? Engine trouble?"

"I don't think so." Mike slowed down, but the shudder intensified. >From the rocky embankment next to the road, pebbles clattered onto the pavement. Ray clutched his armrest. As if that's going to help! More productively, he forced himself to keep a tight grasp on the shield that hid them from sight. He nervously eyed the larger stones that suddenly appeared so precariously rooted in the earth. He noticed Mike's hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. Seconds later, a scenic turn-off appeared on the right. The priest braked and edged toward it. The tires and brakes squealed as the car bumped over a solid object and swerved. Wrestling the wheel back under control, Mike came to a stop beside the low stone wall. The shaking ceased.

Ray's eyes ran over the car's hood. The bubble of psychic invisibility remained intact.

Mike let out his breath. "Looks like it upset them when we disappeared off the radar."

"You don't really think any human agency could start an earthquake?"

"I'm suspending judgment on that. But if they wanted to wreck our concentration, maybe damage us physically enough to make us abandon whatever we're up to, they couldn't have invented a better way--without the slightest risk of their being identified as the cause."

"Well, they didn't damage us."

"I'm not so sure," said Mike. "Think I'd better check the tires."

He stepped out of the car. Ray did the same, stumbling for a second and steadying himself on the fender. Mike pointed to the left front wheel. "What'd I

tell you?"

Ray walked around the hood and contemplated the flat tire. "Broken glass. Damn." He gestured at the shards of a Coke bottle a few yards away.

"Partly my fault," Mike said. "They don't have much tread left, and I've put off replacing them. Foolish economizing." He went to open the trunk.

A distant rumble alerted Ray just before the ground started to vibrate again. He braced himself on the car. Mike emitted a cry of pain. Scrabbling his way along the side of the car like a giant land crab, Ray hurried to the priest's side, meanwhile clinging with a mental death-grip to the threads of power that wove the bubble around their vehicle and themselves.

Mike crouched on the ground, clutching the bumper. He'd stumbled and banged his head. A cut on his brow streamed blood into his left eye.

Abruptly, the clear sky turned thundercloud gray. Ray felt pressure on the protective sphere, as if a monstrous fist clenched around it. His lungs constricted. He had to fight to breathe. Mike, on his knees, gulped for air.

Forcing the words past his nearly paralyzed throat, Ray whispered, "Good Lord, help us now."

He knelt beside Mike and draped an arm around his shoulders. They leaned on the bumper until the quake ceased, the suffocating pressure vanished, and the sky cleared.

Easing himself upright, Ray helped Mike to his feet. With his handkerchief, he blotted the priest's forehead until the blood started to clot. The beginning of a lump swelled under the skin. "Damn it, if they're going to play this rough, or even if it's coincidence, you shouldn't--"

"If you're about to suggest turning back, forget it."

"But you--"

"Who's the senior partner here, anyway?" Mike forced a grin. "You know what scalp wounds are like. Looks worse than it is. This job has to get done, and you can't do it without me."

"You aren't experiencing any dizziness? Double vision? And what about your heart?"

"It's a simple bump on the head, and there's nothing wrong with my heart. Let's get busy changing the tire."

"Uh-uh. Let me change the tire, while you rest." Mike grumbled good-naturedly as Ray helped him into the shade of a tree near the wall. "Sit tight and pray we're finished with the tremors for awhile."

"Next you'll be telling me I'm an old man," Mike chuckled, sitting on the ground with his back braced against the tree trunk.

Ray caught his hands shaking as he extracted the tools and the spare from the trunk. He could too vividly imagine an aftershock rattling the jack loose and dropping the wheel on his foot. Fortunately, no further quakes erupted while he changed the tire. Stowing away the equipment, he said, "Well, we're fit to drive if you think it's safe."

Mike hoisted himself to his feet. "I can't see how turning back would be any safer."

"Yeah, you have a point there." Ray blocked Mike from entering the driver's side. "I'm driving. I don't trust your self-diagnosis even if you were doctoring sailors when I was in kindergarten." He cautiously pulled out of the turnoff.

Nothing untoward happened during the next few miles, except that a pickup truck honked in protest against their slow pace and passed them on a curve. Ray edged up to normal speed. "Was that quake coincidence or not?"

Mike shrugged. "We'll never know. If the enemy did cause it, I suspect they're only groping in the fog, so to speak. The way the attack stopped after such a brief attempt supports that theory. Shaking possibly hundreds or thousands of acres of land wouldn't be the most efficient way to swat a couple of flies like us. Since you rescued Sara, all their attacks have had that hit-or-miss quality."

"Comforting, I guess."

"Of course. If they could pinpoint us accurately, they wouldn't waste energy with sloppy methods like this. What are the chances even a major quake would kill or injure a particular individual? They just got lucky."

"True." Between Mike's logic and their intact psychic bubble, Ray felt a bit more optimistic. "Maybe they were trying to scare us. Sure worked on me."

"You're not alone." Mike gave a shaky laugh, discarded Ray's bloodstained handkerchief, and dabbed at the wound with his own clean one. "But scared enough to turn back is a different matter."

Near noon, they passed the Ardath town limit. Mike directed Ray to the Suttons' general store. As soon as they pulled onto the main street of the village, Ray felt the vague uneasiness he'd been fighting melt away. An oppressive sensation, like a heavy object leaning against his barriers, simply evaporated. Though he didn't let his personal shield dissolve, he relaxed his teeth-gritting concentration on it.

In the gravel lot in front of the store, Mike went inside, leaving Ray to pump gas. A minute later the priest emerged with a thin, petite woman whose sleek cap of gray hair still contained traces of faded brown. She offered Ray a sun-bronzed hand. "Jane Sutton--good to meet you. Father Mike tells me you're a friend of Kate's, too. Small world, like they say, her getting to know him that way. I'm thrilled to hear she's moving back for a while. It isn't the same with that house empty most of the year, since Johnny passed." She waved in the general direction of the far end of town. "Well. How about a bite of lunch before you go up to check on the cabin? And you should do something about that lump, Father."

"It's nothing." Mike pulled out his wallet to pay for the gas. "We can't stay right now. Maybe we'll stop for lunch on our way down."

Back in the car, he explained, "It's better to do this kind of thing on an empty stomach. I told her we were looking over the cabin for Kate. It's a good thing she's watching the store alone today and couldn't come with us. I'd have trouble explaining why we're doing something that might look like witchcraft to her."

Guided by Kate's directions, they drove through the center of town and out the other end, then up the mountainside to the cabin. Basking in the pine scent and the cool air, Ray found danger hard to believe in. When he saw the house, though, alone in its clearing at the end of an unpaved road, a twinge of anxiety pricked him.

"Are you sure Kate and Sara will be okay here? It's so isolated." He cut the engine and scanned the broad front porch of the locked cabin.

"It's not mundane hazards we're worried about," Mike said, "and if we were, this place is a lot safer than downtown San Francisco. As for the other kind of danger, can't you feel that this area is safe?"

"I do feel that way," Ray admitted. "That's what worries me. Like something wants me to drop my guard, and I shouldn't give in."

Mike chuckled. "You've been hanging around me too long. Ardath is a good place, and once we're finished, it will be impregnable." He stepped out of the car,

prayer book in hand, and strode to the door with the key lent to him by Kate. Ray almost expected his footsteps to echo in the empty house. They didn't, of course; the rooms weren't large enough, besides being furnished. Yet he did feel a ghostly sense of the cabin's desertion, with its unnatural neatness, ubiquitous patina of dust, and dust-motes drifting in the sunbeams from the picture window. The awareness that Kate had lived here with John Jacobs caused Ray a twinge of jealousy he resolved to ignore. He followed Mike on a quick tour of the few rooms.

"Now I can truthfully tell Mrs. Sutton we checked the house," Mike said, "and compliment her on her custodial care." He opened his Book of Common Prayer to a section near the back and said, "For the interior, we'll adapt one of these prayers into a house blessing. All you have to do is say Amen at appropriate points and focus. That's your most important role--focus your energy on extending that invisible shield over the entire house and yard."

Ray drew a series of deep breaths and strove to empty his mind of everything except the atmosphere of serenity and safety they hoped to generate. Mike began praying as they walked ceremoniously from room to room: "Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

The shielding rite itself proved almost anticlimactic. No fire-breathing dragon of Evil battered against their mental fortress as they conducted the ceremony. He's right, thought Ray. This place is already halfway fortified. We're only strengthening it. After they covered the interior, they marched outside and circumnavigated the cabin, still chanting. Then they locked up and got back into the car. Ray drove, while the priest flipped pages to the Great Litany. Ray visualized a protective web veiling the house and trailing after them in a glowing strand as they descended the mountainside.

He concentrated on remembering the correct responses to the different sections of the Litany. "Good Lord, deliver us... We beseech thee to hear us, Good Lord... Have mercy upon us." Mike recited the catalogue of petitions: "From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood..." Now, that's an appropriate prayer, Ray thought. "From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence, battle, and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared... By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion... In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our prosperity; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment..."

The notion of needing deliverance in the hour of prosperity gave Ray a sudden chill. The petition served as a grim reminder that in any circumstances, no matter how apparently secure, disaster could fall upon them "suddenly and unprepared." Get your mind on the job, he ordered himself. If you pay attention the way you're supposed to, you won't be unprepared. He blanked his mind of everything except pouring his strength into the responses he chanted, while he drove down the main street of Ardath and around the town's perimeter according to Mike's prior instructions.

Finally Mike led him in a last repetition of the Lord's Prayer and told him to park in front of the Suttons' store. "We said we'd stop for lunch," said the priest, "and I think we deserve it."

Relieved of the strain of concentration, Ray became aware of his stomach's complaints. "Great idea." They visited the men's room, bought soft drinks and submarine sandwiches from Mrs. Sutton, and settled down to eat at a picnic table behind the store. Mike didn't seem inclined to talk about what they'd just done, and Ray had no desire to prod him into discussing it.

After they'd said their goodbyes to Mrs. Sutton and started the drive homeward, though, he had to ask. "Well, did it work?"

"What do you think?" said Mike, who'd insisted on taking the wheel again. "Look for yourself."

Ray twisted in his seat to gaze back up the steep road. For a couple of seconds, he saw a shimmering canopy that arched over the entire town. When he blinked, the scene faded to normal, a cluster of houses surrounded by woods and drenched in afternoon sunlight. Yet the aura of safety remained.

"At the risk of sounding like one of those pop psychologists," Mike said, "trust your feelings. It worked. Didn't you sense that?"

"I guess I did. But that's a far cry from the scientific method they drummed into us at med school." Nevertheless, he allotted a moment to refocusing his energy, spreading the shield of invisibility over himself, his companion, and the car. No matter if his colleagues at the clinic and hospital would consider him nuts, he felt that shield deflecting the enemy's probes.

Mike chuckled. "Believe me, I know what you mean. I'm not doing much more than groping in the dark, myself. About all I can do is trust my feelings of rightness. They don't teach these techniques in seminary, the Navy, or medical school."

God help us, that doesn't sound like much to stake Kate and Sara's life on! For an instant, Ray thought he sensed dark wings once more flapping against his insubstantial barrier.

* * * *

Kate paced the rectory, nibbling her knuckles, until Mike and Ray got home Saturday evening. Until Sara had gone to bed, she'd maintained a facade of calm. After that, she'd seen no reason to bother. Sure, she knew how the length of the drive from San Francisco to Ardath; she knew the men's trip there and back would take all day. That knowledge didn't keep her from worrying, not to mention inwardly fuming at them for putting themselves in danger and her in suspense. They're risking themselves for me--again. Another debt to hang over my head. Didn't "gratitude" translate, in some languages, as synonymous with "resentment"? Irrational as the feeling was, she couldn't squelch it altogether. A full day alone in the house with Sara hadn't helped Kate's mood. She had run out of proofreading work to distract her from Sara's complaints about staying inside. Complaints?--more like whining, a misdemeanor Sara had never committed before except when sick. Intelligent enough as well as frightened enough, after that astral flight, to understand why she couldn't go out, the child still didn't like the situation. How can I blame her, when I hate it myself? One aspect that bothered Kate was the disruption of her harmonious relationship with Sara. Never imagined I could get sick of spending time with her. She felt guilty at the mere thought. Moving back to Ardath would solve the problem of confinement, anyway.

She'd played eleven games of checkers with Sara, who had actually beaten her the last time. Then she'd dumped a new jigsaw puzzle on the dining table, cleared of the Grand Canyon landscape Mike had finished the night before. The new puzzle, a 500-piece picture of kittens in a basket, delighted Sara. Helping her daughter sort the fragments into piles by color, Kate was amazed at how quickly Sara found connections and formed linkages. Five hundred pieces--maybe she is a genius!

Notwithstanding, Kate was glad her child genius was asleep when Mike and Ray arrived. She wanted to talk to the men undisturbed. Aside from insisting that

the hamburgers they'd eaten on the way would do for supper and admitting that they could use a couple of cold beers, they didn't seem disposed to talk. The first detail she noticed was a gash on Mike's forehead.

"What happened to you?" she asked as she popped the tops on the beer cans.

"Nothing. We had a blowout, and I got a bump on the head trying to change the tire."

She frowned at him over the kitchen table. "Looks like more than a bump to me."

"I've certified him fit," said Ray. "Don't worry."

"How did you manage to hurt your head changing a tire?" Whether women's intuition or the growth of her supposed ESP, something hinted to her that the men weren't telling her everything.

"Well, we ran into an earth tremor," Ray said, bracing his chair against the wall and wearily leaning his head back. "Just a small one. No problem."

She glared at him, then at Mike, who blandly gazed back at her. "That's all you're going to say? No problem?"

"Everything's fine," Mike said, in a soothing tone that made her grit her teeth with impatience.

"What happened in Ardath?"

"Not much." Ray took a gulp of beer, then pressed the cold can to his forehead.

"Mike introduced me to your friend, Mrs. Sutton. She's delighted to hear you and Sara are coming back. We sort of blanketed the area with Mike's ritual, and it seems to have worked."

"It did work," Mike said. "You'll be safe there, more so than here. And you'll have the entire town, not just a single house. You'll be glad of that, I know."

Kate studied him suspiciously but sensed no deception, only reserve. "Sara will, that's for sure." Her own distress at the prospect of spending weeks or months in a place so saturated with Johnny's spirit didn't matter, compared with her daughter's safety and happiness. "When do you suggest we make the move?"

"As soon as you can get yourselves together," Mike said, "and Ray and I can take the time off to escort you there."

"Both of you?" While a double escort hardly seemed necessary, she had to admit she would be grateful for the company of both men.

Shortly Ray dragged himself off to his borrowed bed, rather than drive home after all day on the road. Mike asked Kate to join him in his study before retiring.

She accepted the comfortably worn armchair in front of the desk, wondering why he wanted this conference when he was obviously so tired. How old is he, exactly? It's hard to tell, with the white hair and the black eyebrows. But all this uproar can't be good for him. She watched him unlock a desk drawer.

"I've been meaning to give you this," he said, "and now seems a good time. We've guarded your home, to the best of our ability. I want to guard you, personally, too." He held up a six-inch cross of unpainted, nut-brown wood, smooth from countless years of handling, etched with a grapevine pattern.

"Wood from the olive groves around Bethlehem," he said. "And see this crystal in the center?"

Kate peered at the small sphere at the juncture of the cross. The transparent orb captured a scintilla of light. At its heart a speck of something dark was embedded.

"This is supposed to contain a fragment of the True Cross," Mike said.

She leaned forward to brush the aged wood with her fingertips. "Do you really think it does?" What little she knew of the authenticity of holy relics made her

skeptical.

"Who knows? Whether I believe it or not really doesn't matter. It's a fact that this artifact has been blessed by a Pope, however. It certainly dates back to the High Middle Ages, at least. Another fact is that hundreds of people, over the intervening centuries, have believed in its genuineness."

The relic, on a leather cord, dangled invitingly from his hand. Kate closed her fingers around it. "Are you saying that their faith sticks to it, or something?"

He smiled. "Something like that. Physical objects can carry a charge, so to speak, whether positive or negative." He didn't seem offended by her reservations. "If you can accept that this house, or the whole village of Ardath, can store psychic energy, why not this cross?"

"Yeah, well, when you put it that way, it sounds more reasonable than plenty of other things you've told me."

Mike laughed outright at that. Turning serious again, he said, "I want you to keep it."

"What? Oh, I couldn't! It must be valuable."

"Its greatest value lies in its protective power," he said, "which you and Sara need more than anybody else I know. Go ahead, take it."

She accepted the cross and clasped it in both hands. She did feel a warmth radiating from the wood into her muscles and bones. If this aura was an illusion, it was a comforting one. Whispering her thanks, she hung the relic around her neck.

"This reminds me of something I've been thinking about, the past couple of days." She stared down at the cross on her bosom. She felt embarrassed at what she planned to ask. "Would you think it's, well, superstitious for me to want Sara baptized? I mean, because I'm not a churchgoer. Would it be exploiting the church?"

Mike relaxed in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Depends. What's your reason? Protection?"

Kate twisted the leather strand. "Sort of. But I don't want you to think I'm looking at baptism as some kind of magic charm. At least, I'm pretty sure that's not it."

"If you're asking for the rite as an expression of trust, it's not superstitious."

"I think so. But my faith isn't what you'd exactly call robust. Ever since Johnny died--" The old resentment welled up to choke her.

"You're angry with God for allowing it."

Kate stared at him in surprise. "How did you--Oh. I guess you've heard it all before."

"Pretty nearly." He thoughtfully swiveled his chair, then continued. "What would you have expected Him to do?"

"Stop it from happening, of course! Strike down whoever worked the spell, or whatever it was, that made the horse throw my husband."

"If he'd been killed by a mugger on the street, would you have expected God to intervene in that, too?"

"Why not?" Simmering anger tinged her voice. "Why doesn't He stop all the terrible things people do to each other?"

"All?" Father Mike gave her a level stare. "Including every bit of cruel gossip and petty dishonesty in the world? What would happen to free will?"

"Well, when you put it that way--"

"Then where would you have Him draw the line?"

Kate shook her head. "I don't know. I never thought of it that way. I'm confused."

He smiled gently. "We all are, sometimes."

"Okay, I'll think it over. And I do want Sara baptized. It's not that I don't believe there's a God. I'm just not sure what to believe about Him."

"What you vow in baptism is to bring up your child in the faith to the best of your ability. Can you promise that?"

I'll promise anything to get on the right side in this war! "To the best of my ability? Yes, I can."

"All right, then." With a weary smile, he stood up. "Ordinarily, weeks of instruction are required, and we'd perform the rite on one of the regularly appointed Sundays, in front of the congregation. But in these circumstances, I think tomorrow afternoon would suit."

She let out a pent-up breath. "Thank you."

"One more thing before we get some sleep, what about godparents?"

"Ray?" Kate said. "I'm not really close to anyone else that I could ask now, anyway."

"Fine. There's no official upper or lower limit on the number of godparents, and I'm sure he'll be honored."

Falling asleep, Kate mulled over how she would explain this development to Sara. Am I being superstitious, I wonder? Whether she was or not, she felt more at peace already. I'll honestly try to keep the vows, and it certainly can't hurt.

* * * *

Kate also decided to ask Arlene Grant, who happily agreed to stand up as godmother on short notice. As for Ray, Kate thought she glimpsed moisture in his eyes when she made the request of him. Father Mike explained to Sara that the splash of water and dab of consecrated oil would mean she was "joining God's family," which Sara seemed to accept, at least for the present. After lunch they all trooped across to the church through the covered walkway, prayer books in hand. Following the abbreviated service, Mike provided refreshments of coffee, rosé wine, and a bakery cake he'd somehow found time to pick up.

Arlene, claiming a headache, left after a token sliver of cake. Every time she'd dropped in at the rectory lately, the woman had seemed droopy and uncommunicative as if she was fighting some low-grade virus. Kate knew Sara missed Arlene's usual lively tales of her pets' antics. Ray distracted the little girl by spending the afternoon working on the kitten puzzle. The Drake the Dragon puppet made Sara giggle with jokes about the picture. Kate wasn't sure whether to be relieved or sorry when Ray didn't try to get her alone.

Monday night, she and Sara spent their first full evening in the rectory without Mike. The priest had to attend an all-day diocesan conference, which included a dinner that extended long past dark. Kate rejected Ray's offer of company with mock indignation. "You'd think we couldn't take care of ourselves! I haven't needed a babysitter in years." In truth, she did feel a tad nervous about rattling around alone in the huge Victorian house after Sara's bedtime, but she didn't want to let irrational fear get a grip on her. I'm going to nip this silliness in the bud! she assured herself. When we move to Ardath in a couple of days, I'd darn well better be able to spend evenings alone! Besides, she wasn't ready to deal with Ray in the absence of another adult as a buffer. Her own desire for him frightened her. Would she feel the same response to any likable man who made advances to her? I hope I'm not that needy, but how can I tell?

She read herself hoarse, lulling Sara to sleep with one of the Narnia books. Afterward, unnerved by the silent house, Kate flicked through the TV channels. None of the programs held her attention. She retreated to the back sitting room, the one with the fireplace, and played the sound track of South Pacific. A nice, simple pleasure, she thought, alternately funny and sentimental. She supplemented it with The Nine Tailors, since Mike had emphatically recommended Dorothy Sayers to remedy what he saw as Kate's literary deficiencies. As soon as South Pacific ended, she replaced it with another Broadway musical tape. She didn't want to hear the random creaks of the house.

Part-way into My Fair Lady, she heard a rumble that suggested a storm creeping toward her. As rare as thunderstorms were around here, why did one have to choose tonight to swoop down upon the Bay area? When lightning began to flash behind the curtains, Kate grumbled to herself that she really would have preferred a minor earthquake.

She tiptoed down the hall to check on Sara who, surprisingly, remained asleep. See, she's braver than you are, even dead to the world, Kate chided herself. She returned to the music and The Nine Tailors, wondering whether a story that involved floods was the best choice for tonight's reading.

A few minutes later, the phone rang. Mike always told her not to answer it: "That's what the machine is for." Kate had trouble overcoming lifelong habits and usually sat in impatient silence until the answering machine cut off the ringing. This time, she heard Arlene's voice hesitantly inquiring whether anybody was listening. The woman sounded stressed.

Deciding Arlene was certainly an exception to the no-communication rule, Kate hurried to the kitchen and lifted the receiver of the wall phone.

"I was just thinking about you, when the storm started," Arlene said. Kate wondered whether the stiffness in her voice proceeded from fear or from that vague illness she'd been exhibiting lately. "I thought you might not want to be alone in the house. How about if I come over and keep you company?"

Arlene sounded more anxious than cordial, Kate thought. Maybe she really is afraid of thunder and lightning. "I wouldn't ask you to drive in this."

"It's not raining hard yet," Arlene said, "and I'd like the companionship, myself. I'm coming over." She hung up.

Kate slowly replaced the phone. That abruptness didn't sound like Arlene's usual self. Nervous, that's all, Kate thought. Like me The idea of company sounded attractive to her, too. She prowled the house, her arms folded against imaginary chills. Though she winced at every peal of distant thunder, the noise didn't seem to disturb Sara.

About fifteen minutes after the phone call, the doorbell rang. Kate hesitated with her hand on the knob before slowly turning it to open the door a crack, with the chain fastened. "Arlene, is that you?"

"It's me." Her voice sounded tired. When Kate unhooked the chain, Arlene stepped inside and stood on the Persian-style throw rug, clasping her purse to her chest. Rain plastered her pixie-cut blonde hair to her head and trickled down her face. She looked around vaguely, as if unsure why she was in the room.

"Thanks for coming," Kate said. "Let's go into the kitchen and make some tea."

"Okay." Arlene's apathetic tone worried Kate.

"You probably shouldn't be out tonight. You look like you're coming down with something."

"I'm all right." Arlene's feet almost literally dragged as she trailed after Kate to the kitchen.

Reaching up into a cabinet for the teakettle, Kate felt a prickling on the back of her neck. Arlene's inert presence made her feel more anxious than secure. What was wrong with the woman? She certainly didn't act in the mood for "company."

The scuff of Arlene's shoes on the linoleum made Kate glance over her shoulder. Arlene's left arm whipped around her waist. Dropping the kettle, Kate froze. In the first second, she was too confused to be afraid. What's this, her idea of a joke?

Then Arlene's right hand sliced up from behind. Kate kicked backward, squirmed, and struck out with both arms before she consciously noticed the gleam of the blade. The knife slashed her forearm instead of the soft flesh beneath her breastbone. She felt a burning sensation, easily ignored. The grip holding her immobilized against Arlene's pillowy chest was more important.

She gouged Arlene's arm with her fingernails. The attacker emitted a hiss of pain but didn't let go. Grappling with Arlene's right wrist, Kate struggled to keep the knife away from its target. She stomped as hard as she could on Arlene's sneaker-clad foot--not hard enough, wearing only slippers herself. Arlene made no sound except labored breathing, and Kate had the presence of mind not to scream. Nobody would hear except Sara, exactly what Kate didn't want. Asleep, the child might be safe.

Kate's hand, curled around Arlene's weapon arm, was growing slick with sweat. She didn't think she had the strength to disarm a woman who spent her days hustling animals from cage to cage. Producing a moan that she hoped sounded realistic, she went limp. Startled, Arlene relaxed for an instant. Kate slithered to the floor and rolled away.

The other woman gave a wordless yell and dove at her. Kate flung out one leg, which connected with Arlene's calf and tripped her. Arlene tumbled on top of Kate, dropping the knife. Her hands closed on Kate's neck.

Kate thrashed from side to side and thrust her knees into Arlene's midriff. Aside from an occasional grunt of shock, her opponent didn't seem to notice. She raked her nails down the woman's arms, with no better result. Choking, Kate fought for breath, her vision obscured by black spots.

Suddenly the pressure eased. Opening her eyes, she saw Arlene thrown across the room--by Ray. Kate scrambled to her feet. Arlene lay in a corner, stunned.

After a quick glance at Kate, Ray knelt over Arlene, fumbling with her clothes. Kate rubbed her sore throat and watched in bewilderment.

Ray searched frantically for a minute. His frown cleared as he groped in the pocket of the woman's jeans. He pulled out a small object. Arlene opened her eyes and raised herself on her elbows. She stared blankly. Her mouth dropped open, and she collapsed on the linoleum.

Kate clutched a chair for support. "What's that?" she croaked at Ray. For the first time, she had a breath's space to wonder why Arlene had tried to kill her.

Ray's mouth twisted in disgust. He held out his open hand, which contained a crumpled piece of paper. Fastidiously using the fingertips of his other hand, he unfolded the scrap.

Kate peered at it. The symbols, in black pen, meant nothing to her, yet she felt a queasiness similar to that reflected on Ray's face. She lightly poked the paper.

An image leaped into her mind--an austere-looking woman seated in a straight-backed chair, her eyes closed in concentration and her hands folded on

her lap. The woman whose picture Arlene had drawn, the one who had threatened Ray. Kate snatched her hand back.

"What is it?" Ray whispered. "What do you see?"

Kate told him.

He helped her into a chair. "That explains Arlene's behavior. She must have been hypnotized, put under a mental compulsion stronger than ordinary hypnosis. This writing must be a charm of some kind, the woman's link with Arlene, to maintain control."

"Then it's a link with us, with this place. They'll find us."

Ray had already dropped the paper into a saucer and taken matches out of a drawer. "Not for long, it isn't." He struck the match, set fire to the paper, and watched as it burned. He then rinsed the ash down the sink. "Now we don't have to worry about that, at least. Mike should be here any minute. I called the conference and left him a message--told them it was urgent."

"Wait a minute, what made you do that? And come here?"

He folded his jacket and tucked it under the unconscious woman's head. "I just knew you needed help."

"Another of those feelings, huh? Well, I'm thankful for it, whatever it is."

Ray gave her a sheepish smile. "I had to break the chain on the front door. Good thing you forgot the deadbolt this time." The groan of the door rising, followed by motor noises, sounded from the garage. "Oh, good, there's Mike."

At the same moment, Kate heard Sara calling her. She rushed into the bedroom, anxious to calm the child before she decided to investigate the disturbance.

Kate didn't want Sara to see Arlene in this condition. Explaining that Arlene had been visiting and had a little accident, Kate persuaded Sara to stay in bed.

Returning to the kitchen, Kate found Ray explaining the circumstances to Mike.

"I have to assume they saw me with Arlene at some point. That's the only way they could've known Arlene is connected with Kate."

Mike said, "If they questioned her under hypnosis, they must know Kate and Sara are alive. Thank God Arlene doesn't know about Ardath." He turned to Kate. "It's not safe for you to stay here any longer. They can't find the house with that charm destroyed, but I don't feel good about your being anywhere in San Francisco. Fortunately your home is ready. You have to go there immediately."

Kate brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Go to the cabin? Tonight?"

Ray said, "That does seem best." His gaze shifted to the unconscious woman on the floor. "What about her? Why hasn't she come to yet?"

Mike knelt to examine Arlene with a doctor's brisk efficiency. "The blow to the head from the fall looks insignificant. Must be the shock of breaking the tie with her controller." He stood up. "I'll take her to the emergency room and concoct some believable story to account for her condition. You drive Kate and Sara to Ardath."

"Right." Ray's hand briefly rested on Kate's shoulder. "Get Sara ready and pack as fast as you can. I agree with Mike, I want you out of here!" His anxious expression shifted to a frown. "Good Lord, you're hurt!"

Bending her left arm, Kate studied the knife-cut. Reminded of it, she became aware of the sting she'd been ignoring. The blood oozed rather than dripped.

"I'm okay."

"The hell you are!" His jaw clenched in suppressed anger, Ray dampened a paper towel and dabbed at the wound.

Mike joined him. "She's right, it's superficial. Disinfect and bandage it. I

have to get Arlene to the hospital."

Kate stared at her unconscious friend. Contemplating Arlene's actions deflected her attention from the discomfort of the cut. "They--the enemy--took over her mind, the way you think they did those two men?"

"Appears so," Mike said. "Except that they fined-tuned their approach a little more this time. Went to the trouble of finding someone with a direct connection to you, then planted that charm on her to ensure control. After all, she knows you personally. She would've fought the command, given the chance."

I'm sure she would. But will I ever see her the same way, after this? A gray mist thickened before Kate's eyes, and her stomach felt hollow. Hands grasped her shoulders and pushed her onto a chair. Ray's voice ordered her to lay her head down, as he prodded the back of her neck.

She obediently rested her head on the table. Within seconds, the faintness receded. Someone pressed a glass of water into her hand. She took a sip and looked up at Mike. "I'm leaving now," he said. "Ray will take care of you, and I'll drive up to Ardath to check on you in a few days." He bent over to give Kate a hug. Awkwardly wrapping her arms around his neck, she lightly kissed his cheek.

"Thanks for everything," she murmured.

He stared hard at her neck. "You aren't wearing the cross."

Kate blushed. "Well, no, it's in my bedroom."

"Wear it." He gave her hand a final squeeze.

She watched him pick up Arlene and disappear into the garage. Ray stood at her elbow with disinfectant spray and bandages. Kate submitted to first aid, while her thoughts churned between the terror of the recent past and the practical problems of packing up at a moment's notice.

Finished dressing her cut, Ray said, "How about if I wake Sara while you get everything else ready?"

Kate thankfully agreed. Fortunately, she didn't have to lighten her baggage for this flight. The boxes, suitcases, and overnight bags that held the possessions they'd scrounged from the apartment would easily fit into Ray's car. Just a couple of refugees, that's us. Of course, their situation wasn't as bad as all that, she realized. They'd lose access to the rest of their property, which Ray would store for them, only temporarily. Until the heat's off, she ruefully reminded herself. Instead of refugees, make that "hunted fugitives."

Chapter 13

Ray moved his car into the garage and helped Kate load her stuff. Sara, drooping sleepily at the kitchen table in jeans and a sweatshirt, watched him carry her box of toys out. She clutched Tigger to her midriff. "Dr. Ray says we're going to our house in the mountains. Is that our real home?"

Kate swallowed hard. "Yes, I guess it is now."

"Can I go outside there?"

"Sure, munchkin. We'd better get in the car now."

Sara clasped Kate's hand and stood up. "Mommy, what happened to your arm?"

"Just a little accident. It doesn't hurt." By now, that was almost true.

Sara glanced around the room. "You said Miss Arlene was here. Where'd she go?"

"She fell and got a little bump on the head." Kate swallowed again to stop her

voice from quivering. "Father Mike took her to the hospital. She'll be fine."

"Okay," said the child. "Let's go."

Kate tucked her in the back of Ray's car with a quilt and pillow from her bedroom. Mike had a surplus of such items and could pick them up when he visited Ardath. The potted herbs rested on the floor behind the driver's seat.

"When we get away from the rectory," said Ray as he started the motor, "I'll have to shield the car so we won't be noticed." He clenched and unclenched his hands on the steering wheel. "Sara, can you help make us invisible?"

"Okay," came the drowsy voice from the back seat.

"Kate, I'd feel better if you'd help too. Just focus on lending us your strength."

"All right, I'll try."

They pulled out of the garage onto the street, veiled by fog now that the rain had stopped. Kate had to take Ray and Sara's word for the effectiveness of their mental barrier. She herself could feel nothing, though she strove to visualize pouring energy into Ray for him to channel as he wished. For support, she tightened her fingers around the cross that now hung at her breast.

A few miles away from the church, Sara said, "Somebody's looking for us."

"I know," Ray said. As they passed a street lamp, Kate noticed his face was taut with strain. "I feel it, like a battering ram pounding on a gate. Help me, both of you."

Kate shut her eyes, the better to concentrate. While she still couldn't sense Ray's shield, she felt him reaching for her mentally, felt the energy she generated being funneled into his reservoir. She sensed a desperate urgency in the way he siphoned up everything she offered.

"I don't think we can hold it," he whispered. "They know they almost had you and they're throwing the heavy artillery at us this time."

Kate felt as if Ray and Sara groped for her and clasped her hands, though she knew they hadn't moved physically. A hot current flowed between her and Ray.

Linked with him, she did start to feel some of what he perceived. Pressure, vibration, deafening noise, as if she were nailed into a box that someone was pounding on, or holding a door shut against an intruding tidal wave.

Suddenly the barrier burst. A tide, not of water but of foul-smelling darkness, flooded her mind. Sara's cry yanked her back from a precipice of panic: "Mommy, Dr. Ray, don't let them get us! Fight!"

Ray momentarily removed one hand from the wheel, giving Kate a physical touch to reinforce the mental bond. "So they know we're here," he said through gritted teeth. "That doesn't mean they've got us."

But the sense of hostile eyes was horrible enough. For a minute Kate visualized the enemy's surveillance in terms of old horror movies from late-night TV. King Kong's huge paw about to grab them and lift them to his gaping mouth. Godzilla's taloned foot preparing to stomp down and pulverize the car.

Now, cut that out! Even if these people do worship some kind of superhuman monsters, the monsters wouldn't bother with us. We're fighting human beings, with mortal limitations. Kate didn't gain much comfort from her self-imposed pep talk.

Echoing her thoughts, Ray said, "They have to send real people after us, in

ordinary vehicles on public roads. We'll outrun them and make them lose the trail."

A few minutes later, Sara said, "What's that car behind us, Dr. Ray? It feels bad."

When Ray checked the rear-view mirror, the expression on his face grew still more desperate, if possible. "It does look awfully familiar."

Before Kate could ask him to explain, Sara said, "It's the bad lady's car. And there's somebody else, too. Not a person, a monster."

"In the car with her?" Ray's hoarse whisper deepened Kate's fear. He was supposed to serve as their rock, with an answer to every problem.

Damn you, Ray Benson, you're supposed to protect us! Kate put a lid on her irrational anger and tried to channel the emotion into psychic defense.

"Not in the car, 'zactly," Sara said. "With her in her head. Looking out her eyes. It's watching us, and it's hungry."

Ray cast a quick look over his shoulder. "Sara, lie down on the seat! Kate, get down as far as you can, too."

She complied, after checking Sara's position. "Do you think that'll make any difference?"

"Can't hurt--in case they decide to use mundane weapons." He ran a yellow light and accelerated. "Until we can catch a minute to rebuild the shield, it'll be hell trying to shake her. You and Sara must shine like an airport beacon."

"Here we are, drop the bomb?" Kate mumbled, scrunching down below the window level. "Or maybe more like piranha swarming to the smell of blood." The instant she made that remark, she regretted it, peeking over the seat back to gauge Sara's reaction. The little girl, though, didn't seem alarmed by the analogy.

She probably grasps the danger better than I do.

"Damn, she ran the red light behind us!" said Ray. "Where's a cop when you need one?" He slowed at the corner of a one-way street, looked right and left, and turned the wrong way. At the first intersection thereafter, he cut across to the next block.

From the back seat came the quiet statement, "The bad lady is still after us." Sure enough, a couple of minutes later the pursuing car, a blue sedan, reappeared half a block behind.

Ray growled a curse and put on speed.

"Good thing for us the cops aren't around," said Kate. "Can't you and Sara at least try to raise that barrier again?"

"We'll have to," Ray said. Again Kate felt him "reach" for her. Now that she'd learned how to open her mind and let her energy flow, she felt the power as palpably as the breath sighing in and out of her lungs. She inhaled and exhaled deeply and slowly, willing her heart to beat with steady confidence, the way Mike had just begun to teach her. She recalled a comment the priest had made, which she hadn't given much credence at the time: "Kate, I think you have a natural talent for biofeedback, controlling your own body's autonomic processes. Besides your paranormal perception, your other great strength may be a bottomless well of energy that you can channel at will."

Now she comprehended his meaning, as she felt her heart and lungs obey her mental directions. She visualized a fountain of power centered somewhere around her diaphragm, pouring its essence along the nerve-paths that bound her to Ray. Behind her closed lids, she could almost see the polychromatic halo Sara perceived around every living person at all times, which Kate had barely glimpsed the night she and Sara had traveled; now, however, her own aura melted

around and into those of Ray and Sara, merging the three of them together. Temporarily part of this network, Kate saw phenomena she normally couldn't perceive. The web or bubble generated by Ray and Sara became clear to her. It glowed like stop-motion heat lightning around the body of the car. A rush of warmth expanded outward from the center of Kate's being. For an instant she felt as if she and Ray interpenetrated each other, so deeply did he draw upon her power for his creation.

A thunderclap reverberated in her head. The bubble they were shaping vanished like a drop of water on a red-hot griddle. A brutal fist slammed into Kate's stomach. She doubled over, hugging herself and gasping from cramps. A quick glance showed her Sara still huddled on the floor behind the front seat.

Kate heard the screech of brakes and felt the car swerve. Almost immediately, the pain stopped. Not physical at all, she understood, but her body's transmutation of a psychic attack. She realized her head lay on Ray's lap. She started to move but changed her mind. In this position, she wasn't visible from outside the car, and the intimate contact might enhance their defensive bond.

She felt him straightening the car, so they obviously hadn't hit anything.

"Sara, are you all right?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes, Dr. Ray. They hit us, they broke our wall."

"Yeah." He squeezed Kate's shoulder, then returned both hands to the wheel. "And that woman is still right behind us." He continued working his way back and forth along side streets, running stop signs and yellow lights at every opportunity. Lying on the seat, Kate had a skewed vantage through the windshield. Alternating light and darkness assaulted her eyes, with fractured glimpses of traffic signals, neon displays, and high-rises. The nauseating presence of the enemy overshadowed everything.

After a while Ray said, "We're in the middle of a slum. Lucky if some gang doesn't decide my car looks like a choice item--she might have her work done for her. Damn it, if we could just get the shield up! She must be tracking us by ESP, so every time we get out of sight, she catches up again."

"At least she hasn't started shooting at us," Kate said.

"No, she probably doesn't want to attract attention. Even here."

"So what are we going to do?"

He shook his head. "I'm open to suggestions."

Sara, who had been silent for several minutes, spoke up. "Dr. Ray, maybe we could fool the bad lady. We could make her see something that isn't real."

Kate felt the increased tension in Ray's thigh muscles. "Could we? Or, rather, could you?" Kate heard a trace of humor in his voice. "I'm strictly in the amateur class compared to you."

"I can do it if you and Mommy help." Sara's fragile-sounding soprano contrasted oddly with the matter-of-fact competence she projected.

My daughter, Wonder Girl. The concept still seemed surreal to Kate.

"I wish Yasmin was here. She could help, too. Mommy, Dr. Ray, we have to hold hands. Not real hands--you know." Her tone implied frustration with her limited vocabulary.

Kate drew a long breath and concentrated on reinforcing her bond with Ray and Sara. She felt herself and Ray flowing together, their streams of power becoming a single river that fed into Sara. The joining stirred whirlpools of sensation in the pit of Kate's abdomen. Despite their desperate straits, cresting the wave with Ray sent a flood of pleasure through her.

Don't lose your grip, don't let it distract you, she commanded her throbbing

nerves. Focus, focus!

Something hard struck the car. "Good God, they're throwing rocks at us!" Ray muttered.

Without loosening the mental tie, Kate sneaked a fast look out the side window. Two teenage boys in cut-off T-shirts were pitching chunks of brick at the car. Kate glanced back and saw the blue sedan a few hundred yards behind. Deciding she'd seen enough, she dove for Ray's lap and renewed her concentration. Ray floored the accelerator, whipping around a sports car just ahead. Its horn blared as they passed. "Now, Sara! The sooner the better!"

Kate sensed the oppressive shadow of dark wings over them. At the same time, a vision of the car following them unreeled inside her head. She saw the middle-aged woman, her fixed glare incongruous along with her sculpted hair and finely penciled makeup, accelerating after them.

Abruptly Kate discovered that a split-off piece of her consciousness floated above the vehicle, joined to her body by the shining ribbon she'd seen when she "traveled." She gazed down upon the chase that careened through the narrow streets. A giant bulk charged out of an alley and loomed between Ray's car and the woman's. It looked and sounded like a truck, a massive eighteen-wheeler. Horns blared and brakes screeched in a chaos of headlights, engine noises, and shattering glass.

It took Kate a minute to realize that the truck wasn't real, but an illusion generated by Sara, fueled by energy from Ray and Kate. In that minute, the pursuing car swerved, spun in a half-circle, and crashed into a lamppost. Water poured from its radiator. A compact tailgating it slammed into it broadside. Kate sensed Ray flinging a wordless query at Sara. Amid a starburst of power, a spectral double of Ray's car attempted a turn and collided with the jackknifed rear end of the illusory truck. In a final flourish, the duplicate's engine burst into flames.

Kate sank back into her body. Freed from the pressure of the evil woman's attack, Sara gathered and shaped the scattered energies to re-form the mental shield. The barrier closed around the car, seamless as an eggshell.

The final surge of effort jarred Kate into ordinary consciousness. Her ties with Ray and Sara snapped. Opening her eyes, she noticed her head still lay on his lap. Her face heated as she sat up. Other parts of her body tingled in the aftermath of their shared exertion. That's strange. It was all mental, wasn't it?

"We should be safe for a while," Ray said. "Our opponent will be busy sorting out that mess. Great work, Sara."

"Great work, yourself," Kate told him, letting out a long sigh of relief. The car's motor and the normal night sounds of the city seemed eerily quiet to her, in contrast to the paranormal cacophony of the past few minutes. She twisted around to look at Sara, who hugged her stuffed animal with no other outward sign of distress.

They didn't talk for the next few miles; there didn't seem anything adequate to say. Once they had driven well past the Golden Gate Bridge, Ray stopped at an all-night gas station. While filling the tank, he scowled at the dents in the fender from the brick fragments that had hit their target. "Could be worse," he said. "At least they didn't break any windows." All three of them stoked up on granola bars and pop-top cans of juice. Kate was surprised at how hungry she suddenly felt. Mike must be right about psychic exercise using real energy, she decided.

As soon as they got on the road again, Sara fell asleep. Kate fought the same urge, until Ray told her, "Get some rest. I can hold the barrier firm by myself. As far as I can tell, Madame X has given up for the night."

Conceding that the world wouldn't disintegrate if she weren't awake to stabilize it, Kate yielded to exhaustion. Sometime in the predawn hours, they stopped again, and she coaxed Ray into letting her drive. With yet another halt, to buy a fast-food breakfast, the horizon was starting to turn gray by the time they pulled into Ardath. As they passed the Suttons' store, Kate said, "It's too early even for them. We'll go straight up to the house."

She would have preferred to do that anyway, like plunging headfirst into the coldest part of a pool. Driving up the dim, silent main street, she became aware of a serenity she hadn't experienced in far too long. The feeling made little sense, after the night of panicked flight. Echoing her thoughts, Ray said, "It feels safe here, doesn't it? We don't have to maintain the personal shield." He glanced into the back seat. "Do we, Sara?"

"No," came the sleepy reply. "Nothing can get us here."

Kate heard Ray exhale in grateful relaxation. She felt a teeth-gritting tension melt away from her. At last she'd reached a place where she didn't have to stay on guard. Funny, basing that decision on Sara's word. It's a lot to expect of a four-year-old.

When she got her first glimpse of the cabin, another welcome realization came to her. It didn't hurt as much as previous visits. Am I finally getting myself together and moving on? Or am I just too emotionally battered to react?

She switched off the engine in the gravel driveway, and they sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Finally Sara wiggled into a sitting position and said, "Are we home?"

"Yep, I guess we are." Maybe here, Kate hoped, she could forget about the threat that loomed over them. In this sheltered haven, the enemy couldn't impinge on their lives. At least, I can forget as long as I don't let myself remember that we can't leave here. She shook off that thought. After all, she hadn't left Ardath during the entire period of her marriage to Johnny, except for a few trips to the county seat, and she hadn't felt confined. It's not time to think about him, either. She dug the house key out of her purse. "Let's go in."

Ray produced a flashlight from the glove compartment. He joined her on the porch, with Sara clinging to his hand and hugging Tigger with her free arm. Kate opened the front door and inhaled the clean, but dusty scent of her unused house. With Ray shining the light for her, she unlatched windows to admit fresh air. Sara scurried from room to room, her eyes brightening as the sleep wore off. "Mommy, where's my bedroom?"

"We came here last summer," Kate said. "Do you remember anything about it?" Standing in the middle of the living-room rug, Sara scrunched up her face. "I remember the porch. And my window tree."

"Window tree?" Kate couldn't make immediate sense of that.

"Come on, let's see if it's still there!" Sara grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. Ray followed close at Kate's back, making the flashlight beam dance on the walls ahead of her.

Kate guided Sara to the room at the right of the master bedroom. "This is where you slept." The bed was neatly made up with a patchwork quilt, just as Kate had arranged it the previous summer. Apparently the Suttons made sure none of the few tenants who'd inhabited the house in the past year had left a mark on it.

Kate raised the window. Outside, the branches of a tall pine brushed the screen.

"There it is," Sara cried, skipping to the window, "my tree!"

Kate savored the evergreen fragrance. Imagine Sara's recalling this one detail, the giant tree that shaded two of the three upstairs rooms. The memory of lying beside Johnny on winter nights, listening to that tree rattle against their own bedroom window, stabbed Kate. Instead of rejecting it, she embraced the memory. I might as well get the worst out of the way. After the initial pang, it hardly hurt at all. A momentary thought that, by remembering without pain, she was being disloyal to Johnny, made her smile at her own foolishness.

Thus fortified, she moved to the doorway of the center bedroom. The double bed loomed before her, covered in a white quilt. On her previous visits, she had slept in the left-most room, the guest room. No more! Coward! This time, she would use her own bed. She marched to the window and opened it, then picked up the telephone receiver. She heard a dial tone. Jane Sutton, reliable as always, must have reactivated the account upon hearing of Kate's plans.

Ray hovered at the door, careful not to intrude. Pasting on a smile, Kate said, "We'd better fire up the generator."

While she and Ray wrestled with the mysteries of electric power, Sara dashed outside in the pale sunrise light. When Ray had the machine under control, Kate stepped out the back door, wiping her hands with a rag. Sara was running circles around the huge pine. I don't have to order her to come in and hide, Kate thought with relief. She's safe.

Kate tested water faucets and the toilet, all of which functioned after producing initial groans and gurgles. Finding canned juice and instant oatmeal in the kitchen cabinets, she served a second breakfast. Afterward, she insisted that Ray and Sara nap until a reasonable hour for driving down to the store. Sara seemed delighted to curl up with Tigger and stare at the "window tree." Ray accepted the guest bed, giving Kate a dubious frown when she promised she would rest, too.

She didn't feel ready for the master bedroom, not just yet. She reclined on the couch, trying to tame her restlessness, but achieved only a fitful doze.

Some time later, Ray came downstairs, his clothes wrinkled from lying down. He gazed across the room at Kate, as if hesitant about approaching too close. "How do you feel?"

"Better." She stretched her arms above her head. "Better than I expected to feel. I'll get Sara up so we can go to the store."

When the three of them walked into the general store, Mrs. Sutton stared at Kate from behind the counter, first in surprise, then with a grin of delight. Her aged golden retriever, lying like a floor mat in the aisle, lurched to his feet and tentatively wagged a greeting. "Kate! I thought you wouldn't be coming for at least another week! And look at you, Sara. You've grown so much." She hugged each of them and shook hands with Ray. "Nice to see you again, Doctor. Well, you all will need to stock up on supplies, and you'll want to phone the oil company and step up the fuel deliveries."

She rambled on as she helped Kate load the counter with canned food, dairy products, and other items for the house. Kate appreciated the woman's vivacious conversation, since it saved Kate herself from having to talk. Exactly why she'd rushed here from San Francisco at a moment's notice would have been hard to explain.

"Imagine you knowing Father Emeric," said Mrs. Sutton as she packed groceries. "It was wonderful seeing him here the other day. He kept me from falling apart

when my mother died of cancer, years ago. He's good people."

"He told me the same about you," said Kate.

Ray, leaning on the counter and passing cans over to the women, said, "I'm glad you're a friend of Father Mike's. It makes me feel better about Kate and Sara, knowing that they'll have somebody nearby to take care of them."

Blushing, Kate said, "You make it sound like I'm a child myself." While overprotective behavior from him made her uncomfortable, at the same time she felt touched by his caring. When he patted her hand, though, she quickly pulled back, embarrassed by the store owner's curious gaze.

After ringing up the purchases, Mrs. Sutton insisted on serving them coffee at one of the two cafe tables by the window. She sat with them, chatting about repairs the cottage might need. Sara played out front with the dog. Just as Kate and Ray got ready to collect her and drive back to the house, the store's bell jingled, and Dr. Thom walked in.

"Kate! I heard you were coming up for a while, but I didn't expect you today." He clasped one of her hands in both of his and vigorously pumped it. "Is it true that you're planning to stay longer this time?"

"Yes," she admitted, "but I can't say how long. I've taken an indefinite leave of absence." That described her circumstances, more or less, in lieu of the whole truth.

"Good. You've been working too hard. I can see the signs." He glanced out the plate-glass window at Sara, chasing the dog. "Incredible, the change in her in just a year. I'm glad you've brought her back, Kate. She needs to experience her roots." He cleared his throat. "If it's any of my business, which you'll probably say it isn't."

Blushing, Kate introduced Ray. Thom surveyed him and said, "Another overworked city doctor."

Ray laughed. "So it's that obvious?"

Taking a seat at the second table, Thom said, "A pot of coffee, Jane, and do you have any more of that blueberry bread from yesterday?" As Mrs. Sutton poured him a cup, he said, "I stop here for a snack every morning. One of the many advantages of living in semi-retirement miles from civilization."

"Come on, Thom," said Mrs. Sutton, "you're the one who always says there's a difference between civilization and industrialization."

Ray said, "So you're civilized but not--what? Technologized?"

"That's one way to put it." Thom cut a slice of blueberry bread and passed the loaf to the other table.

"Get him to show you his symbolic palm tree," Kate said. "He keeps it in a pot in his living room to remind him how much he doesn't miss Los Angeles."

Quizzically arching his brows, Ray said, "I don't know about L.A., but this place does seem to beat the hell out of the clinic in downtown San Francisco."

His thoughtful tone made Kate wonder. Would Ray actually consider...? Now, where did you get that notion from? Thom hasn't even offered, and why would Ray want to hide himself up here in the wilderness? There was only one reason that her unruly imagination would devise that scenario, and she had already decided to squash any romantic ideas about Ray. It's too soon, and my life is too confused.

After Thom admired Sara and received polite replies to the usual banal adult-to-child questions, Ray drove Kate and Sara back to the cabin. Kate reflected that she would soon have to deal with the problem of transportation. Maybe on their next visit, Ray and Mike could bring her car from the city. While

Sara helped Ray stow the supplies they'd bought, Kate started sweeping and dusting. She never would have expected to get so much pleasure from just mopping her own floors. When she tested the washer-dryer, its hot-water connection leaked, as it always did after sitting unused for a while. The familiar problem made her feel even more at home. Getting the tools out of the shed to fix the water hookup, she thought, I can't believe messing around with a wrench looks like fun! I've stayed away too long--I should have taken the plunge ages ago. Her previous week-long visits hadn't seemed like coming home, for she had deliberately behaved like a vacationer, not a homeowner, leaving all practical details to the Suttons.

A little later she found Ray and Sara making a circuit of the yard and contemplating the view of the valley out back. "Too bad it's too late for a vegetable garden," Kate said. "Maybe I should plant some more bulbs for spring."

Ray gave her a tentative look, as if assessing her emotional state. Before he could speak, if he intended to, Sara said, "Bulbs? Like light bulbs?"

Kate suppressed a giggle. "No, munchkin, flower bulbs. They're round like onions. We'll put them in the ground, and next spring--you know, around Easter--flowers will grow."

"Okay." Sara scanned the edge of the woods, then pointed. "Look, what's that?"

At first glance Kate could distinguish only the movement of a largish animal.

The shadows of the trees interfered with vision. A raccoon, maybe? She started to warn Sara not to get close. Then the creature stalked into the sunlit clearing.

"Look, Mommy, Dr. Ray, it's a kitty."

"Oh, yeah?" Ray said, squinting into the sunlight. "I'd say the jury's out on that point."

The animal was the biggest cat Kate had ever seen. With its plumed tail straight up, it padded over the grass and weeds toward them. "Maybe it's part bobcat," said Kate.

"I'm not sure that's possible. But looking at that specimen, I'm ready to believe it."

Kate latched onto Sara, who was about to swoop down on the cat. A feline that size looked scarcely less alarming than a raccoon or a real bobcat. The animal had a blocky, muscular shape and thick, smoky-gray fur. Ear tufts and a ruff around the jowls accentuated the wild appearance. "Be careful, Sara, you know the rule about touching strange animals."

"He's not strange. He likes me." Sara crouched on the ground, waiting for the cat. To Kate's surprise and slight dismay, the creature walked straight up to the little girl, sat down, and stared into her face as if evaluating her. Sara held her right hand, palm up, under the cat's nose. He sniffed her fingers. He then reared onto his hind legs, rested his front paws on Sara's knees, and butted her chin with the top of his head.

Giggling, Sara rubbed behind his ears. "See, he likes me. He came to live with us."

"I've never seen a feral cat behave that way," Ray muttered. "It's almost spooky."

"Then he can't be feral," said Kate. "Sara, the kitty must belong to somebody who lives around here. You can't keep him."

"He belongs to me." Sara didn't whine or protest, but simply made the statement in that self-evident tone Kate found so disconcerting.

"If he's not a pet," Kate said, "he probably has fleas and who knows what else, not to mention no shots."

Ray hunkered down in the weeds and offered his hand to the cat. Instead of taking a bite out of a finger, as Kate still half expected, the beast sniffed and then sat docilely, while Ray stroked him. Picking up the cat, who flattened his ears but didn't struggle, Ray made a cursory examination. "A few fleas, but nothing we couldn't eradicate with a little spray and powder. His eyes and nose look healthy, and he sure isn't malnourished. If you do decide to keep him, I could run him to the vet for immunizations."

Kate ran her fingers through her wind-tousled hair. "Are you two ganging up on me or what?"

"Please, Mommy, I know he's s'posed to live with us. Daddy sent him to me."

Kate's ears buzzed, and the ground abruptly seemed ten feet away. "Sara, please don't..."

She felt Ray's arm around her waist. "Easy, Kate, it's all right. Lean on me."

The lightheadedness receded. Acutely aware of the heat of Ray's body, she disengaged herself and settled carefully onto the nearest tree stump. "Okay, you win. On one condition. As soon as possible, we'll ask around town about his owners and put up a 'found' notice at the store. If nobody claims the cat, I guess he's yours." She forced a smile. "At that size, he might make a good watchdog."

Ray joined her in watching Sara pet the cat, who rolled on his back to expose his belly for the child's stroking. "Just a big harmless teddy bear," said Ray.

"You could call him Fog."

Kate's lips twitched with unwilling humor. "Because he's gray and walks on little cat feet? Yeah, sure, except those are big cat feet."

Sara looked up. "Is that his name? Fog?"

"Do you want it to be?" Ray said.

"It's a nice name. He likes it, too." She plopped onto her bottom, and the cat crawled into her lap, or rather as much of him as would fit. "Fog needs food, and dishes to eat out of, and toys, and other cat stuff. Right, Mommy?"

"Other stuff," said Kate dryly. "Like a carrying cage to take him to the vet, and a litter box so we don't have to open the door every two minutes all winter, and probably a lot of things I can't think of at the moment." She confronted Ray with an exaggerated sigh. "See what you've gotten me into?"

After the house was tidied and in full working order, Ray made a solitary excursion into town for cat food and litter. A large plastic dishpan served as a litter box; other items would have to wait until his return visit with Father Mike on the coming weekend. Even after they'd prepared and eaten a late lunch, Ray lingered, thinking of last-minute cautionary remarks.

Kate stood on the porch with him, piqued by his protective hovering, yet reluctant to say goodbye. I can't become dependent on him. He has other things to do besides hang around me and keep the goblins away!

Having already said goodbye to Sara, who was entertaining Fog with a piece of string in the living room, Ray clasped both of Kate's hands in his. They leaned on the porch rail together, avoiding each other's eyes. "I'll drive your car up this weekend, and I'll try to bring you some more work from Mr. Boyle. And toys for Fog--can't forget that." He laughed softly. "Now, you have my phone number, and Mike's, if you need anything."

"Oh, Ray, quit fussing. We're perfectly safe here. You said so yourself."

"Yeah, I know. You really think I should listen to me?" One of his hands curled

around the back of her neck. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me, too. You." She felt herself blushing. "Listen to us, it's only a few days. Sara and I will be fine. We have a watch-cat." She lowered her voice. "You better be careful, yourself. Keep up that bubble, or shield, or whatever you call it."

"I will." He squeezed her hand hard. "I won't take the slightest risk of leading them here or to the rectory."

"It's not that, dummy, I don't want them tracking you down, either!"

"All right, I'll be careful." With a half-smile, he raised her hand to his lips.

Before she could recover enough to respond, he turned and walked to his car. She waited until it disappeared around the bend before going inside the suddenly emptier house.

Unpacking clothes, finding niches for Sara's few toys, and making lists of things to buy and do filled the afternoon. Supper, dishes, baths, and read-aloud time disposed of the evening. Finally, however, Sara lay asleep, with Fog on the foot of her bed. Kate had lost that skirmish with scarcely a shot fired. Now she herself had little choice but to go to bed.

She lay awake too long listening to the sigh of the wind in the giant pine. She attributed her insomnia to the quiet. How was she supposed to settle down without the familiar rhythm of traffic outside her window? I'll get used to it.

I got used to it quick enough five years ago, with-- She rolled over, punched her pillow, and ordered the memories to shut up.

When she slept, she dreamed that Johnny opened the bedroom door and walked in. This time Kate knew she was dreaming, remembered that her husband was dead. In the surreal manner of dreams, though, she didn't feel incredulous or frightened at viewing him "in his habit as he lived," plaid shirt, beard, and all. He carried Fog cradled in his arms.

"I'm glad you've come back, Kate. This is where you and Sara belong." He sat on the edge of the bed. She felt the mattress sag and scented his woodsy fragrance.

"We do? Hiding for the rest of our lives?"

"You won't have to hide forever. It will turn out all right, I promise."

Tears of frustration gathered in Kate's eyes. "That's not enough. I need to know more-- who's trying to hurt us, how to get rid of them and protect Sara."

"I don't belong here anymore," Johnny said. "There's only so much I can do to help."

"If you hadn't gone and gotten yourself killed--" She clapped a hand over her mouth, horrified at her own words.

Instead of counterattacking with anger, Johnny gave her a sad smile. "I know how you feel. I wish I could be with you. But I did send Fog." He laid the cat on the bed and stood up. "Goodnight, Kate."

She wasn't sure whether she saw him vanish or just fell into oblivion with his eyes still fixed on hers. The next thing she knew, she was awake, and her watch, on the nightstand, read 3:17. The cat lay curled next to her feet. I subconsciously felt him there and dreamed Johnny brought him. "Go away," she mumbled, prodding Fog with her toes. "Go back to Sara."

Somehow she felt more serene as she sank back to sleep, confident that her old home welcomed her, that by coming here she'd done the right thing.

Chapter 14

"Daddy's here. I saw him last night."

Kate's spoon rattled against her cereal bowl. She slowly put it down and gripped the edge of the table. "Munchkin, you know Daddy can't be here, don't you? He's with God."

"Isn't God everywhere? So Daddy can be with God and be here too."

Now, how do I refute logic like that? "Your father is here in spirit."

"Then I saw his spirit. He told me Fog will take care of us." Sara took a swig of orange juice, her appetite obviously unhindered by the content of the conversation.

"You dreamed that he talked to you. That's only natural, here in his home."

Sara shrugged. "I guess he visits in dreams 'cause it's quieter then. Or 'cause he can find me easier when I'm in bed."

At a loss for further argument, Kate seized upon the distraction of the cat, who crouched at the back door screen emitting a raspy chirp of a meow. "Why don't you let Fog out? He's not used to staying inside."

As Sara got up to open the door, Kate thought, I've got to stop making an issue of this "talking to Daddy" business. It doesn't bother her a bit, so why upset her about it? Kate decided she herself was especially disturbed about the topic this morning because of her own dream. If not supernatural, it was something of a coincidence. No, it isn't. As I just said, it's only natural to dream about Johnny here. It'll stop when we get settled.

"Eat up, Sara," she said. "We have to start digging the flower garden." She would phone the store to ask about bulbs and inquire whether the Suttons would deliver; they used to. While she was at it, she might ask for a selection of yarn. She could take up crocheting again, and later quilting as well. Along with reading for Ned Boyle and coaching Sara with kindergarten work, those activities should keep her busy.

* * * *

Even though she crawled into bed pleasantly tired, Kate dreamed again. Strangely, she didn't have a second's doubt that she was dreaming, yet she also spoke to Johnny as if she believed he was really present. He invited her to get up and walk outside with him. When she tossed back the covers, he reached out as if to help her rise. For an instant she thought their fingers brushed, but she felt no touch of flesh, only a crackle of electricity. Of course I can't feel him; this isn't real.

She followed him downstairs, unbolted the front door, and stepped onto the porch. Fog padded past her to sit on the steps. Kate felt the boards cold under her bare feet, and the night breeze made her shiver. Inconvenient dream, letting me feel just the parts I could do without. "What do you want now, Johnny? Why can't you either tell me straight out what you're doing here, or leave us alone?"

Her words and tone shocked her. Did she really want Johnny--even a dream-wraith of him--to go away? Yes, she decided, she did, if the most she could have was this frustrating, evasive vision.

"You're right," he said. "I should leave you alone. But I can't ignore the

danger you and Sara are in. I feel drawn to watch over you. It's like magnetism." His hand stretched out to graze her unbound hair. Again she felt a spark, like static in cold, dry air. Looking oddly self-conscious, he knelt to stroke the cat. "Besides, it's hard to break away from you, even when I know I can't have you anymore. It's sort of like phantom pain in an amputated limb. Even without a body, the emotions associated with the body aren't completely dead."

Tears welled in Kate's eyes. She leaned over, trying to touch him, but he glided out of her reach. "Walk with me," he said.

She tried to ignore the pebbles and dry pine needles in the grass, while following him in a circle around the cabin. At the back of the house he spread his arms, as if drawing her attention to the view of the valley. "My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed, I have a goodly heritage."

Kate thought the verse sounded familiar but couldn't place it. Turning to her with a shy smile, Johnny said, "Psalm 16:6."

He'd never been one to quote Scripture before. Well, maybe dying changed a person's perspective. Gazing out over the dark sea of trees, relieved only by a few glimmers of light, she folded her arms across her chest. Her lightweight flannel nightgown provided little protection from the wind. "I tried to tell Sara you can't be here because you're in Heaven. So why aren't you there instead of here? Is there a Heaven at all?"

"Oh, yes." His smile became remote, as he gazed across the valley. "But you still need me, so I've been allowed to linger here awhile, for the same reason you and Sara have been given the powers you need to fight the evil that's pursuing you. You do have protection, Kate. Never doubt that."

Turning to her, he wrapped his arms around her. Warmth and serenity she hadn't felt in longer than she could remember suffused her body and mind. Protection. Divine protection.

Johnny strolled the rest of the way around the house. The cat met him at the porch steps, rubbing against his ankles. "You should let Fog stay out most of the night. He's here for your safety."

"That's what Sara--" Kate began. But blackness congealed before her eyes, and she remembered nothing else.

* * * *

By the time Mike and Ray arrived for their visit Friday evening, the novelty of Ardath hadn't yet worn off for Sara. The only complaint she'd voiced related to the lack of a TV. "Ray will bring your Sesame Street records," Kate said, "so you don't have to miss it completely."

"Can't he bring us a TV, too?"

Kate explained that TV didn't work in Ardath, because of the mountains and the distance from the nearest city. Sara gave her a dubious look, as if suspecting Kate of inventing a spurious excuse, but didn't fuss.

The two men arrived in a miniature caravan, both Mike's car and Kate's, loaded with Kate and Sara's clothes, books, toys, and other personal items. Sara, devoid of inhibitions, hugged the men, while Kate thanked them and goggled. "I never expected you to go to this much trouble."

Amid their protests that it was no trouble, she reflected, This proves it, we really have moved back here. I might as well admit it, this is no temporary hideout, this is home.

The labor of unloading and stowing boxes overrode her self-consciousness about seeing Ray again. Twilight merged into full dark by the time they finished the

task. Since all three of the adults agreed they were about to faint from hunger, Kate immediately dished up homemade bread and the soup she'd been simmering all day.

"How do you do it, Kate?" Mike said after a while, as he got up to refill his bowl. "Create a meal like this out of the limited ingredients they're able to keep in stock at the general store, I mean?"

"Mrs. Sutton's really helpful about special-ordering stuff she doesn't have on hand. All she needs is a couple of days' notice."

"So you can get everything you need without worrying about leaving town. That's good," said the priest.

"Speaking of leaving town," Ray said, "I've made an appointment for the cat with a vet about thirty miles away, tomorrow at eleven. I'll take him and bring him home, no problem."

Kate repeated the thanks that seemed more inadequate each time.

"Why is Fog going to the doctor?" Sara asked.

While they cleared the table, Ray explained to Sara about immunizations.

Meanwhile, Mike maneuvered Kate outside for a walk under the trees. "Ray and I discovered something Sara doesn't need to hear about." At Kate's indrawn breath, he patted her arm and said, "Sorry, it's nothing alarming, just background information. We know who that woman is, the one who confronted Ray and tried to follow you." He took a folded paper out of a pocket.

Opening it, Kate saw that the page was a Xerox of a newspaper article dated a few months earlier. A photo showed Eugene Martlet with the woman Kate recognized as their pursuer. The caption identified her as Marlet's wife, executive secretary of the National Institute for Research in Nontraditional Cosmology. The brief article described a lecture series being offered to the public. "His wife? Your monster in human shape is married?"

"Why not? It's a good cover, another way of appearing ordinary." Mike took the page, refolded it, and tucked it away. "I've decided to hire a detective agency to do a few hours of investigation on the Institute. Couldn't hurt to find out what they've been up to."

Kate sat with him on the low stone wall that separated the back yard from the steeper mountainside slope. Stars were coming out, crystal-hard, a countless throng compared to the few visible from her city apartment. "I've been wondering about Arlene, but I didn't want to ask in front of Sara. I figured you would've told me if--"

"She'll be fine. No measurable aftereffects, except that she can't remember anything that happened at the rectory that night. She says she felt an irresistible urge to be with you during the storm. After that, it's all a blank, until she woke up in the emergency room."

Kate shivered. "Sounds like those other people. I guess we have to be thankful Arlene's still alive."

"The hospital put her through a battery of neurological tests, but of course they didn't find any abnormalities. Her doctor had to write it off as a mystery and let her go."

"You didn't tell her?"

"What she did to you? Certainly not. She thinks she walked into the rectory and collapsed in the kitchen while helping you fix refreshments."

"Good." The constriction in Kate's chest loosened. Still, she was glad Arlene was in San Francisco and didn't know the location of the cabin. How could anyone guarantee the enemy wouldn't try to use her again?

After an interval of comfortable silence, Mike said, "Kate, are you happy here?"

"Happier than I expected. I built it up in my head to an unrealistically high hurdle. The apartment was only a--a waiting room, the past three and a half years. I think we were meant to come back here all along. One thing, though--" She trailed off, not sure whether she wanted to discuss her dreams.

"Yes?" His tone was open but undemanding.

"Sara keeps insisting Johnny is here. And she claims he sent us the cat." Kate forced a light laugh. "I've dreamed about him myself, too."

"How do you feel about that?"

She plucked a handful of weeds and started twisting them into a braid. "It's not scary, the way I would have imagined it would be. And it doesn't depress me, either. In the dreams he behaves so matter-of-fact, like a casual visit. It seems so real."

"And you want to know if it could be an authentic communication."

She nodded. "If it is why doesn't he tell me anything useful, instead of dropping cryptic hints?"

"Maybe he can't. Could be he doesn't know, himself. Why should death instantly make someone omniscient?"

"Then why doesn't he go ahead and move to a higher plane, or whatever he's supposed to be doing?" While she wanted to believe God had assigned Johnny to watch over them, in her waking hours she still had doubts about the things her dream visitor had told her. She shredded her grass braid and tossed it into the ravine. "The marriage service says 'until death do us part,' but we're not completely parted yet."

"You're right, you and Johnny aren't husband and wife anymore. But that doesn't dissolve all bonds between you. You've got a shared history, which will never change. As a practical problem, this doesn't come up too often." In the moonlight she could see the faint smile on his lips. "Jesus did comment on it, though."

"Huh?" It had been a long time since Kate had read the Bible, much less listened to a sermon.

"A group of Sadducees--they were the party that didn't believe in the afterlife--told him a hypothetical story about a woman who was married to, and widowed by, seven brothers in succession. They asked Jesus whose wife she would be in Heaven."

"You're kidding!" Kate giggled.

"It's right there in the Gospels."

"So what did he say?"

"That in the Resurrection there's 'neither marrying nor giving in marriage.'"

"Big help!"

Mike laughed at her indignant response. "That's probably what the Sadducees said, too. I think the point is, life after death is so different from this world that we can't understand it until we get there--and anyway, as they say in government circles, we have no 'need to know.'"

"So I should mind my own business?" Kate stood up, staring across the back yard at the house, where Fog slithered through the grass. "Hard to do, if Johnny keeps doing things like sending us cats. Is that possible?"

Mike answered only with a noncommittal shrug. "Does it matter? The cat is helping Sara adjust to the move, isn't he?"

Inside, the three of them shared a final glass of wine. Kate's nerves twitched

whenever she met Ray's eyes or "accidentally" touched his hand. She remained attuned to his location, like heat rays on the back of her neck, even when he was out of sight. She recognized the symptoms, despite the many years since she'd last suffered them. Definitely, I have a crush on Ray, or is it more? She felt both glad and regretful that the men weren't spending the night in the cabin. They had a room at Ardath's one bed-and-breakfast, the village's only public accommodation for the few tourists who found their way here in spring and summer.

Before leaving for the night, Ray gave her two documents: the receipt from the storage of her apartment furniture, and a certified check for the balance of her San Francisco bank account. "I'm not sure what you can do with it, though. If you have to take the risk of opening a new account--"

"I don't. I've kept one active at a branch bank in Canterville, the next town over."

"Good." The note of relief in his voice emphasized the danger lurking outside the town limits. Kate wished he and Mike wouldn't remind her of it so often. But he had another question to clear up. "Have you thought about what to do with your mail?"

"Not really. I guess the few people who might want to write to me can't do it in care of you forever." She noticed that Mike had already slipped into the driver's side of his car, leaving Ray on the porch with her.

"I could rent a post office box for you, in the same town where you have the checking account," Ray said. "With me picking up your mail, nobody could find you that way."

"Okay, do it. I'm just sick of thinking about it."

He clasped her hand, running his thumb over her knuckles. "I know," he whispered. "I wish I could make it go away." He leaned over to give her a light, quick kiss. She didn't have time to part her lips in welcome before he drew back.

He glanced over his shoulder at the car. "I feel like a kid on a first date.

Dad's waiting to drive me home. See you tomorrow morning."

The following day, while Ray escorted Fog to the vet and back, Mike drilled Kate and Sara in the psychic exercises they'd begun at the rectory. After what had happened during their flight from the city, Kate wasn't surprised that Sara's powers seemed to have taken a leap to a higher phase. Kate was surprised and a bit dismayed, though, that her own ability seemed enhanced. I thought Sara was doing all that flamboyant stuff, with a little help from Ray. I was just along for the ride.

Mike expressed his delight at her progress. "You see, as I told you, you just needed to gain confidence in your talent."

Confident, me? Yeah, right. She felt about as confident as Bambi sliding around on the frozen pond with Thumper. Any minute, the ice might crack under her feet, and she wasn't sure she could swim.

* * * *

Johnny and Sara--four-year-old Sara, in her jeans and Cookie Monster sweatshirt--sat on the stone wall overlooking the valley. It was a crisp, sunny fall day, the same kind of day Kate had just lived through. She watched Sara tickling Fog's chin with a pine needle.

At first Kate observed the scene from above, a pair of disembodied eyes. Then she found herself standing by the back door. Johnny called and beckoned to her. She floated toward him and sank down onto the grass.

Johnny said, "Sara, go take Fog for a walk." Sara jumped up and trotted around the house, with the cat stalking after her. Johnny's vivid blue eyes transfixed Kate. "The forces of chaos are constantly shadowing Ray. He's strong, but he can't maintain that shield at uniform strength his every waking moment. They may yet break through at the wrong time. He must be even more careful."

Kate's body coalesced into solidity. She clenched her fists, feeling the nails gouge her palms. "What's that supposed to mean? He's always careful. What are you telling me that we don't already know?"

"I'd be more definite if I could. I see them breaking his shell--I see an attack--but I don't know where or when. Please, Kate." He reached for her, and she thought their fingers actually brushed. A sizzle of static electricity flared between them. "Try to persuade him to stay here. The frequent traveling back and forth he plans is dangerous."

"Stay here?" Her face heated. Can somebody blush in a dream? "That's ridiculous. The only way he'd want to make that move would be if we were married." Sadness darkened Johnny's eyes. "I no longer have a claim on you. That might be best for everybody concerned."

Kate sprang up and ran away from him. She woke in the dark bedroom, with the wind sighing through the pine tree.

This was Thursday night--literally Friday morning, by now--the sixth night since Ray and Mike's visit. She'd dreamed of her late husband four times. Reluctance to let go of the memories? Guilt, because I'm attracted to Ray? Or real messages from beyond? If these were real messages, she thought again, they weren't much use. She had to find a way either to stop the dream-harassment or extract some concrete information from it.

At breakfast Sara remarked, "Last night Daddy came here to play with Fog and me. Except it was daytime. We sat on the rock fence in the back yard."

Kate froze with her hand on the refrigerator door. Usually she paid little attention to Sara's comments about "seeing Daddy," hoping to discourage the obsession with a show of indifference. Nor did she want to hear the details, which only fueled her own anxiety. Yet she couldn't ignore the fact that Sara's visit sounded remarkably like last night's dream.

Kate sat opposite Sara and gazed at her until the little girl lifted her head from her cereal bowl to stare back. "Sara, if Daddy talks to you at night, could he talk to you during the day, too?"

"I don't know. I never asked him."

"Well, later today, maybe we should ask." Sara's receptivity gave Kate the idea of trying to contact Johnny through the child. If Johnny was really lingering nearby, he wouldn't hurt his daughter. Wide awake, Kate and Sara might actually be able to get some straight answers. Or, if nothing else, Kate might ask him to leave. At first she'd thought the half-real communication was better than nothing, but the frustration was building to an unacceptable level. And I don't want Sara indefinitely fixated on a ghost, either.

On the other hand, if Johnny didn't respond to their invitation, no harm would be done.

Kate threw her energy into scrubbing the house and baking bread for Ray's upcoming weekend visit, while putting off the experiment until late afternoon. Sara accepted the project of contacting her father as perfectly normal; she might have been anticipating a long-distance phone call. Kate, however, felt nervous about the prospect.

Recalling a stray remark from Mike about an overstuffed stomach impeding psychic

work, she decided to make the attempt right before dinner. With a casserole waiting in a warm oven, she kindled a fire in the living room. The afternoon was cool enough to make the warmth pleasant, and Kate thought the flames would provide a focus for concentration.

I've never done any of this stuff alone before, except that business with the mirror, she thought, watching the fire spread from rolled newspapers to the logs. Maybe I should wait and talk to Mike first? No, I've had enough of this haunting, even if it's meant well. I want answers!

She asked Sara to sit cross-legged on a cushion facing the hearth. Kate sat beside her, at an angle, to watch her eyes. "Remember how Father Mike made you relax and helped you reach out with your mind?"

"Sure."

"Do you think you can do that now, without him? Can you make yourself relax and get sleepy?"

"That's easy." Sara folded her hands loosely in her lap.

"Fine." Kate swallowed, trying to stifle the nervousness that might creep into her voice. "Look at the fire. Watch it leaping and dancing. See how bright it is. Focus on the light." Was this routine working? She'd never had training in hypnosis. What else did Mike do? Oh, yes. "Count to ten with me, Sara. One, two..." Kate slowly intoned the numbers. Sara's soft voice echoed them.

The huge gray cat padded into the living room. He crossed the braid rug to lie in front of Sara, his head on her knee. She dreamily moved one hand to rest on his back. Her eyes were fixed on the fire.

Kate felt her own muscles loosening; her head grew light as she focused on Sara and the periphery of the room became a blur. "Now, Sara, is Daddy here?"

"He's always here."

"Yes, but can you talk to him, and will he answer?"

"I'll try. Fog will help me call him." Sara's fingers curled behind the cat's neck-ruff.

Observing how easily the child slid into trance, Kate felt a chill in the pit of her stomach. She realized this process was becoming routine to her, too, like their read-aloud ritual with C. S. Lewis or Madeleine L'Engle at bedtime. Kate disliked watching herself grow accustomed to the impossible, even though it made her task easier. She touched Sara's hand, which felt cool in contrast to the cat's warm coat.

"Call Daddy," said Kate, her dry throat making her voice rasp.

Sara's eyelids drooped. In contact with her, Kate shared the instant when the child extended her senses into the non-physical realm. To Kate, the moment felt like stepping into a dimension as clear, airy, and fragrant, compared to the firelit living room, as the mountainside was compared to a foggy morning in downtown San Francisco. She expanded and blossomed along with Sara. Lord help me, I could get to like this! She saw on two levels, the living-room walls and furniture on one level, and superimposed on them a vision of the life-aura glowing around herself, Sara, the cat, even the spider plant hanging in the corner, and overarching them all, a protective layer of rosy cloud. She couldn't make her senses decide whether the cloud hovered below the ceiling, or outside, enveloping the house and yard. Is my spirit really so loosely anchored to my body, rattling around and ready to jump out at the slightest jolt?

The awareness that Sara was speaking drew Kate's attention away from these misgivings. "Okay, he's here," Sara said. "What do you want me to say to him?"

"Ask him if Ray is in trouble when he drives back and forth from San Francisco."

A moment of silence, as if Sara were actually asking a question and waiting for a reply. "He says he tried to tell you about that already. Dr. Ray should stay here where it's safe."

"What if that's just not possible?" Kate curbed her impatience and spoke more quietly. "No, don't ask him that. Ask when and where the danger will strike."

"He doesn't know."

"Sounds like a cop-out to me, like those scenes in mysteries where the detective sets up a meeting with somebody who gets killed before they can pass on the vital clue. Look, what if Ray just stops visiting here, stays away from us?"

After a moment's reflection, Sara said, "That wouldn't help. Daddy says the bad things will keep looking for Ray, maybe try to hurt him and make him tell about us. They'll find him even--even--eventually." She enunciated the word with exaggerated care, then emitted a faint sigh. "Daddy wants to talk to you himself." She cleared her throat and spoke in a deeper tone--her own voice, still mediated through a little girl's larynx, yet not the same. "Kate, I tried to explain all this the other night. Now, listen up, we don't have much time. I can't tell you anything definite because I don't know myself."

Kate's heart stuttered. She swallowed the phantom ice cube in her throat and said, "Johnny? That's really you, isn't it?"

"Well, you did ask for me, didn't you?" The voice conveyed an echo of his once-familiar humor. "Cliché or not, time is like a stream, and the rapids overlap and mix when one stream flows into another. I see things, but half the time I can't tell present from future, or potential from certain. The state I exist in now, outside the body, doesn't have firm roots in time and space. I see another attack on Ray, psychic or physical or both. I don't know when or where."

"How can I give him a warning like that? It would upset him worse without doing a bit of good."

"Get him to move up here, where he'll be sheltered with you under the shield."

Sara's body gave an oddly adult shrug. "That's the only way you can all be safe, until you get rid of the enemy."

"Martlet? Can we destroy him? If we had to kill him, could we?" Kate had trouble imagining herself killing any person. On the other hand, if Mike's theory was sound, Martlet wasn't a person.

Johnny confirmed that supposition. "He's not human, so you can't kill him. But you could banish him, perhaps drive him out of his manlike form and back where he belongs." His tone, transmuted through Sara's voice, became stern. "Now, what in the world possessed you to try this flea-brained stunt?"

"What?" Kate stared at the little girl's expressionless face, searching for Johnny's features within or behind it.

"Using Sara as a medium? Good God, I thought Father Mike was supposed to be teaching you!"

"He didn't say--"

"He probably thought you'd have better sense than to try it without asking!"

Sara's free hand waved at the ceiling, drawing Kate's inward eye to the psychic cloud cover with its roseate glow. "This barrier is only as good as your will to be protected by it."

"Of course I want protection!" Kate took refuge from fear in defensive anger.

"Protection from what? You're certainly not going to hurt Sara or me!"

"I'm not talking about me," the child-adult voice said with exaggerated

patience. "When you invite me in, you leave the way open for other things that might decide to follow. The longer I stay, the worse it gets. I can feel them right now, clawing at the barrier, nosing around for a weak spot--" Sara's eyes drifted open, rolled up toward the roof.

Kate saw a jagged tear in the cloud cover. As she watched, paralyzed, the rift widened. Terror coursed up her limbs like an ice-water IV.

Sara's delicate, cool hands grasped hers. With a surge of vertigo, Kate leaped out of her body. That was too easy, too quick. What if someday I can't get back in? But she had no time to worry about that danger now. She saw dark smoke oozing through the rip in the clouds.

The smoke had an unwholesome iridescence, like the colors shining on a puddle of dirty oil. It congealed into the shape of a creature with wings, a giant bat or perhaps a pterodactyl. Mindless fear propelled Kate backward. Sara's immaterial touch stopped her. "Mommy, fight! Make it go away!"

How, for God's sake? Kate glanced down at her body, along the trailing ribbon of blue light. The cross Mike had given her rested on her bosom. She freed one hand to raise the cross in challenge. Get out of here, you damned thing!

The smoke comprising the dark wings swirled in patterns that made her stomach churn. But the creature didn't flee. Instead, its visage melted from a bat's head into the muzzle and fangs of a saber-toothed wolf. Nice going, we made it angry!

Out of nowhere, Johnny's image flashed before her eyes, a bright blur except for his golden-brown hair, and vaulted up toward the attacker. He slammed a fist into the creature, which emitted a howl that seemed to cleave Kate's skull from inside out. The jaws snapped at Johnny, who flowed out of their reach. Can it hurt him? Kate wondered. Existing on the same non-physical plane, presumably it could.

She sensed movement from Sara. The little girl seemed to be lifting the cat. Not the cat's body, but the essential self that corresponded to Kate and Sara's astral form. Fog launched himself from Sara's arms in a shape as insubstantial as his name, misty gray. The spirit-cat expanded like smoke on the wind, solidifying instead of becoming more tenuous in the process. In seconds his astral form matched the winged wolf-thing in size.

"Mommy, Daddy," Sara called, "help Fog!"

Kate poured her energy into the cat. She felt, like blood racing through her own veins, the pulsating vitality of Sara and Johnny doing the same. The claws and teeth of the feline shape fastened on the dark thing's throat. The beast raked its talons at the cat and thrashed its wings. The cat maintained his clutch on the enemy. In his astral form, Fog had eyes of green flame, and sparks shot from his canines and claw-tips when he pierced the dark thing's armor. Clots of black smoke dribbled from the wounds.

Johnny charged the creature's flank. Kate couldn't be sure whether he stabbed it with a light-spear formed of their shared energy or ripped it open with his bare hands. Perhaps it didn't matter, since all they experienced on this plane must be metaphorical, an image of the unimaginable to help them function outside their bodies.

The dark thing gave a roar that reverberated through her bones. Fog relaxed his bite. The creature collapsed into an amorphous clump of blackness and funneled back through the gap in the clouds.

Kate could no longer see Johnny. His voice--his own, not Sara's speaking for him--sounded from a distance: "Remember what I said. Never, never try this

again. And warn Ray. His job is to take care of you, and he can't do it if he's not here."

Then she felt his absence, an unmistakable hollow space.

The rip in the barrier eddied like material clouds in a windstorm. Sara stretched out elongated astral fingers to draw the sides of the tear together like someone feathering the edges of a torn page to mend them. As Kate began the dizzying fall back into her body, her vision changed. She saw her daughter, incongruously, as an opalescent spider reweaving a torn web with dainty legs and spinnerets.

Kate's flesh closed around her, both shelter and prison.

She must have been unconscious for a while, she decided when she opened her eyes. Her perception certainly had a gap in it after Sara repaired the barrier.

Now she lay on her back on the rug, with Sara's head on her outflung arm. Before Kate had time to worry about the child's welfare, Sara sat up and rubbed her eyes. Kate pushed herself to a sitting position, too, her arms aching. The flames on the hearth had died down to glowing logs and embers. The room was dark otherwise.

Fog lay on his side, eyes shut. For a second Kate thought, with a sick emptiness, that he was dead. But when Sara stroked him, he responded with a feeble mew.

"He's tired," Sara said. "He'll be okay."

"I'll take your word for it." Kate rubbed her forehead. "The barrier--the rip in the cloud?"

"I fixed it. They can't get back in, and Daddy says they can't find us that way if we don't open the gate again."

"Guess I blew it that time, didn't I? I'm so sorry, sweetheart." For the first time, Kate had leisure to think of what she'd done. Now that she could absorb Johnny's warning, her heart lurched. God only knows what might've happened to Sara!

Before she could plunge too deep into self-flagellation, Sara said, "I'm hungry."

"Me, too." Though her stomach ought to be too knotted for appetite, she felt ravenous. "Let's get supper, and we'll pour some milk for Fog as soon as he's ready. He deserves it." Super-Cat, she thought. He actually was sent to help us.

Just as she was pulling Sara to her feet, someone pounded on the door. Kate's pulse shifted into overdrive. Her fingers dug into Sara's arm. She drew a deep breath that made her ribs ache.

"Don't be afraid, Mommy, it's all right."

At the same time, the hammering on the door was joined by shouting. "Damn it, Kate, are you in there or not?"

"Ray!" She staggered to the door, unlocked it, and flung it open. When Ray stepped in, she shamelessly wrapped her arms around him and leaned on him.

"What the h--" He glanced at Sara. "What's going on? I've knocked at both doors a couple of times. Didn't you hear me?" He fumbled behind him to lock out the chill night air.

"Not until just now," Kate said. Ray's fingers massaged the base of her skull; she wished she could sag against him and enjoy the sensation for hours.

He took a longer look at Sara, sitting on the rug next to the cat, inert except for an occasional flicker of a tail-tip. "Something's wrong, isn't it? What happened?"

Kate's fatigue and hunger made it hard for her to form an intelligible answer.

"We tried to speak to Johnny. Sara contacted him for me."

"You what?" Ray's arm muscles went rigid. His voice shook with the effort of keeping it low. "And something got at you, right?" Again he gazed over Kate's shoulder at the child. "Sara, are you all right?"

"Sure. Fog saved us."

Ray unlocked the door again, shoved it open, and yanked Kate onto the porch. She glared up at him, while his hands gripped her upper arms painfully hard. "What's the matter with you?" He made the words a harsh whisper. Jerking the door shut, he continued with the same suppressed wrath, "Didn't it occur to you that if you lay Sara wide open that way, anything might come in and take possession of her?"

Possession? That would have been infinitely worse than the attack they'd repelled. Kate's fear made her lash out. "Where do you get off, barging in here and--"

He shook her until her head thumped the wood behind her. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough, apparently, to startle Ray into restraining himself.

"Isn't it enough that I have to do my job, day after day, constantly worrying about whether I'm being watched or followed? Do I have to worry about you, too? Up here where you're supposed to be safe, for God's sake!"

"Well, who asked you to worry? Why don't you stay away and forget about me? Or you could stay here where you belong instead of leaving us--" The ridiculous accusation burst out before she realized what she was saying. Biting it off in mid-breath, she collapsed against his shoulder and buried her face in his jacket to stifle her sobs, in the faint hope that Sara wouldn't hear.

Chapter 15

When she finally raised her head to look at Ray, he wore a stunned expression, as if he'd been hit with a blunt instrument but couldn't remember how to fall down. She rubbed her eyes, sniffled, and said, "That came out wrong. I didn't mean to say that."

His hands rubbed mechanically up and down her back. "If you did mean to say it, my answer would be that I'd love to stay here, but I haven't exactly been invited."

Kate took refuge in an outside authority. "That's what Johnny told me, that you belong in Ardath, that neither of us will be safe as long as you keep traveling back and forth."

"Did he really?" Ray had collected himself enough to speak in his usual calm, directive way. "Sit down and tell me about it." He guided her to the sagging porch swing, draping an arm lightly around her shoulders as they sat.

She told him everything. By the time she finished, he was shaking his head, his mouth set in a tight line.

He inhaled deeply before speaking, as if he wanted to explode at her again. "I guess you couldn't have known. Mike didn't have time to explain many details to

you. But Kate, a séance!"

She pressed her knuckles against her mouth. "I never thought of it as that! If I had..."

"I know." He patted her shoulder. "Never mind, it's all water under the bridge after the horse is stolen. I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time, after what you've been through." His lips skimmed the top of her head. His breath ruffling her hair made her tremble.

The door cracked a few inches, and Sara peeked out. "Are you okay?"

"Sure."

"When is supper?"

Kate answered with a weepy smile, "Soon. How about setting the table for three people?" I hope the casserole isn't dried to a fossil. Too bad that's not the worst of our troubles. After Sara closed the door, Kate said, "I just wanted to know. All this psychic stuff is so frustrating, like trying to catch shadows. And I still don't know much of anything."

"From all I've heard, that's how it is, more often than not. Let's just thank God nothing got in."

"Amen to that." With the crisis over, she felt self-conscious about his arm around her. She eased out of his loose embrace and stood up. "Come on, we'll treat you to desiccated noodles, tastefully accessorized with a salad."

* * * *

After tucking Sara into bed, Kate sat with Ray on the living-room couch, in front of the replenished fire. The evening was too chilly for the porch to be comfortable. Gazing at the hearth in the otherwise darkened room, Kate fought the impulse to move closer to Ray.

They didn't look at each other. Eventually he broke a prolonged silence with, "I'd better drive into town, if I want to get a room before the bed and breakfast locks up for the night."

"Isn't that kind of silly?" she said. "You're welcome to stay here. There's only one of you, and we have one extra room." Would he read her offer of shelter as another kind of invitation? And how would she react if he suggested sharing her room? She decided that even if she wanted that outcome, she would have to refuse. Sara's presence posed an obstacle. It wouldn't be fair to her. How could I explain Ray in my bedroom tomorrow morning?

The pressure of his gaze made her turn her head toward him. "You know where I really want to sleep," he said. The firelight revealed a shy smile on his lips.

"But you feel inhibited with Sara in the house, don't you?"

The echo of her own thoughts made Kate's pulse stutter. "I'm afraid so. I'd be expecting her to wake up every minute."

Ray reached across the gap between them to capture her hand. "I want to spend the night anyway. I want to guard you, both of you." His fingers squeezed hers to the point of numbness. "You've got to stop scaring me like that! My heart can't take it!"

"Yeah, decrepit old man, that's you."

"None of your sass, woman, I'm at least three or four years your elder." But he wouldn't allow her to distract him with teasing for long. He slid along the couch and imprisoned her in his arms before she could retreat. "Oh, Kate, I couldn't stand to lose you!"

He means it, he really cares, I didn't imagine it! Then his mouth on hers obliterated coherent thought. The kiss began as hard, possessive, but softened into a tender exploration of lips and tongues. Her head spun; the afterimage of

the fire seared her closed eyelids. His fingers skimmed her breasts, rousing her nipples to instant erection. She moaned aloud at the painless cramp in her lower abdomen and the tingling heat lower still.

She yearned to ease the ache by pressing her body to the full length of his.

Their side-by-side position frustrated her. But when she tried to crawl into his lap, he held her off.

Breathless, she stared into his eyes. "Please, Ray."

"Don't do that!" The words came out ragged and hoarse. "If we don't stop--soon--we'll forget we aren't alone!"

"I know," she whispered. Yet she couldn't stop herself from raising her lips to his one more time.

With one arm wrapped around her shoulders, he eased his free hand from her breast downward. Her muscles contracted fiercely when he reached the cleft between her thighs. Catching her breath in a gasp, she arched her back.

Continuously teasing her lips with his tongue, he stroked her through the smooth fabric of her pants. In only seconds, she spiraled out of control, to an explosive release.

Limp in his arms, she leaned on his shoulder until she could breathe again.

"What about you?" She touched the front of his slacks.

He grabbed her hand. "No, you don't!"

"But--"

Both hands on her shoulders, he enforced a separation of a foot or so between them. "Not yet. I don't want to take advantage of you. Well, maybe I do, but I'd hate myself in the morning." His smile looked strained. "Kate, marry me."

"Huh? Why?" Great answer, you'll be lucky if he doesn't get up and walk out!

"What do you mean, why?" He shook her gently. "For the usual reason. Because I love you, you idiot!"

I think I love you, too. I wish I could be sure. "It's not because of that baby Mike talked about?"

"What?" His blank stare gave way to renewed exasperation. "Good grief, I haven't thought of that in weeks! If anything, Mike's supposed prophecy would discourage me. It's a complication, and I don't like the idea of being a pawn of unknown forces any more than you do. Kate, it's you I want."

"And I want you, too. But--" Was it only sexual deprivation that drew her to him? No, she did have deep feelings for Ray. But the kind and degree of love he deserved?

His impatience faded to solemn tenderness. "If you can't, that'll be the end of it. I promise I won't harass you."

"Oh, Ray." She threw her arms around his neck. "I do want to marry you! I'm just afraid that I don't have as much to give you as I should--emotionally, I mean."

"Because you love Johnny?" Ray stroked her hair, his voice calm and firm. "Of course you do. I wouldn't expect you to forget about him. Sure, I'm a little jealous. But that's my problem. Our love for each other doesn't negate what you shared with him in the past. Heck, if it weren't for Johnny, you wouldn't have Sara, and I'm crazy about her, too."

"I know you are." Ray's fondness for her daughter counted for a lot, and Kate did want him; she couldn't imagine living without him after all they'd experienced together. But how can I make a life with Ray if Johnny keeps haunting me? She cast aside her doubts; after all, if the "haunting" had any reality, Johnny had as good as given his blessing to her union with Ray. "Yes, I'll marry you. When?"

"How about next weekend, if Mike can spare the time? I don't want to wait."

"Me, neither. It's not as if we need a big formal wedding. I'll check into getting the use of the church in Ardath next Saturday. What about the license?"

"I'll take care of that. Thom can probably do our blood tests tomorrow."

"Are you sure you're ready for snowed-in winters and no TV?" She posed the question lightly, but from her own winter in Ardath she knew the change would require adjustment.

"If that's the highest price I have to pay for you, it's no contest. Anyway, we can trade in one of the cars on a four-wheel drive."

Kate's racing heart stumbled in mid-beat as she remembered the main practical hitch in their plans. "But, Ray, what about your job? I don't want a commuter marriage, and you won't be safe until you stop running back and forth to San Francisco. At least, that's what our resident oracle says." She forced a grin.

Sometimes she still found clairvoyance and precognition hard to take seriously; despite all she'd suffered recently, the daily routine of cleaning, cooking, gardening, and paperwork made the occult seem unreal.

"Don't worry, I'll work something out. I ran into Thom in town last weekend, and he dropped some hints...well, we'll see." He kissed her forehead lightly, as if afraid of restarting more than he could handle. "Now, I'd better get going. See you in the morning."

She stood up, her fingers twined with his, reluctant to let him go. "Come up here for breakfast?"

"Sure." A quick kiss on the lips, and he retreated to his car.

Kate glided upstairs, feeling as buoyant as Nurse Nellie in South Pacific, cavorting on the beach. "I'm in love with a wonderful guy," she hummed, under her breath to avoid waking Sara. In bed, she ran her palms over her tight, aching breasts. Only one more week, that's not long to wait. She rolled on her side, hugging the extra pillow. Sweet of Ray to insist on preserving her technical virtue. She drifted to sleep in a state of deeper contentment than she had known since Johnny's death.

She woke to find Johnny standing beside her bed, illuminated by more than moonlight. That vision told her she wasn't awake, after all. Yet her cold nose and the sound of wind in the pine tree felt real.

"What are you doing here?" she said, sitting up with the covers clutched across her chest. "You're only a dream."

"You know it's more than a dream." The mattress creaked when he sat on the edge of it.

"Maybe." She eyed the closed bedroom door, then the window where the tree tapped the screen. "So if you're real, what do you want? I passed your warning to Ray, and he believes it. We--I'm going to marry him."

"I know." Johnny's deep blue eyes, visible by the glow of the aura that surrounded him, showed affection tinged with sadness. "That's the best possible thing for you and Sara."

"You're not jealous?" This is weird; I discussed the same thing with Ray a few hours ago, from the opposite side.

A slow shake of Johnny's head. "I don't have a right to you anymore. It's almost time for me to move on. I won't interfere with your relationship to Ray. You and Sara won't see me again until--"

"No!" Kate started to grab his sleeve, remembering just in time that her hand would probably pass right through him. She didn't think she would enjoy that experience. Why was she protesting, when this afternoon she'd been half wishing

he would vanish forever?

"Not until your moment of greatest danger," Johnny said. "I'm allowed that much--to ensure your safety before I take the next step."

"Next step? Where?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you." A fleeting smile. "Even if I knew much, which I don't. At this point, I still see 'through a glass darkly.'" His hand floated toward her, cupped as if to stroke her hair. She felt a stirring like a summer breeze above her head. "I've come to say goodbye. I didn't have time that day." The day the horse had thrown him. The old bitterness welled up in Kate. "You knew! You knew you were going to die when you went riding!"

"Not exactly. I had a strange feeling, like something of great significance was hanging over us. But that didn't seem like reason enough to stay home. After all, back then I didn't believe in premonitions either."

"Neither did I. But I saw you lying dead..." A memory she had buried sprang up. "And maybe Sara did, too. At that very moment, she started crying. So she had powers, even then?" Kate shivered. Lying back on the bed, she pulled the bedspread up to her chin.

Johnny leaned over her. His hands lingered above her breasts before sweeping down the length of her body. A wave of heat followed them. Kate didn't catch the motion that folded the covers down to expose her to the night air and his luminous gaze; she couldn't tell whether he actually picked up the cloth or just willed it to move. Though she wore a flannel gown, long-sleeved and buttoned up to the neck, she felt denuded. Again he stroked the air inches above her body, a single smooth caress from neck to thighs. Energy rippled through her.

"One last time," he whispered. Somehow he'd undressed, or simply willed his clothes to disappear. Why not? she thought. His whole appearance is probably some kind of mental construct anyway, clothes and all. Yet his lean, muscular chest looked solid, as did his erection. She melted at the sight, quivering with alternate spasms of cold and heat.

He stretched on top of her. She didn't feel the pressure of flesh and bone or the softness of a living mouth. Instead, a starburst of prismatic lights blinded her. Silvery chimes echoed with piercing sweetness through her head. Electric currents suffused every pore of her skin. The pleasure wasn't inside her; she was inside it, drowning in it, shuddering in ecstasy over and over. She plunged deeper and deeper until it submerged her senses and consciousness in ecstatic self-abandon. This is only a vision, she assured herself as the moment faded into oblivion. Or a dream. Just a dream.

* * * *

On the Saturday morning he was to marry Kate, Ray joined Mike for breakfast in the dining room of the local inn where they'd both spent the previous night.

They were the only guests, and their host and hostess had already eaten. Mike filled Ray's plate with scrambled eggs from a chafing dish on the sideboard.

"Come on, the condemned man should have a hearty meal."

Bleary from a near-sleepless night, Ray said, "Do I actually look like that?"

"Traditional for bridegrooms, isn't it?" He poured Ray a cup of coffee. "Cheer up, it'll be over in a few hours."

Glancing at the door to make sure they were alone, Ray said, "I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing. I love her, but do I have the right to take her when she isn't one hundred percent certain?"

"If your doubts don't mean you should back out, why should her doubts have that effect?"

Ray blinked, deciding he wasn't awake enough to make sense out of that remark. "What do you expect me to say at this point, turn around and forget the whole thing?" Mike set his loaded plate on the table and filled his own cup. "Anyway, if you see me as some kind of prophet who can tell you how to run your life, think again."

"I know. All I want is moral support, I guess. I'm sure not about to back out." He stabbed a sausage link and stared moodily at it. "At least Sara doesn't have any doubts. She's thrilled. But I sometimes wonder if I'm bringing more danger upon them. If I'd broken the link and stayed away altogether..."

Mike snorted into his coffee. "As if Kate would let you."

Ray lowered his voice. "I've received several phone calls at the clinic.

Anonymous, but I know damn well who they're from."

"What are they saying?"

"Nothing definite. Low on content, high on cryptic threats. They're trying to wear me down, I think." For his own sake, Ray found the war of nerves more annoying than frightening. His fears were for Kate and Sara. "I sense them following me every day when I leave work. Sometimes I even catch a glimpse of Mrs. Martlet's car. So far, I've always been able to cloak myself and lose them."

"You're afraid they'll eventually crack your shield."

Ray nodded. "That's what Johnny predicted, according to Kate." He'd recounted the séance incident to Mike, who had been equally appalled at the risk Kate had taken. "I haven't told her about these phone calls, and I don't plan to. No use scaring her for nothing; the threats don't tell us anything we don't already know."

"She would probably be afraid that you're in danger," Mike said, "and I agree, there's no point in upsetting her."

"Am I?" Ray asked. Not that he felt much personal fear; worry that he might lead the enemy to Ardath preoccupied him to the exclusion of other concerns.

"I don't think so. How would it benefit them to attack you? I suspect Mrs. Martlet's threats were intended mainly to shake you up. They want you intact and free to lead them here."

"Exactly what I'm afraid of." Ray bit into an English muffin, which tasted like cardboard in his present mood. "Kate and Sara won't be safe until I'm settled here, too."

"Shouldn't be too long, should it?"

As Ray had told Mike in the car on the way from San Francisco the night before, Dr. Thom Fletcher had decided to switch from semi-retirement to almost total retirement. He claimed he'd been considering that step for months, and Ray had popped up at the fortuitous moment. While Ray didn't know how much of this story to believe, he was grateful for the opportunity. It was time for him to take the step from the clinic into private practice, anyway. Thom wasn't asking a large buy-in sum; after a down payment out of his savings, Ray would be left with only modest monthly installments to carry. True, moving from the clinic to Ardath would reduce his income. On the other hand, his expenses would drop drastically, too, and Kate had a modest income of her own as long as she continued freelance work for her old boss. "I've given notice at the clinic," he said to Mike, "and after that I'll have to spend a couple of days a week in San Francisco, in transition mode, you might say. I should be completely moved up here by December."

Mike asked a question similar to Kate's: "Don't think you'll have any trouble

adjusting to small town life? Not to mention Rocky Mountain winters?"

"With the woman I love? It can't come soon enough for me."

* * * *

Kate stood on the doorstep of the little Congregational church, interdenominational in practice, where Father Mike had just married her to Ray Benson. Dr. Thom and Jane Sutton had served as their attendants, with Sara marching up the aisle in an improvised flower-girl outfit. Now Mrs. Sutton's husband was taking pictures. Lightheaded with relief at getting through the ceremony, Kate clutched Ray's arm and smiled at the camera, while an October breeze swirled dry leaves over the brick-paved sidewalk.

After the photo session, the twenty or so guests adjourned to the church social hall for the reception. The Suttons had arranged delivery of a cake from an out-of-town bakery, and hors-d'oeuvres catered by them with the help of a few neighbors complemented the champagne punch. Sara skipped along the sidewalk, bubbly as the champagne, delighted with the idea of Dr. Ray moving into her house. I wish I could forget my worries and have fun that easily, Kate thought.

After nibbling a carrot stick and forcing down a few sausage rolls, she posed for the obligatory pictures of cutting the cake and feeding pieces to Ray. "Stick it out, it won't be long now," he stage-whispered while holding a sliver of cake to her lips. She giggled, grateful to him for easing the tension.

Finally she and Ray drove up to the cabin, with Sara riding in Mike's car behind them. Jane Sutton had insisted on providing a dinner casserole, which she'd deposited in the oven at the house sometime during the afternoon. Kate had invited Mike to stay for dinner before driving back to San Francisco. After all, Sara would be with them, so why not the priest, too?

While Ray set the table with Sara's help, Kate changed out of the ivory-toned silk suit in which she'd been married. Before supper, Mike steered her outdoors. She could tell by his manner that what he wanted to discuss wasn't pleasant.

"Ray told me what you did last Friday, with Sara."

Kate swallowed a lump of tension. "He called it a séance. That never occurred to me. You said contacting the dead was dangerous, but this was Johnny. I thought if he could speak to us in dreams, why not more directly?"

Mike sighed. "It isn't the same thing. Using Sara as a gateway...well, I won't scold you. Ray probably did plenty of that. It's largely my fault, leaving you half-trained. I should have explained matters in more detail. I let you think anything goes, so to speak."

"I know better now. Maybe I was right to be afraid to touch this stuff."

"Not that! The solution to lack of knowledge is more knowledge, not a retreat into ignorance."

"I didn't get a lot of knowledge from Johnny." She blushed and stared at the ground, where bare dirt marked the spot that would blossom with daffodils in the spring. "I saw him one more time, after Ray proposed to me. Johnny said we wouldn't see him again. Not until our greatest need."

"Have you mentioned this to Ray?"

Her face grew hotter. "No, I wasn't sure how to bring it up. But I think if you could tell him, it would make him feel better." As for the rest, that explosion of passion, she knew she would never confess it to anyone. "Ray reminded me of something I'd put out of my mind, what you said about my having another baby."

"Yes?"

"I wasn't planning to use any birth control. Not that I especially want it to happen, but it took me so long to become pregnant with Sara--I'd about decided I

was infertile." She shook her head. "I'm all mixed up. Somehow I feel as if using contraception would be interfering with my destiny."

"Try not to worry about it," said Mike. "Your natural talent for biofeedback makes me suspect that you can control your body's autonomic functions, without realizing it."

"What are you talking about?"

"You told me you became pregnant with Sara just at the time Johnny was planning to propose marriage." He turned to face her, cupping her chin to raise her eyes to his. "I believe you have the ability--unconscious, of course--to ovulate at will. When the time is right for the baby, you'll conceive."

"That's not much more comforting than inexorable destiny." Turning toward the house, she managed a quivery smile. "I'm more than half scared about the whole idea of another baby. I told you about the delivery, Mike. I almost died."

"Now, that we can exert some control over. Biofeedback, remember? You can learn to control the course of your labor. I'll help you practice."

"One more item on the list of things I have to learn."

Mike held the front door for her. The scent of cheese from the casserole filled the house. "You and Sara, too. As for your training, I'll visit and help you as often as we can arrange it. Provided," he laughed, "I don't wear out my welcome."

At dinner Sara spontaneously told Mike her version of the séance. "We can't talk to Daddy that way anymore," she said, "because the Echthrois are trying to get us."

"The what?" Ray said.

"I believe it comes from Madeleine L'Engle," said Mike.

Kate glanced at Sara, who was scooping up peas with an appetite unimpeded by fear. I wish I could file and forget things the way she can. "That's right. I recently started reading her *A Wind in the Door*."

"Having a name for those entities seems to help her," Mike said. He asked Sara, "Does it bother you, not being able to talk to your father?"

Sara shook her head. "He was going to stop visiting us anyway. He has to go to Heaven pretty soon, so he told me Fog and Dr. Ray have to take care of us now." Ray laughed. "Well, I'm glad I'm somewhere on that list."

When Kate started to clear the table, Ray nudged her back into her chair and took over the job, along with Mike and Sara. He poured Kate a fresh glass of wine, which she sipped while her brain raced like a hamster in a wheel. She couldn't get over Sara's matter-of-fact references to the supernatural. She talks about the creatures of the dark as if they're in the same category with burglars, spiders, and earthquakes. And she repeats conversations with her father's ghost the way she'd tell me what happened at day care.

At twilight Mike left, taking Sara with him. The Suttons had invited her to spend the night at their home, until lunchtime the next day. Since their five-year-old grandson and his parents were spending the weekend, Sara would have a playmate to entertain her. Before getting into Mike's car, Sara ran around to the back yard and looked up at the branches of the tall pine.

"Goodnight, tree, I'll see you tomorrow." She then scurried to the front of the cabin, squatted beside the flower bed, and patted the soil where the bulbs had been planted. "Sleep tight, flowers."

"She does that every night," Sara explained to Ray, "ever since I mentioned to her about some people talking to plants."

Sara turned to the porch, where Fog sat with his tail curled around his

forepaws. "I'm sleeping over at Mrs. Sutton's house, Fog. Take care of Mommy and Dr. Ray." Skipping over to the priest's car, she hugged Ray and Kate, then said, "Okay, Father Mike, now we can go."

Mike threw her a salute. "Aye, aye, Ma'am." Waving to Kate, he got into the driver's seat, fastened Sara's belt, and drove off.

After the car disappeared around the bend, Ray rubbed his hands together and leered at Kate. "At last I have you in my power!"

Kate's giggle changed to a shriek as he swept her up in his arms. Dizzily she clung to his neck while he carried her into the house. The cat, evading the man's feet, darted through the door just before it closed and lay at full length in front of the hearth. On the way to the couch Ray switched off the lamp, leaving the fire as the only light in the dim living room. He plopped down on the couch, cradling Kate on his lap. "There," he said, panting. "Threshold crossing accomplished."

"And now for your next trick?"

Her grin faded under the intensity of his gaze. He lifted her right hand to his lips, first kissing the knuckles, one by one, nuzzling the palm with light flickers of his tongue. She closed her eyes and drooped against his shoulder, luxuriating in the sensual pleasure he gave. When he released her hand, she opened her eyes, disappointed. He reached for a bottle in an ice bucket on the end table. She knew he'd bought the champagne but hadn't noticed him setting it up. Popping the cork with a deft touch, he poured a glass.

"Only one?" said Kate.

He took a sip, then raised the goblet to her lips. "Don't mind sharing, do you?"

After half a glass, her head was already spinning. "I don't need that. I'm drunk enough without it!"

"Hey, that sounds like a compliment." He set the goblet back on the table.

"Well, the feeling's very mutual."

He kissed her until she wanted to arch her back and purr. She pulled away only when she felt on the verge of fainting from lack of air. With his fingers tangled in her hair, he gazed into her eyes. "Are you happy?" he whispered.

"Yes," she breathed. Extending her freshly trained perceptions beyond the alcoholic and erotic fog, she probed the shield that overarched the house. It felt intact. Sinking down into her body, vibrating with awareness of Ray, she hid her face in his neck. "Can we be happy? Do we have the right? Is it safe?" He silenced her with hungry kisses. Finally, between oxygen-starved gasps, he said, "Tonight I won't let anything hurt or frighten you, nothing in the past or present or future, not prophecies or memories. I'm going to make love to you until there's no room left in your mind for anything but me."

Nestled in his embrace, she opened to his passion without fear or regret, unshackled by any remnants of the past, whether memories or dreams.

Sara paused between forkfuls of mashed potatoes to stare intently at Kate. "When will my sister get here?"

Ray froze, letting a dollop of cranberry sauce slide off his fork. Kate set the turkey platter down with a thump. "Sara, what are you talking about?" Feeling her cheeks glow with self-consciousness, she evaded Ray's amused look.

"My baby sister," Sara said with a trace of impatience. "You know, when will she come out of your tummy?"

After a little over a month of marriage, Kate hadn't begun to consider that possibility. She'd filed Mike's prophecy for future reference--a distant future, when they might be free of the enemy's pursuit. He said I would conceive at the "right time." This sure doesn't fit my concept of right. Mike wasn't here to answer a challenge on the topic, since Thanksgiving services and the parish dinner for the needy kept him in San Francisco. Kate, Ray, and Sara were sharing a holiday dinner for just the three of them, plus Fog with his scraps of turkey skin and boiled giblets. "Munchkin, we aren't even sure there's going to be a baby. And if we had one, we wouldn't know whether it's a girl or boy until it gets here."

"There's a baby," Sara said with her usual air of certainty. "A baby sister."

That question decided, she reached for another biscuit.

"Guess that settles it," said Ray. "Pass the gravy, please."

Sticking her tongue out at him, Kate complied.

After the meal, Sara took the cat out front to play with a strand of twine. The two adults, who'd stuffed themselves with less restraint, leaned on the kitchen counter scraping and stacking plates. "Now that Sara's busy," Ray said, "what's this about a baby? I've noticed you haven't had a period since we got married."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," said Kate. "My system could be upset from all these recent changes." Yet her breasts had become over-sensitive lately, and within the past week she'd awakened queasy in the mornings. Nothing definite, but a *deja vu* pattern she could no longer ignore. With a washcloth in one hand and a spoon in the other, she closed her eyes and turned inward. Yes, at her deepest center she touched a scintilla of life-force that wasn't part of her own essence. Opening her eyes, she faced Ray's intent scrutiny. "Yes, Sara's right."

He put his arms around her waist and kissed the top of her head. "Then maybe she's right about the baby's sex, too."

Kate shook her head. "I'm willing to accept that she somehow felt the baby's presence, but the sex? How could anyone know that this early, even by clairvoyance? I bet it's wishful thinking."

"Could be," said Ray. "Maybe she doesn't want an icky little brother."

Laughing, Kate rested against his shoulder for a minute before freeing herself and picking up the next plate.

"If it's a girl," said Ray, "she ought to have a female warrior name, to fit Mike's prophecy. Something like Deborah Joan, for the prophetess Deborah in the Bible and Joan of Arc."

Though he spoke lightly, Kate's chest tightened in resistance. "I don't want any child of mine to be a warrior." She picked up a Brillo pad and began vigorously scouring a pan. "Much as I love babies, and even though I wouldn't want the two kids too far apart in age, I wish this had held off. If not until the whole--conflict--is finished, at least until you can stay in Ardath full time."

He rubbed her back. "I know."

Ray's work at the clinic had declined to two days per week, while he oriented

his successor and at the same time adjusted to Thom's practice in Ardath. By mid-December, he wouldn't have to make the regular trip to San Francisco anymore. He'd be traveling outside the town limits only to pick up mail. Though the Suttons accommodated a post office branch at the store, Ray and Kate had decided neither of them should receive mail in Ardath, at least for the time being.

Kate knew what a strain he must endure, maintaining a psychic shield every minute he spent outside the village. For his sake as well as her own, she wanted the transition finished. He hadn't mentioned the enemy in several weeks, and she hadn't asked. If he'd glimpsed Mrs. Martlet's car attempting to shadow him near the clinic, she didn't want to know. For that matter, absence of evidence wasn't evidence of absence; the cult might have assigned a new follower. So Kate preferred not to speculate on things that couldn't be remedied anyway.

"How do you feel about a baby? Really?" She couldn't ignore the fact that Ray had undergone major dislocations in his life and plunged into potentially lethal dangers, all because of her.

"Dearest, I'm scared silly," he grinned, "and also thrilled to death."

When the dishes were wiped and ready for washing, the leftovers refrigerated, Ray persuaded her to take a break. Just as they waddled into the living room and sank onto the couch, Sara, in her sweat suit, boots, and parka, dashed inside.

"Mommy, Dr. Ray, come look!"

They followed her onto the porch. Plump snowflakes drifted from the gray sky. Bouncing up and down, Sara said, "Is that really snow?" She'd never seen it except in books, aside from distant views of white-topped mountain peaks.

"Sure is," said Ray. "If there's enough, we'll make a snowman later, okay?"

"Cool!"

Kate folded her arms, wishing for a coat, and said with a giggle that was half shiver, "Energetic, aren't you?" She nudged Ray in the ribs.

"It's a good way to work off the turkey and make room for the pie."

For a minute they stood side by side, arms around each other's waists, before going in to don coats and gloves. Sara skipped in circles around Fog, who sat lashing his tail and batting at the flakes. "It looks so peaceful," Kate whispered.

Ray nuzzled her hair. "We'll make sure it stays this way."

* * * *

Monday night, Kate paced the living room, waiting for Ray. As usual, she let Sara stay awake to say goodnight to him, but Kate had run out of energy for reading. An extra chapter of the current Narnia installment had made her hoarse, anyway. Instead, she'd turned on a Peter, Paul, and Mary tape to distract the child.

Ray had called to warn Kate he would be half an hour late or more getting home. He'd said he had run into trouble, but nothing serious. Since he refused to explain over the phone, her anxiety wasn't much relieved. Sara's eyes followed her back and forth across the rug. After a while, Sara yawned and said, "Let's play something. I'm tired of just listening."

Kate started to snap at her but caught herself in time. "You look sleepy. Why don't you go to bed? Ray will come up to your room when he gets home."

Sara shook her head. "Don't want to sleep."

Kate suppressed a sigh. Maybe a game would be preferable to pacing, after all. "Okay, how about Scrabble?"

She set up the board between glances at the window. Since Sara's reading skill

had jumped to what Mike estimated at second-grade level, the little girl could usually assemble enough words to keep the game moving. They didn't keep score, and if Sara got stuck, Kate helped her find viable combinations on her letter rack.

Kate flinched, startled, when Ray's key snicked in the lock. She sprang up to face him. "About time you got here! How dare you not tell me what--"

He silenced her with a kiss. "I told you, I'm fine."

Pulling back, she looked him over and found no visible damage. Ray disengaged from the embrace and knelt to hug Sara. "Thanks for waiting up for me, sweetheart. You'd better scoot to bed now. I'll bet Fog and Tigger and Drake the Dragon are sleepy." He scooped her up, evoking an outburst of giggles, and carried her up the stairs.

While waiting, Kate occupied herself with boxing the Scrabble pieces. She whirled to face Ray when she heard his step behind her. "Okay, Sara's not listening now," she said in a harsh whisper. "What's going on?"

"Like I said, it's nothing, really." He flopped onto the couch. Having left his overcoat, gloves, jacket, and tie upstairs, he looked weary in a rumpled shirt unbuttoned at the neck. "My wallet got stolen." He held up a hand to forestall Kate's exclamation. "As you can see, I didn't get hurt."

Kate sat beside him, calmer now that she'd heard the worst. True, he seemed intact. "How did it happen?"

"He was waiting in the parking lot when I left the clinic. Funny, you expect this stuff in dark alleys, not broad daylight." A sheepish smile. "Maybe after dark I'd have been on guard. On the other hand, he had a gun."

She squeezed his hand. "I do not want you fighting with any gun-slinging muggers!"

"I'll make a note of that. Anyhow, he popped up from the other side of the car, pointed the weapon at me, and demanded my wallet. Nondescript young man with shaggy black hair and a denim jacket. It happened so fast, I probably wouldn't recognize him in a line-up. Not that I expect him to get caught."

"So that explains why you were running late."

He nodded. "Reporting to the police, for all that's worth. It's no big deal, just a heck of a nuisance. Credit cards to call in, and I'll have to get my driver's license replaced tomorrow. I lost only about thirty dollars in cash."

He put his arm around her shoulders.

Yielding to the invitation, she snuggled to his side, feeling his embrace tighten reassuringly. The solidity of his chest and the thumping of his heart comforted her. "As long as you're okay. Want something to eat?"

"No need, I grabbed a couple of burgers."

"As usual," said Kate with mock severity. "You'd better hurry up and stop these regular trips, if only to save your cholesterol from crashing through the roof."

"Yes, Doctor."

A thought struck her that made her tighten with apprehension. "Ray, could this have anything to do with, well, you know?" She'd acquired a superstitious reluctance to name the dark powers too explicitly, for fear of summoning the forces behind the names.

She felt Ray tense for a moment, then deliberately relax. "I don't see how.

Let's not get paranoid; bad luck does happen. How does it go again? 'Once is chance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action.' But sometimes it is coincidence."

Determined to accept his reassurance instead of wrecking her nerves with speculation, Kate said, "Okay, but you still owe me for making me worry myself sick about you! Are you prepared to pay?"

Grinning, he tilted her chin to look into her eyes. "What price are you asking?"

"First, I have to say goodnight to Sara, if she's not already asleep. Then I'll run you a hot bath. After that, we'll see." She collected her first installment in a lingering kiss that reduced her to incoherence, lightheaded and weak-limbed. Their intimacy was still new enough that it took no more than this to set her afire. A delicious tingle spread from her breasts downward.

The fresh realization of how much she needed him laced her passion with anger.

"And next time, be more careful, damn it! How dare you get yourself into a situation like that!" She burst into tears, and he wrapped his arms around her and cuddled her against his chest.

"I know, love, I know."

* * * *

The following Monday evening, Sara lay in wait for Ray on the front porch instead of hovering in the kitchen, nagging for snacks while dinner cooked. Her atypical nervousness worried Kate. Sara's intuition had proved reliable too many times.

When Ray's car crunched onto the gravel driveway, Kate released a half-conscious internal clenching and allowed herself to breathe freely. Sara caught Ray's hand and tugged him into the house. "Dr. Ray, Fog says the bad lady saw you at the post office a little while ago!"

Reclaiming his hand, Ray shuffled off his coat to hang it on the coat tree by the door. As he shed gloves, hat, and boots, he said, "Take it easy, Sara, I'm listening." His reassuring smile didn't fool Kate.

After giving him a quick hug, Kate said with more sharpness than she'd intended, "What are you talking about? What lady?"

Sara grimaced at her mother's deliberate obtuseness. "You know. She chased us in the car when we ran away from Father Mike's house. The bad lady who stole me."

"You're claiming the cat told you--"

Ray interrupted Kate with a cautioning glance and knelt to face Sara at eye level. "Can you tell us anything else?"

Sara's forehead wrinkled in concentration. "Fog didn't see much. The lady sat in her car waiting until you came. Then she tried to follow you, but you put up the bubble, so she couldn't see where you went. That's all."

"Very good, Sara." Ray patted her shoulder. "If I lost the woman, she can't know where I was headed. So it'll be okay. Don't worry."

Kate had the urge to challenge that facile assumption but suppressed it. She knew Ray was pretending confidence for Sara's sake.

Later that night, after putting Sara to bed, they did discuss the warning. As they strolled around the yard, bundled in winter coats, Kate said, "She could be wrong this time, couldn't she? I've heard..." She didn't want to distress Ray by mentioning Johnny. "I mean, isn't it true that clairvoyance and premonitions aren't always reliable? If the present and future are in constant flux, Sara--or Fog, for goodness' sake!--might have seen a potential event, not a real one." "Could be. Either way, I don't know what more precautions we could take than we already do." He tightened his arm around her waist.

Kate laughed nervously, watching Fog, next to the low stone wall in the back yard, mincing over the crust of the snow. "I can't believe myself, getting all

upset about a psychic message from a cat."

"Whether the cat amplifies Sara's own perception in some quantifiable way, or attributing her visions to Fog helps her keep them at a comfortable distance,"

Ray said, "it seems harmless, so why argue with it?"

"Oh, I won't," said Kate. "It's better than an imaginary friend, I guess. At least the cat is visible and touchable." And better than carrying on conversations with her father's ghost, she thought. "Since she said that, about Mrs. Martlet, I've been wondering; was there anything in your wallet that could give us away?"

"Of course not! Do you think I'm stupid enough to carry your address around?" He stopped so abruptly Kate almost tripped. "Damn!" He picked up a rock and pitched it into the ravine. "I did have one thing, your phone number, as an emergency contact. No name, just 'wife,' but they could figure out who it referred to easily enough."

"Could that actually give them our location?"

Ray looked worried. "Unfortunately. They could use a reverse directory. Business and residential addresses are cross-listed by telephone number. Those sorts of references are available to the public at their local libraries, I believe."

"Oh." Kate grappled with the fear rising in her throat. "But I'm unlisted."

"Let's hope they don't manage to get around that with a bribe to the telephone company," he said. "Not that they'd need to, probably, considering the psychic power we know that woman has and not to mention other members of the organization we don't know about." He clasped her hand and started toward the back door. "Come on, you're starting to shiver." He glanced at the sky, from which fine snowflakes began to fall.

Kate spoke what Ray had avoided mentioning. "How about Martlet himself?"

"Let's hope he left the investigation to his underlings. So far, the woman seems to be acting alone, for all we've observed. If what Mike believes about Martlet is true..."

Kate was just as glad he didn't finish the sentence. She could fill in the blank on her own. What chance would we have confronting an inhuman entity face to face?

* * * *

A snake with gleaming, grass-green scales slithered across the yard to the porch. The gray cat perched on the steps, his back arched and hair bristling. Venom dripped from the reptile's fangs to sizzle in the snow. The knowledge that snakes shouldn't be able to function on a subfreezing mountain night only aggravated Kate's fear. Could Fog defeat this unnatural creature?

A screech ripped her out of the nightmare.

Her breath stuck in her throat, as if a blow to the chest had paralyzed her lungs. She gulped air and sat up, shaking Ray.

"Huh?" Rolling over, he blinked at her.

The shriek sounded again, merging into a series of yowls.

Ray threw off the covers. "My God, that's Fog!"

Both of them scrambled out of bed and hurried downstairs. At the door, Kate heard Sara's bare feet behind her and spun on her heel to block the little girl.

"You stay inside, understand? Fog probably found a raccoon." She prayed that was true. "Sit on the couch and wait."

Wide-eyed, Sara backed to the couch and lowered herself onto it. Meanwhile, Ray unbolted the door. "Kate, you better stay with--"

She cut him off. "Don't even think it." She was already shuffling into her boots

and shrugging on her coat. The cat's screaming sliced through her skull.

Similarly half-dressed, Ray flung open the door. At the same time, he flicked on the porch light.

He and Kate took one step onto the porch. At the bottom of the steps, Fog stood guard. His puffed-up coat made him look twice his size; the expanded tail quivered with rage. His ear-piercing cries poured out in a continuous stream.

The Martlet woman stood at the edge of the splash of light. With her professionally coiffed head bare, she wore a tweed coat, unbuttoned, and a pair of dark gloves. She gave no sign of noticing the snow that swirled around her. Both hands gripped the pistol she pointed at the cat.

"Can't you make that filthy beast shut up?" Her voice carried, though she didn't actually shout.

"What do you want?" Ray said.

A cold smile. "You know. Don't waste my time. You still have a chance to live, Dr. Benson. Not your wife, of course. That can't be helped, but I can give her a quick death, much easier than she'd get from my superior. Your life in exchange for the little girl, plus an easy exit for the woman."

Ray's fists clenched at his side. "Go to hell." Kate's own rage roared inside her head, almost blotting out their voices.

"My superior is hungry for that child's power. He has uses for her. If she cooperates, she'll have a long, sheltered existence."

"Get out of here. I don't want to have to kill you."

Hearing Ray put the unthinkable into words made Kate's stomach churn. At this moment, though, she did feel capable of killing.

"I know your weakness." The woman gave a tiny shrug that didn't disturb her aim.

"I, on the other hand, wouldn't mind killing you in the least." Fog's cries shifted toward something more like a snarl. The pistol twitched. "Because of you, he is displeased with me. When my agent obtained your wallet for me, I finally had a chance to repair my failures. Did you really think that amateurish shield of yours could hide you forever? Once I knew where to look, simple logic led me to the nearest post office. Sighting you confirmed what the contents of your wallet told me, and once I got up here it didn't take long to find your car--parked in plain sight. So here I am. And the sooner I leave with what I came for, the better." A ghost of a shiver. "The atmosphere in this place is suffocating."

Kate edged closer to Ray, praying Sara would stay inside. Fog inched toward the woman, plumed tail lashing. With a grimace of apparent distaste, she fired.

Inside, Sara screamed. The cat skidded sideways and lay still. Sara dashed out the door. Kate reached back to grab her arm, just in time to keep her from charging the woman.

Mrs. Martlet smiled again. "Good, this saves trouble. A shattered leg or collarbone won't decrease the child's value. It might even make her more pliable."

Before Kate's inner eye swam a slow-motion vision of the pistol barrel lifting, turning toward Sara, the bullet emerging with a puff of smoke and floating through the snow-clogged air to burrow into Sara's chest. The thunder in Kate's ears rang counterpoint to the woman's voice. Involuntarily Kate took one step down from the porch, feeling Ray move at her side.

"Stop!" Mrs. Martlet ordered. "If you get near me, I will shoot her. If you turn her over to me as I asked, she'll be physically unharmed."

Yes, as long as Martlet has a use for her. Then his hunger will use her up.

Numb, Kate stared across the driveway.

"Hurry, make up your mind," the woman said.

A flare of power flashed like lightning behind Kate's eyes. Sara. The lightning arced from the child to the red-stained body of the cat. Fog leaped up from the ground--no, not the cat, an illusion, Kate realized. She saw the animal spring toward Mrs. Martlet, claws extended, fangs bared, hissing defiance. Like a double exposure, she also saw the small body still inert on the snow.

Mrs. Martlet apparently didn't recognize the illusion as such. She stumbled backward, her weapon hand faltering. Simultaneously, a baseball-size rock launched itself off the ground and flew straight at the woman. It collided with her wrist, knocking the gun out of her grip. She fell to her knees, groping for the pistol. Another rock hurtled through the air and hit her shoulder. The image of the cat vanished.

Is Sara doing this? Glancing at Ray, Kate saw that he was equally surprised. He gathered his wits and charged toward Mrs. Martlet. As soon as he stepped off the porch steps onto the ground, the surface under him changed. To Kate's eyes, the snow and the dirt under it melted. Ray's feet sank into it as if into quicksand.

The earth sucked at his ankles. He waded across the driveway like a man fighting his way through shin-deep mud.

The very air thickened around him. When Kate tried to follow, the atmosphere congealed, for her, too, into a spongy barrier she had to dig through inch by inch.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Martlet scrambled for the gun. Another stone struck her arm. She rolled away from the next missile and lunged for the weapon. The pistol skittered out of her reach. Why does she need the gun? Kate wondered. Maybe illusions are the worst she can do?

Mrs. Martlet glared at Ray, who doubled over, clutching his abdomen and gasping in pain. Is she afraid to assault Sara directly? thought Kate. Good! That knowledge didn't make Ray's pain less agonizing to watch, though. Despite it, he lurched forward as fast as the quicksand allowed.

The woman's fingers closed on the gun just as a small stone glanced off her forehead. She let out a scream and flinched but didn't drop the weapon. Blood oozed above her left eyebrow. With shaking hands, she aimed at Ray.

"No!" Kate cried. Arms outstretched, she stumbled toward Ray. Her feet seemed to sink into the earth, which shackled her with its suction. She dragged herself closer, inch by inch, her stomach knotted with frustration.

The gun discharged again. At the same moment, a loose tree limb flew into the woman's face. The bullet went wild--or so Kate assumed, when Ray didn't fall. She saw the woman readying the pistol again. Unable to move physically, Kate reached with her mind. She felt Sara behind her, pushing. With a psychic tentacle, she squeezed the woman's wrist. Mrs. Martlet dropped the gun with a howl of combined anger and pain. Kate momentarily saw a bracelet of fire encircling the assailant's forearm.

A burst of energy from Sara. The gun jumped off the ground and sailed into the woods. The woman raised both hands above her head, not in surrender but in threat.

What's she going to do, cast a lightning bolt? Though Kate had no idea whether this enemy had that power, she didn't wait to find out. With a surge of effort, she closed the gap enough to clutch Ray's hand. "Help me," she whispered. Again she reached for the woman. This time, Kate applied pressure to her enemy's neck and chest. She squeezed.

Choking, the woman crumpled to the ground again. Kate drew power from Ray and continued squeezing. Terror wouldn't allow her to let up. If she released Mrs. Martlet, who knew what the woman might try next? Whatever deadly energies she had in reserve, she mustn't be allowed to summon them.

The blood pounded in Kate's head. She pressed down until her own chest burned with the strain. Rage-fueled energy poured out of her like boiling lava.

Suddenly she felt chilled fingers on the back of her neck. Her wrath rushed out of her like a gust of wind, leaving her empty. She realized Ray was touching her. "That's enough, you've finished her," he said. "She's not fighting anymore."

The roaring in Kate's skull ceased, and her vision snapped back to normal. She sagged into Ray's embrace. A few yards away, Mrs. Martlet lay face down on the driveway. Snow fell thickly, swirling in eddies of wind; for the past few minutes, Kate hadn't even been aware of it.

With a choked cry, Sara ran off the porch to where Fog lay. She knelt beside the cat, softly sobbing. Ray's arms tightened around Kate. "Damn the woman to everlasting hell! Fog alone is worth a thousand of her!"

He released Kate and stumbled over to Mrs. Martlet. "She's dead."

"You mean I...?" Kate staggered to his side and rested a hand on his shoulder to keep from collapsing.

"We," said Ray. "I was right there with you. Looks like we stopped her heart."

"But I didn't mean to! I only wanted to keep her from hurting us." Nausea welled up in Kate's throat. She swallowed it, averting her eyes from the corpse until it subsided.

Ray hauled himself to his feet and grasped Kate's arm. He led her across the yard to Sara, who still crouched over the cat.

The little girl lifted her tear-streaked face to him. "Dr. Ray, is Fog dead?"

Bending over the furry shape, Ray palpated the neck, torso, and limbs. "No," he said in a tone of quiet amazement. "He has a badly broken leg, but I think he'll live." When Sara spread her arms, he stopped her. "Careful, don't touch! Kate, find a flat board or something. We all need to get inside."

Kate fetched the first suitable object she came across, a flattened corrugated cardboard box. Together she and Ray slid the unconscious animal onto the slab of cardboard and carried him into the living room, where she replenished the smoldering embers in the fireplace. While Sara watched, Kate helped Ray splint the injured hind leg. With the crisis over, awareness of her chilled flesh surfaced. The fire's heat stung her fingers and toes. Noticing Sara shivering, Kate wrapped a quilt around her.

"Concussion and fracture," said Ray as he finished up. "This is one lucky cat. Thank God, it must've been a low-caliber bullet. Hit the bone and ricocheted off."

"There, Fog is going to be all right," Kate said. "Sara, you have to go to sleep now."

"I want Fog to sleep with me."

"Not a good idea," said Ray. "He'll be better off down here, where he won't get cold."

Sara thought over the recommendation. "Okay. Is the bad lady dead?"

Ray exchanged a silent glance with Kate before answering, "Yes, she is."

"Good, then we can go to sleep." She kissed Ray and allowed Kate to escort her to bed.

When Kate came downstairs, she found Ray sitting on the couch, his head on his

hands. She lightly touched his shoulder. "What about Mrs. Martlet? Her body, I mean?"

Ray heaved a long, shuddering sigh. "I was just trying to work up the nerve to take care of it. We can't report it to the sheriff. Last thing we want is publicity."

An icicle stabbed Kate between the eyes. "But it's murder."

"Self-defense. And not even that, to outward appearances. She had a heart attack. That's all anyone would see."

"What are we going to do?"

Ray wearily stood up. "She must have driven here. I'll find her car, put her in it, and relocate it someplace down the valley. On one of those unpaved side roads between here and Ardath. She'll be found--not too soon, with luck--dead of natural causes in the driver's seat."

"I'd better follow you to drive you home. You can't walk that far in this."

He shook his head. "I'll have to. We can't leave Sara, and I sure don't want to wake her and bring her along."

Kate had to agree; Sara had suffered enough tonight and certainly didn't need to witness the disposal of a body. Thank Heaven, she wasn't linked with us when we did whatever we did. She's not tainted by the killing. "All right, but don't go any farther than you have to." Something else occurred to her. "What about the gun?"

Pulling his boots back on, he said, "I'll have to find that and take it with me.

Bury it, I guess, along with her gloves." At Kate's quizzical stare, he said,

"Gunpowder traces. We can't leave any evidence to complicate the heart attack theory."

Kate donned her own wraps to help him search for the pistol. Fortunately, Sara's power hadn't flung it far, and the snow hadn't quite hidden it yet. Within a few minutes, Ray's flashlight gleamed on the metal. He picked up the gun in his gloved hand. Together they walked several hundred yards down the road. Mrs. Martlet's car was parked just out of sight around the bend. Ray played the flashlight over the tires. "Radials. With luck, I'll actually be able to get the thing on the road. But we have to be thankful for the snow, it'll cover the tracks in no time."

Kate glanced around uneasily; the flakes showed no sign of thinning.

"Don't worry, it's not exactly a blizzard yet." He gave her a hug. "Go back to the house and lock the doors. I won't be long."

He walked with her as far as the yard, where he hefted Mrs. Martlet's body over his shoulder and headed for the car. Kate retreated into the cabin, one thought revolving in her numbed brain, I've killed a woman. I'm a killer.

Chapter 17

Kate's hands and feet stayed numb despite the fire. She added another log and remained kneeling on the rug, too drained to bother getting up. Fog opened his eyes and emitted an agonized mew.

Thankful for this sign that he would indeed live, she stroked his spine over and over, trying to soothe him into silence. But he wouldn't stop crying. She prayed the noise wouldn't wake Sara.

Maybe Ray could administer some sort of painkiller, with the human dosage reduced to match the cat's weight. Thinking of Ray awakened her anxiety about him. He doesn't have that far to walk, she reminded herself. He can't get buried in snowdrifts and die of hypothermia. He'll be back in no time. He had to be. After this night's ordeal, she realized couldn't stand the thought of facing the rest of this night without him, much less losing him altogether. Her mind veered onto a different track: Would Mrs. Martlet's body be found and connected with them?

Rationally, Kate knew it probably wouldn't. Not on the narrow dirt side road Ray planned to use. As infrequently as any car but their own and Mike's drove up here, by the time someone stumbled across the woman, weather would have blurred any evidence. And to all appearances, she'd died a natural death.

But it wasn't natural! We did it; somehow we stopped her heart.

Having experienced so many preternatural phenomena in her training with Mike, not to mention the attacks mounted upon her, Kate didn't entertain the thought that Mrs. Martlet's death might be coincidental. No, just as Kate was learning to control the automatic functions of her own body, she had, with Ray's help, insinuated her power into the other woman's chest cavity and squeezed the heart muscle to death.

Kate swallowed a surge of nausea at the graphic image. Wrapping her arms around herself, she rocked on her knees, moaning softly through parted lips.

After a while she heard a key in the lock. Jumping, she cried hoarsely, "Ray? Is that you?"

His voice replied. She got up to meet him, her legs shaky after being bent under her. She threw her arms around him, and he enfolded her in a firm hug. His heart pounded under her ear, and she caught a faint whiff of Old Spice. "Oh, Ray, thank God you're back." She wiped sudden tears from her eyes. "I love you." He gave her a gentle kiss and let go of her, swaying with obvious exhaustion. He dropped onto the couch, his head in his hands. "I need a drink," he muttered. Kate fetched the brandy bottle and two glasses from the kitchen. When she re-entered the living room, Ray had tossed his coat, gloves, and boots at the coat tree and was checking on the cat.

Pouring Ray a shot of brandy, she said, "Can you give him something for the pain? I can't stand to hear him go on like that."

Ray gulped down his drink. "I should have some drug that would work safely." He got his medical bag out of the corner closet and rummaged in it, coming up with a packet of capsules. "Better hide this in food. He's not used to taking medication."

Kate opened a can of cat food for Ray, who halved a capsule and sprinkled part of the contents into a glob of the tuna. He rolled this into a ball and popped it into Fog's mouth. The cat swallowed the offering without seeming to notice the trick.

"Tomorrow I'll drive him to the vet," Ray said, "for a more suitable painkiller, plus antibiotics. If the doctor recognizes the fracture as a bullet wound, I'll play dumb and say it must've been a careless hunter."

After a couple of minutes, Fog stopped mewling and closed his eyes. Kate and Ray settled on the couch, each of them with a glass of brandy. "What about that woman?" said Kate. "Is everything...?"

"I did what I planned and didn't run into any problems. The car isn't visible from the main road, and it's snowing hard enough to hide any traces of what happened here."

"You know what did happen? We murdered her."

Ray shook his head. "Self-defense."

"I know you don't feel one bit better about it than I do!"

He heaved a deep sigh and sipped his drink. "No, but I'm trying hard to see it rationally. I took an oath to do no harm, but that applies to medical practice. It has nothing to do with defending my family. When she started shooting, if you'd had a gun in your hand, wouldn't you have shot back? To protect Sara?"

"Of course, but--"

"Logically, how is this different?" His tone didn't carry conviction. He stared at the floor, one hand dangling while the other loosely gripped the liquor glass.

"You know it's different!" Kate took a hefty swallow of her drink, looking for comfort in the fiery sensation. "We--I invaded her body! I hate being able to do that! Ray, what if it happens again, and next time it's not self-defense? What if I get carried away with anger and accidentally hurt somebody who doesn't deserve it?"

"I don't see much chance of that. You're not a violent person by nature."

"How do you know?" She stared at him in the flickering light. "How do you really know? What if I told you that at the second we overpowered her, I felt the most incredible rush." A lump clogged Kate's throat. She swallowed it with another dose of brandy.

"Is that so strange? An adrenaline surge feels good. That's how the human body is designed. That doesn't make you evil."

She wasn't convinced. His bleak tone stripped the words of credibility. "You're not afraid to be near me now?"

"Why should I be? I did it along with you."

After a moment of tense silence, she sagged against him. He put an arm around her. "I dreamed about Johnny a few days before our wedding," she said, gazing into the fire to keep her eyes from betraying her, "and he said he would return at our time of greatest need. Seems to me we could have used some help tonight."

"We did pretty well on our own, didn't we?" Ray's tone was unexpectedly sharp.

"We didn't need a ghost to defeat that evil creature."

The hurt in his voice stung her. "Oh, Ray, I didn't mean you weren't capable of protecting us."

He hugged her tighter. "I know," he whispered.

"It's just that, if tonight wasn't our moment of greatest need," she said, "I hate to think what will be!"

Ray surprised her with a weak chuckle. "You do have a point there, love!" He rested his chin on the top of her head. "You can't tell which of those dreams are genuine visions, and which are just dreams. Could've been your own wishes talking."

Since Kate couldn't explain why that particular dream had felt so vivid, she didn't pursue the topic. "A time of greater danger than this could happen, if getting rid of that woman doesn't discourage them. I wish we knew whether she communicated with Martlet before she tracked us down."

"Didn't sound like it, from the little she said."

"But we don't know! We won't have any way of knowing until he comes after us."

All we can do is wait like helpless sheep." She realized her fingers were digging into the couch cushion. She flexed them and forced her breathing to slow down.

He rubbed the back of her neck until her tension eased. "Too bad we didn't get a chance to question her before she died."

"As if she'd have told the truth!"

"If I had Mike's ability," Ray said, "I could have hypnotized her. Well, we'll find out what he thinks of all this. Right now, we need sleep."

Kate glanced at the dark ceiling, as if she expected to see a visible canopy over them. "Your barrier, is it still there? Did she rip it open?"

Ray bowed his head to concentrate. "It's intact. Nobody can perceive our life-essence without entering the shielded region, the way Mrs. Martlet did." He stood up and tugged on Kate's hand. "Come on, we have to rest. Fog will be fine the way he is."

They shared a hot shower and fell into bed. Hours later, Kate lay awake listening for a hostile presence on the wind long after Ray succumbed to exhaustion.

* * * *

A couple of days later, Mike traveled up from San Francisco to consult with them. "So everything's been quiet since then?" he said after he'd heard their story. They were gathered in the living room after supper, with Sara upstairs listening to a new set of audio books on her portable tape player, a surprise gift from Mike.

"So far," Kate said. "It's driving me crazy, waiting for their next move."

Ray bent over to pet Fog, who lay in a box beside the couch. "And I keep reminding her we don't know they'll make one."

"Your shield is still operating," said Mike. "That's a good sign, at least. It seems to be as strong and permanent as the one around St. Augustine's." He opened the briefcase he'd brought with him. "Remember, I told you I planned to hire a private investigator to check on Martlet's organization. Well, I've received some interesting facts." He took out a manila folder. "I've made a copy of the file for you. For one thing, Eugene Martlet has no past."

Ray accepted the folder and leafed through it. "Do tell."

"Oh, the detective found a convincing records trail at first," Mike said. "But further digging revealed that it was fabricated. The Eugene Martlet whose birth certificate this man uses died in Illinois fifty-three years ago at the age of five months."

Kate leaned over to peek at the file in Ray's lap. "Can people really do that?" Her fear, displaced by curiosity, receded into the background for the first time since Mrs. Martlet's invasion.

Mike said, "It's the most common way to establish a false identity. Anybody can order a copy of anyone's birth certificate. There are no safeguards."

"If Martlet isn't Martlet," said Ray, "who is he?"

"My guess is he's nobody. I originally suspected, from Kate's vision of him, that he was a nonhuman entity in masquerade. This information supports that theory."

Kate's chest constricted at the memory of her vision, the man-shaped darkness she had seen right before the hit-and-run "accident."

"As you'll notice in the file," Mike said, "there's more. The cult--or nonprofit research institute, as they call it--has been implicated in drug dealings, but the rumors have never resulted in enough evidence to justify making an arrest."

Also, a few of the members have died in suspicious circumstances. Again, rumors but no solid evidence. No charges have been filed against Martlet or his associates."

"What about Mrs. Martlet?" Kate asked.

"Nothing much. She worked for an insurance company before becoming a paid employee of the institute. Seems she left that job and her first husband to take up with Martlet. Her only previous odd association was with a sort of neo-pagan religious group, the Children of Perpetual Light, whose philosophy centers around reincarnation and a mishmash of adapted Oriental mysticism. They were suspected of using hallucinogens in their rites, but that was never proven, either."

Kate's shoulders twitched with impatience. "Then we don't really know anything useful."

"One other interesting fact. The institute has its main office in downtown San Francisco."

Ray said, "That must've made it easy for them to keep an eye on Kate." He set the folder on the coffee table.

Kate felt queasy at the image of those people keeping an eye on her. "It'll make it easier for us to find them, too," she said. "What do we do about all this?"

Ray froze, then slowly turned in her direction. "Do? What did you have in mind?"

"We should go after them! I'm sick of sitting around like a shooting gallery duck!"

"Don't even think it!" Ray said. "Not you, it's too dangerous. You're the one they want."

Mike patted one of her clenched fists. "I agree. Remember your baby."

Folding her arms, Kate shot a rebellious look at Ray. "I don't want to hear one word about dangerous and then have you riding off to battle and getting stomped."

Mike said, "Enough of that. I advise both of you to sit tight and hold a defensive posture, at least until the baby is born. After all, we don't want to become like the thing we're fighting against."

Catching Ray's eye, Kate realized that he, too, was still shadowed by their destruction of Mrs. Martlet. No, she didn't want to plunge into a situation where she'd have to go through that again. And yet-- "I hear you. We have to play by the rules, and they can do any darn thing they please, is that it?"

Mike sighed. "It looks that way sometimes, doesn't it? But that's not the whole picture. Chaos always loses in the long run."

"Not from what little science I've read. Doesn't modern cosmology state that chaos always wins?" said Kate.

Ray nodded. "In a sense. Entropy."

"If one accepts that the physical universe is all there is," Mike said. "We've all seen evidence to the contrary, haven't we?" He rubbed his hands together and re-opened the briefcase. "Now, I've brought a little present for you two, also, a new Celtic harp tape. How about we listen to it?"

* * * *

"Haven't you read through that blasted file enough times?"

At Ray's harsh whisper, Kate glanced up from the kitchen table. She had the Xerox copy of Mike's detective report on Martlet spread out before her. "I lost track of time," she said, "but don't worry, dinner's in the oven."

He bent over to give her a mechanical kiss on the cheek, his lips still cold

from outdoors. "I'm not talking about dinner; I'm talking about you obsessing over that stuff. If we can't do anything about it right now--and we agreed we can't--you should try to forget about it."

"Maybe you can forget!" She swept the papers into the folder and snapped it shut, trying to "shout" in a whisper. "Maybe you can forget that some thing could creep up here any night and destroy us all. I can't."

"Well, you could at least try." He pulled a chair to the table with a thump and sat down. "It would be nice to live a normal life instead of constantly watching out for phantoms."

"Normal life? What do you think I want, for God's sake? And you didn't have to get involved in my abnormal life. It was your own idea!"

He stared at her, stricken. She gasped at the realization of what she'd said.

"Ray, I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean that."

His voice, echoing her apology, overlapped hers. He leaned across the table, put his arm around her shoulders, and kissed the side of her neck. "We're under a terrible strain. But we have to try not to let it control us. For Sara and the baby, if nothing else."

"I know." But although she agreed with him in principle, she wasn't convinced that ignoring the hazard was the proper way to handle it. Sara's footsteps clattering down the stairs to greet Ray cut off the discussion.

The following morning, after Ray left for his day's work with Dr. Thom, Kate called Sara into the kitchen for their usual daily reading and math practice.

This time, however, the table was bare of workbooks and crayons. Sara scanned the empty surface. "Are we going to do something new today?"

"New for me, but not you," Kate said. She'd conceived a plan, one Ray wouldn't approve of, and this morning marked the first step. After Mrs. Martlet's attack, Kate had realized that she'd counted too heavily on the security of this place. She'd half-consciously thought of her late husband as some kind of guardian angel who would repel any danger. When Johnny hadn't magically intervened on that night, Kate's confidence had crumbled. A false confidence, she decided, relying on a force outside herself. She needed to learn self-defense. Suppose next time she had to face the enemy alone? She couldn't use Ray and Sara's power as a crutch, any more than she could lean on Johnny's spirit. "I want you to teach me something," she told Sara.

Sara's eyes widened. "Me teach you, Mommy? What?"

"How to form a shield, like you and Ray are so good at."

"You mean a bubble? Okay, that's easy." Her forehead crinkled. "Why?"

"Sometimes you and Ray might not be around." Kate tried to speak lightly. "I might need to take care of myself." Sitting across from Sara, she cupped the child's petite hands in her own. "Show me how you do it."

"Should I get Fog to help you?" Sara thought for a second and answered her own question. "No, he still doesn't feel good."

"That's right. Anyway, I can't talk to Fog the way you do." I've come a long way, baby, Kate reflected, discussing girl-to-cat communication without turning a hair.

"You have to make yourself see, so I can show you. Not really see, but..." Sara grimaced in frustration.

"Yes, munchkin. Father Mike calls it the third eye."

Sara giggled. "Yeah, he told me to 'magine another eye up here." She touched her forehead. "That would look funny."

"Let's both imagine it." Again they clasped hands. Kate concentrated, looking at

her daughter in what she thought of as a sideways direction. A corner-of-the-eye glimpse that made Sara's aura visible. When Kate's vision adjusted to the rosy nimbus that enveloped the child, she further visualized a silver-blue ribbon linking her own aura to Sara's.

Quietly Sara told her, "Now you have to think with me, inside my head. I can't tell you how to make the bubble in words."

Kate opened her mind, imagining her consciousness flowing to meet Sara's through the mental gateway. The child's thoughts tickled the inside of her skull like feathers or butterfly wings. Sara's tiny fingers, interlaced with hers, seemed to weave patterns like a spider web. Or did only the fingers of their astral bodies move? Kate danced into the pattern and spun a cat's-cradle of shining filaments, until they shaped a canopy over herself and Sara.

When she opened her eyes, she felt as if she'd been asleep in the chair. She blinked in the glare reflected into the kitchen window from the snow. Sara bounced in her chair. "That was cool, Mommy! Do you know how to do it by yourself now?"

Probing within her own mind, Kate found the skill tucked away like a pearl in a jewel box. "Yes, now I do. Thanks."

"Are we going to work on school stuff?"

Kate almost said yes, then glanced out the window. "What the heck, let's make a snow fort instead." Mastering the new skill gave her a serenity she wanted to enjoy before her fears came flocking back.

* * * *

On the next occasion that Ray was scheduled to visit the clinic in San Francisco, Kate made her move. She felt a now-or-never urgency, for he'd almost finished his transition period and wouldn't be making all-day trips out of town very often in the future. The night before, she felt him watching her, as if he could read her mind. She lay rigid beside him in bed, imagining that if she softened too much, he would be able to absorb her intentions through her skin.

In the morning, she got dressed as soon as the wake-up nausea passed, thankful that it was never severe or long-lasting. "What are you so bright and early for?" said Ray in the kitchen, watching her slice grapefruit.

"Why not?" The knife grazed her finger. Gritting her teeth, she wrapped a tissue around the tiny cut and gouged at the grapefruit seeds with the knife tip.

"You know you don't have to get up and fix breakfast."

"Well, maybe I want to!" She grabbed a mug from the cup tree by the sink to pour herself coffee. Sara trotted into the kitchen, wearing flannel pajamas and fuzzy slippers. Kate's hand shook, and she dropped the mug into the sink.

"Hi, Mommy. What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Luckily the cup hadn't broken. Picking it up, Kate noted a small chip, on the side away from the drinking surface. "Pregnant women are allowed to be cranky. Isn't that right, Doc?"

"Sure," Ray said. "If you say so."

Kate avoided his eyes and Sara's as she fumbled through breakfast. If anyone could hear her thoughts, she feared, it would be her daughter. Good Lord, I hope not! That would give a child way too much advantage over a parent.

Once Ray left, she phoned Mrs. Sutton to ask her to watch Sara for the day. "I need to do some shopping out of town. You know, the holidays and all." Kate was relieved when the storekeeper readily agreed. She would have called the previous day, except that she'd feared Mrs. Sutton might have run into Ray and mentioned the request to him.

As Kate bundled Sara into her wraps, the little girl said with a suspicious air, "Where are you going?"

"Shopping, just like I told Mrs. Sutton. You enjoy going to her house, don't you?"

Sara didn't allow herself to be sidetracked. "Shopping where?"

"That's a secret." She knows something is up, Kate thought as she maneuvered the car down the winding road. Thank goodness, the pavement and the sky were both clear today. But she doesn't know what--she can't quite read my mind.

Mrs. Sutton welcomed Sara with hot chocolate. The woman would probably assume Kate meant to shop at the mall in the county seat, an idea Kate didn't contradict. She stifled pangs of guilt as Mrs. Sutton and Sara waved goodbye from the front of the store. She'd left a note for Ray, in the unlikely event he got home before her. If she returned first, as intended, she would destroy it and break the news of her mission more gently.

Out of sight of the store, she pulled over to calm herself with the relaxation and breathing exercise, almost a form of light self-hypnosis, that she'd learned from Mike. She visualized the mental shield coalescing around her. It felt as natural as a fresh layer of skin; she didn't expect to have any trouble maintaining it and driving at the same time.

She would need it, for she meant to travel to San Francisco and confront Eugene Martlet. She had the address from Mike's file. If she found Martlet at the institute's downtown office, she counted on his not risking violence in an urban high-rise. His organization surely wasn't the only tenant of the building, and even within the institute, many of the employees probably had no inkling of the cult for which the group fronted.

And what if he's not there? Big, fat, anticlimax. Kate wasn't sure whether she would be relieved at being let off the hook or frustrated at postponing the confrontation. I'm sick and tired of hiding like a rabbit in a burrow. I want to settle this, which does not have to make me as bad as them!

Ray would be furious, of course. And when Father Mike found out, he'd react much the same way. Kate hoped the results of the visit would justify the risk and defuse their outrage. She had considered either asking Ray to accompany her or appealing to Mike for help. She'd quickly dismissed the idea, knowing both would refuse and try their best to stop her.

If Martlet was everything Mike suspected, he might strike her down at first sight with a single bolt of lightning. But he wants Sara. I don't think he'd zap me as long as there's a chance I might let slip a clue to her whereabouts. He'd rather get all of us at once. Martlet's wife had shown willingness to negotiate, or at least pretend to negotiate. Maybe the man would do the same, long enough for Kate to get him at a disadvantage, anyway.

Wonder what I'm figuring on doing to him? Last time I saw this man, I was so terrified I ran in front of a car. But she had learned so much since then. She had powers she hadn't imagined several months ago, powers strong enough to make her a target--strong enough, she hoped, to rattle Martlet. Or whoever he really is.

When she merged onto the freeway, the traffic made her nerves twang with apprehension. Good grief, it hasn't been that long since I've driven on a highway. Had the isolation of the mountains changed her so quickly? Once she adjusted to the high speed, she realized her problem wasn't the traffic. She was disturbed by all the people pressing so close around her. So many minds that she couldn't touch and evaluate. How many of them might be hostile? At best, they

were indifferent; she could run off a bridge and die, and most of them would respond with no more than curiosity.

What's the matter with me, getting morbid? Not to mention paranoid? She groped for her silken canopy of protection and found it intact. She relaxed into a tiny smile. As the man says, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't really following you. She assigned a corner of her brain to holding the shield firm. Her grand notion of invading the enemy's lair would end in disaster if they spotted her first.

In San Francisco, she felt eyes crawling like ants on the back of her neck. She had to keep reminding herself over and over that most of these people were honest citizens, and none of them had any interest in her. Concentrating on the map unfolded on the passenger seat kept her focused on her goal and minimized the nervousness.

Finally she found the office building where Martlet's institute was housed. It had a parking garage, and she smiled to herself at the incongruity of pausing at the gate to accept her ticket in the midst of planning an assault on a monster in human shape. Wonder if Martlet will validate it for me? Before or after I flatten him?

Brave words. Was she rushing into a situation whose scope she had no concept of? Her training had only begun, after all.

A conversation with Johnny, which she hadn't thought of in weeks, came to mind. He'd assured her that the powers of good watched over her. She had more than her own talents to draw upon. Cupping Father Mike's olive-wood cross in her hands, she whispered the Lord's Prayer. For an instant, a pearly glow radiated from the crystal at its center. I'm not alone. Thank you, God.

Not that the moment of comfort made her any less terrified, she wryly admitted to herself. Well, I'm not about to turn around and drive back to Ardath now. She locked the car, tucked the keys in her purse, and marched to the elevator.

Chapter 18

After a stop at the ladies' room, necessary enough that she couldn't accuse herself of purposeful delay, Kate hunted for the institute's suite. Shortly she found the door, labeled with gilded letters: National Institute for Research in Nontraditional Cosmology. Resisting an impulse to knock, she opened it and stepped inside.

A spacious reception room, carpeted in moss green, with several doors leading to offices. Ferns, spider plants, and a hanging model of the solar system. A large print of a medieval map of the world, dragons and cherubim adorning its four corners. A pamphlet rack near the chairs. Desk of polished wood, with phone, intercom, electric typewriter, and a svelte, mahogany-skinned woman wearing gold-rimmed glasses.

Kate stalked up to the desk with long strides that she hoped projected confidence. "I want to see Mr. Martlet."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but he'll see me. Just tell him Kathryn Jacobs is here."

The receptionist arched her eyebrows, apparently in polite amusement rather than recognition. "Mr. Martlet has an extremely tight schedule, ma'am."

"I'll wait." Kate sat down on a leather-covered love seat, her purse clutched in her lap. Here's my chance to back out and go home. No, for her daughter's safety, she had to follow through. If she stayed hidden behind psychic fortress walls, the way Mike recommended, the next attack might end in Sara's death. Several minutes passed. Kate leafed through a booklet about mysterious rains of frogs, fish, and other fauna; the author theorized that these phenomena might arise from erratic space-time warps. She looked up to notice the receptionist coolly examining her. "You haven't announced me to Mr. Martlet," said Kate. "I assure you, you're wasting your time here. He doesn't have an opening today. You'd better call for an appointment."

Kate felt more amused than irritated. After the battle with Martlet's wife, an officious secretary didn't pose much of a threat. Considering a direct assault on the inner offices, Kate decided against it. She didn't know which door belonged to the director, and she'd likely get thrown out the moment she started looking.

Of course, Martlet might not even be here at present. Now, wouldn't that be a let-down! Kate thought of a way to find out, as well as notifying the enemy of her presence without the receptionist's cooperation. Fear paralyzed her for an instant. What she contemplated felt like diving into the deep end of an icy pool. Don't be silly, she commanded herself, meeting him face to face will be a bigger risk, and I'm committed to that. She dropped her shield.

Only for a second--long enough to perform a mental radar sweep through the suite. Long enough to probe a clot of darkness that stung her in return like a frozen needle through her forehead. She withdrew into her own skull and gathered the threads of her psychic cloak, wrapping it around her like a security blanket. She clasped the cross she wore, the relic with the supposed splinter of the True Cross, to reinforce her protection.

The intercom on the desk buzzed. When the secretary answered, a man's voice said, "Send in Ms. Jacobs. And we're not to be interrupted for any reason."

The woman gave Kate a confused look. "Very well, go ahead." She waved toward an alcove at her left.

Miming a serene nod, locking her knees against a threatened tremor, Kate walked in the indicated direction. The opening led to a short corridor that ended at a door bearing Martlet's name. She turned the knob, half expecting it to scorch her flesh.

It consisted of ordinary brass, of course. Whatever Martlet might be, he wore the facade of a middle-aged man and occupied an ordinary executive suite. She felt plush carpet under her shoes and smelled the fragrance of leather from the armchairs and the expensive books that filled a bookcase on one side of the room. A large aquarium was built into the opposite wall. A door standing ajar in one corner revealed a washroom with what looked like a marble sink. The wide desk--cherrywood, she thought--sat in front of a picture window. A man stood behind the desk.

Kate closed the door behind her and pressed her back to it like a cornered animal. She saw a humanoid silhouette etched in darkness. Not ordinary dark, but a nonreflecting depth that devoured any light falling upon it. The vision cast her back to that night of terror and helplessness. She hyperventilated, her heart racing.

No! Not this time, damn you! I won't let you do that to me again! How could she overcome it if she couldn't even stand to look at it? But she could; she was no longer an ignorant victim. She drew calming breaths, the way she'd been taught. She forced herself to withdraw from the immediacy of the vision and see the mask, the way the entity presented itself to the world. Gradually the darkness evaporated. She faced a slender man of average height, with iron-gray hair receding from the high forehead. Short sideburns and a thin moustache, as in the photo she'd seen in the institute's brochure. His skin was deeply lined at the corners of mouth and eyes but not wrinkled overall. A dignified but not strikingly impressive image. Probably he wouldn't want to stand out too vividly in a crowd.

"Ms. Jacobs. Sit, please." The voice of a man who might speak competently in public but wouldn't project as a dynamic orator. A languid wave of a hand gestured toward the chairs. Icy chill prickled up her arms when she noticed that all his fingers were the same length, as if he had not cared, or been unable, to adjust that small detail.

She started to insist on standing but decided that pose would be pointless. If capable of zapping her, he could do it in any position, and she wouldn't improve her chances by tiring out her leg muscles. She took a seat in one of the leather-upholstered chairs. Martlet walked around to the front of his desk and sat on the edge.

Viewing his human mask rather than his true essence helped to subdue her fear. Yet she realized that knowing him for what he was gave her an advantage she hadn't considered before; she wouldn't underestimate him, and she would have no scruples about destroying him if she could. "So," she said, proud of the steadiness of her voice, "this must be where you say, 'Now I have you in my power.'"

He flashed a humorless smile. "No, it's where I say, 'Ah, at last we meet!' You've caused me more trouble than I expected."

"Good. I'm here to cause more." She swallowed hard. "You leave me and my family alone. If you promise--and I'll know if you're sincere--I'll leave you alone. Otherwise--"

"Why, Kathryn, are you threatening me?"

She reminded herself not to let his show of amusement goad her into a rash outburst. "We handled your wife--or whatever she was--pretty thoroughly." Martlet frowned. "So that's what became of Lucille. I should have known, when I couldn't make contact with her."

"You didn't know--" Kate gnawed her lip, angry with herself for blurting out that comment. So he didn't know until this moment that she was dead!

"I must admit you surprise me. Yes, Lucille vanished from my mental sight about a week ago, somewhere in the Sierras. She'd hinted that she was on your trail but hadn't given me any details. I didn't press her, assuming her confidence was mostly bravado. When she disappeared, I suspected she was simply ashamed or afraid to face me with another failure. She'd been less than competent so far. I was thinking of assigning others to the task."

"She knew that, I guess," Kate said, thinking aloud. "She was just dying to win your approval, heaven knows what for. And she did die."

"Damned fool female!" Martlet quickly suppressed his brief show of wrath. Kate sensed that he didn't want to display weakness in the form of emotion. "I shouldn't have given her so much rope; I should have forced her to tell me what she was up to. I had quite a lot invested in that woman."

"Then isn't it time to cut your losses?"

"Hardly." He picked up a geode from the desk and turned it in his hands. "Her death gives me another motive for your destruction. She was a valuable associate."

He didn't bother to maintain a strong mental barrier--showing contempt for Kate's power, maybe--and she caught a flash of an emotion other than anger. "You cared about her!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The window behind him rattled. The geode flew out of his grip and crashed into a wall. A vase on the desk vibrated, tottered, and tipped over onto the blotter. Kate grasped the arms of her chair, bracing herself as the room swayed.

The agitation ceased within seconds. The intercom buzzed. Martlet thumbed it and said, "Everything is fine; leave me alone." He glanced at the vase, which stood itself upright; the water that had spilled flowed into it like a film running backwards, and the single rose reclaimed the petals that had fallen off. "Excuse me," he murmured. "Merely a natural reaction to your absurd remark. To care about human tools would be totally outside my character."

"I don't think you have any character," Kate said, pursuing an inspiration that struck her even as he spoke. "Only what you've had to put on to appear human. And acting human, you're in danger of becoming it. You must hate that!"

While he didn't visibly flinch, she sensed him choking down a surge of indignation. I was right, she thought. An alien intelligence from another dimension shouldn't feel any human emotions, not even anger.

Martlet said, "This theorizing is a waste of time. You've stated your demands; now listen to mine. I'd like to hold onto you, for the sake of what you carry in your body. Seven months from now, that fetus could become very useful to us. But I can't take the risk; you'd be too unmanageable."

Kate leaned forward on the edge of her chair, struggling with her burgeoning anger. "Damn right I would!"

He held up a hand for silence. "Please. I'm not finished. Here's what I offer: A quick death for you. Immunity for that doctor you appear so attached to--yes, Lucille informed me of that much. The best of lifelong care for your daughter. Thanks to her combined inheritance from you and her father, she's far stronger and more enticing than you. She's not too old to be converted, and she'll live in luxury as long as she uses her powers at my command."

"Go back to hell where you belong!" She kept her voice low, though it quivered with leashed rage.

"Hell is a human concept. Have you rationally considered the alternative? You can't hide forever, and what do you think will happen to the little girl if you don't surrender her to me?"

"I don't believe she'd live long if I did." Kate forced her breathing and heartbeat to slow down. "And I happen to believe there really are fates worse than death."

"Oh? Maybe because you haven't seen much death." He touched one fingertip to the rose in the vase. Kate sensed thirst emanating from him, psychic thirst that sucked avidly at the blossom. The petals drooped, withered, dropped off, like a flower in a time-lapse movie. The bare stem crumbled to dry flakes.

Kate beat back the fear that threatened to swamp her. "Parlor tricks. I could do that, too." Resisting the panic calmed her enough to let her realize that this show of force was a hopeful sign. He wouldn't bother with intimidation if he felt totally confident of defeating her. Yes, I actually could kill a plant that

way. Could I annihilate Martlet the way we killed his wife, if I had to? She decided she could. This creature was in no way human and intended her destruction; destroying him would entail no guilt.

"Perhaps it didn't have the emotional impact I intended," he said. "I tend to forget how you people make artificial distinctions of value between lower and higher forms of life." He strolled over to the aquarium. "Come here, I wouldn't want you to miss any of the details."

Kate joined him, cringing at the thought of the physical proximity. That was irrational. Martlet could hurt her just as badly from across the room, if he wanted to. She focused on the catfish he pointed at.

"It's quite simple, merely an acceleration of entropy," he said in a lecturing tone. He tapped on the glass where the catfish floated along the bottom of the tank. Again Kate felt the tentacles of hunger/thirst uncoiling from within him. She envisioned a nature film she'd once seen, a starfish extruding its innards to scrape and suck its prey's vital organs. Or flies in a spider web, reduced to shriveled husks.

The catfish dropped to the gravel bed. Its flesh instantaneously rotted to shreds. The remnants dissolved into the water and vanished. The skeleton lay on the floor of the aquarium.

Martlet was right, damn him; this demonstration did affect her worse than the withering of the rose. Her disgust at being manipulated overshadowed the fear. "All right, I've seen enough."

He returned to the desk and stood behind it. "Any life-essence feeds me, but less complex forms such as that aren't very nourishing. Human life serves me better, and a highly organized intelligence with talent like your daughter's is best of all."

Kate restrained herself from lashing out at him. No doubt he wanted her to do that.

"If you turn her over voluntarily, I wouldn't have to drink her in one gulp, as it were--not like that." He gestured toward the fish tank. "I would sip delicately and make her last for years, keeping her power at a level where she could work for me." He folded his arms, staring at Kate. "You'll make a gourmet meal yourself. I could take you right now."

No, you couldn't, she thought. Not through my shield. You'd have to shatter it first. She felt confident of that conclusion, because if he could do what he claimed, he would be acting, not threatening.

"Be reasonable," he said. "I'll know the location of your refuge within a few hours. All I have to do is establish communication with Lucille's astral self--what you'd call the spirit. Now that I know she's dead, that is the obvious course of action."

The pulse pounded in Kate's head. She didn't doubt he could do that, and what chance would they have once he located Ardath? "Is that the only reason you want to contact her?" she said. "Maybe you have another motive for summoning her spirit. Maybe you miss her."

The desk rattled again. The overhead lamp flickered.

"Makes you mad, does it? You don't enjoy hearing the truth?" Kate stood up. Illogical or not, she felt stronger on her feet. "You got attached to your wife, didn't you? Poor woman, I wonder what possessed her to fall in love with something like you?"

"Stop this nonsense! She wouldn't have been such a fool." The room rocked like the deck of a ship.

Kate clutched the back of a chair. "Liar! You knew she felt that way. You must have used it to control her. But you didn't count on getting trapped in feeble human emotions yourself, did you?"

The intercom buzzed. Martlet squashed the button and shouted, "Go away!" The intercom burst into flame. A wave-front of energy swept past Kate, sealing the door.

Though alarmed by this display of power, she felt she was on the right track in taunting him. Disrupting his concentration could only work to her advantage.

"Did you go to bed with her? Did you enjoy sex? I bet that made you sick, all that messy, animalistic pawing and humping. I bet you liked it!"

A roar burst from Martlet's gaping mouth.

She took a stride toward him. "And I bet it weakens you. How can you keep hold of your full power when you're buried in all that stinking flesh?"

The overhead light bulb shattered in a shower of sparks. An offhand gesture from Martlet deflected the shards of glass away from him. A few of the fragments stung Kate's cheek, but she barely noticed. The aquarium glass sprung a hairline crack, and water began to leak. Can I take him? How can I imagine what he might be capable of?

Electric sparks fountained from an outlet near the desk. Kate filed it as a minor distraction, too far away to harm her. She focused on Martlet. A cloud of sooty smoke oozed from his open mouth. It rolled toward her. Little as she knew about his nature and abilities, she knew she couldn't let that cloud engulf her.

It spawned ameoboid pseudopods, groping for her. She backed up, knowing the door was sealed, and in seconds the tendrils would reach her.

I can't run anyway. This is what I came for! Father Mike had said no one could literally annihilate Martlet; he could only be sent back where he belonged. But I don't know how! Destroy his human shape--but how?

Panicked instinct rather than thought guided her hand to the cross at her breast. God, help me now! Springing forward instead of retreating, she raised it to catch the sunlight from the picture window. A beam struck the crystal in the center of the cross. Is that a natural ray of sunlight? Or something more, attracted by my will? Whatever the light was, she captured it with the crystal. She angled the cross toward the predatory cloud. A silver-white, laser-fine ray sliced to the core of the cloud.

The cloud melted to a puddle, then vanished. Martlet howled. Kate felt the floor drop from under her feet. She was falling, hurtling down a bottomless shaft into a black void. It's an illusion! I'm still in the office! She breathed a prayer, and the darkness receded, restoring the room to normal. Martlet surged toward her. She poured all her terror and rage into the crystal and aimed at his chest. The stiletto of light pierced him. When it penetrated his flesh, his image blurred like a reflection on water. Shadowy tentacles shimmered around him. A bolt of electricity blinded Kate.

A second later, through dark spots swirling before her eyes, she saw Martlet's human body lying on the floor. She risked a quick probe and sensed no life in him. The room rocked. In the far corner by the electrical outlet, blue flames licked the carpet. She smelled smoldering wood and realized the intercom had set the desk afire. Sprinklers in the ceiling began to shower the room. Over the pounding in her head, she heard fists hammering on the door. A cramp wrenched her abdomen. Grayness obscured her vision. An aftershock made her knees buckle, and she blacked out.

* * * *

Unlocking his car in the clinic's parking lot, Ray reflected with satisfaction that he would have to make this trip only once more; then his obligations to his old job would be cleared, and the transition complete. Every hour away from Ardath troubled him, though rationally he knew that Kate, sheltered in the mountain village, was safer than he was. Today he'd managed an early-afternoon departure, so he should reach home before dark. Pure superstition, to imagine that the enemy could function only at night like a movie vampire, but he still hated to leave Kate and Sara alone after sunset.

As he fastened his seat belt, a hot needle stabbed him between the eyes. He clenched his teeth to convert his scream of agony into a groan. Even before the pain faded, he knew it wasn't his own. Crying for help would do no good. He had to rush to the source--Kate.

Thanking Heaven for the bond that enabled him to sense when she was endangered, he reinforced his psychic shield and fumbled for the thread of connection that had slipped from his fingers. Where is she, for God's sake? That felt awfully close. He scanned the nodes of life-force thronging the city the way he would palpate a patient's flesh in search of an anomalous mass. Within minutes he sensed the glow of his beloved's presence.

She's not at home. She's here, right in downtown San Francisco! He was already pulling onto the street. Despite the clear, windy December weather, he drove in a fog. Instinct, providential guidance, or sheer luck allowed him to squeak through several near-collisions. Once he ran a red light and didn't realize he'd done so until a chorus of horns blared after him.

At the next stop he felt the car's body vibrating. Earthquake! Since he didn't notice any buildings collapsing, he ignored it and resumed speed as soon as an opening appeared in traffic. He couldn't discern Kate's exact condition or what she was doing. He sensed only her location and a pervasive murk of fear and rage.

Just as he turned onto the block where he knew he would find her, a stronger quake hit. He screeched to a stop at the first open meter and clutched the wheel until the shaking stopped. He jumped out of the car and, without pausing to feed the meter, dashed up the street toward the high-rise where he sensed Kate.

Sirens wailed. Ignoring them, Ray hurried into the building's lobby and staggered to the elevators, where he leaned against the wall gasping. Unable to control his autonomic functions as Mike had taught Kate, he did the best he could by slowing his respiration to long, deep breaths. Within a minute he felt his heartbeat decelerate. He surveyed the building's directory. The name of Martlet's institute gave him a jolt, though he realized he shouldn't be surprised. Why else would Kate risk leaving Ardath? Crazy idiot, so that's what she was up to! What in God's name got into her?

Ray ducked into a door labeled "Stairs" and clattered upward. The intervening floors swept past in a blur. His chest heaved with exertion by the time he reached the correct story. He shoved the fire door open and ran down the corridor to the institute's suite.

The door stood ajar. Paramedics wheeled out a stretcher, with an IV connected to the inert form of a middle-aged man. It had to be Martlet. Ray perceived the resemblance between the gray-skinned mask and the photo he'd seen in the institute's promotional leaflet. What happened to him? Whatever it was, I hope it hurt like hell! Lacking Kate and Sara's fine-tuned ESP, Ray couldn't tell whether the man would survive, and he had more vital concerns right now.

When he tried to push his way into the office, one of the EMTs blocked him. "My

wife is in there," Ray said. "I'm a doctor." He fumbled for his wallet and thrust his ID into the young man's face.

The paramedic studied the ID card for a moment. "Okay. We're treating a woman in the director's office. You can come in and see if it's your wife."

Odors of scorched wood and electrical fixtures permeated the inner office. A woman from the emergency team trained a fire extinguisher on the desk and the area around it. A fish tank embedded in one wall leaked onto the carpet. Kate lay on a stretcher, moaning weak protests at the paramedic's ministrations. Her eyes snapped wide open when Ray strode up to her. "What the hell is the matter with you?" He spoke through clenched jaws, trying not to shout. "What possessed you to run off without telling me, leaving Sara--?" He broke off, seeing tears trickle from her eyes. He clasped her right hand, careful not to touch the left arm with the IV.

"Oh, Ray," Kate whispered, "I'm bleeding!"

His heart lurched. He kissed her hand. "It will be all right. Where's Sara?"

"With the Suttons. They think I'm out Christmas shopping."

The paramedic interrupted. "We have to transport her now." He gave Ray the name of the hospital.

After a kiss on the forehead, Ray left Kate with the ambulance attendants and hurried to his car. Pocketing the parking ticket on the windshield, he drove to the hospital.

Once he'd finished Kate's admission forms, he phoned Ardath to check on Sara, telling Mrs. Sutton only that Kate had a threatened miscarriage. He then called Mike. After that he paced for an endless time, fighting the grief and fear he couldn't indulge as long as Kate needed him. Finally the ER staff allowed him into Kate's assigned cubicle.

After he closed the curtain around them, she grabbed his hands and dug her nails in. "Ray, I'm so scared!"

He leaned over to kiss her damp cheeks. "We have to pray for the best."

"They gave me a shot, but I'm going to lose the baby, I know it!" She gulped.

"That's Martlet's revenge."

"Don't talk like that!" Startled by the harshness of his own voice, Ray swallowed his anger and said more quietly, "We won't let them win."

"Yeah? How do we stop them? Even if he's dead, he did this to me first!"

Before she asked, Ray had been speaking only to comfort her, with no idea of how to stop what was happening. All his medical training left him helpless, only cursing him with a more vivid awareness of the danger. But now a possibility flashed into his head. "You can reverse it, stop the bleeding. Isn't that what Mike's been training you for?"

He felt Kate's hands tremble. "I used it to kill, remember?" she whispered. "I'm afraid of it. The taste of it makes me sick."

"No, that's not how it's supposed to be. Mike taught you the skill for beneficial purposes. What we did to that woman was to save all our lives."

"I'm scared." Her voice quavered. "It might twist on me."

"I'm here." He clasped her hands to his chest. "Draw on my strength, however much I have to give. I'll be your anchor; I won't let it go the wrong way."

Hesitantly Kate nodded.

They synchronized their breathing. He sank into her consciousness as into a warm whirlpool. Together they mapped the web of her neurons and circulatory system. They traced the energy pathways to the tiny pulse of life that was the growing fetus. Ray sensed blood and vitality flowing out of her womb. He visualized his

hands laid over Kate's, guiding them to dam the flood and reverse its course. Threads of silver light repaired the microscopic injuries, reinforced the weak points in Kate's tissues. Together he and Kate enfolded the dimming spark of life and fed it their heat until it flared clear and bright.

Ray floated up to normal awareness. A weary smile played on Kate's lips. "Thank God," she whispered. "I know He's with us now. And thank you, too. Oh, Ray, I love you. I couldn't make it without you." Her eyes drifted shut. Her words made his heart constrict with yearning. Drained, he leaned his head against the wall and simply held her hand.

Some time later a nurse came in to check Kate. "Your clergyman is in the waiting room. At least, I assume that's who he is. A Father Emeric?"

"Can he come in?" Ray said.

The nurse nodded. A minute later, Mike stepped around the curtain. After bending over to kiss Kate's brow in greeting, he said, "The baby?"

Kate glanced at Ray and said, "It'll be all right now."

"Thank God for that!" Since Ray had the only chair, Mike leaned against the wall at the head of the gurney. "I have good news for you--qualified good news, anyway. Martlet is in a coma on full life support. From what I could get out of the staff, if he lives, he isn't expected to recover any higher brain functions."

"What do they assume caused it?" Ray asked.

"They're calling it a stroke." Mike squeezed Kate's shoulder. "You may be questioned about the mess in the office, but nobody will connect you with Martlet's collapse. You can claim he had some kind of fear-induced seizure as a result of the earthquake."

Ray felt more secure, listening to Mike's firm recommendations. "Yes, that should work. They won't expect her to recall many details. Perception and memory are notoriously unreliable in moments of stress. You won't get blamed, love."

"But we know," said Kate, her face shadowed.

Mike said, "You did what was necessary."

Ray's anger reawakened. "Necessary! Damn it, Kate, couldn't you trust me enough to talk it over with me before you went charging out to risk your life?"

She closed her eyes. "You would have told me not to go."

"You know it!"

Mike laid a hand on Ray's forearm. "This is no time for that. Everything turned out for the best. What's past is over."

Suddenly aware of clenching his fists on his lap, Ray forced them to relax. "I guess you're right. Darling, promise you won't keep anything like this from me ever again." If she'd been killed, and we hadn't been able to say goodbye... He had to stop thinking in that direction, or he'd break down. Not that he considered tears something to be ashamed of--but not in public!

Kate nodded, raising a hand to wipe her eyes. "Oh, Sara must be wondering where we are!"

Ray reassured her that he'd already phoned. The nurse reappeared, murmuring in pleased surprise at the improvement in Kate. No wonder, Ray reflected, considering that the labor-suppressing drugs usually didn't work nearly so fast. When the three of them were left in peace again, Ray said, "Mike, do you honestly think we're rid of Martlet?"

"I see no reason to doubt it, in view of the current situation. After all, whatever he is, he depends on his human shell to function in our world."

"If he isn't human at all," Kate said, "how did he get a body in the first

place?"

Mike smoothed his bird's-nest hair. "I'm not exactly an expert."

Ray smiled despite his fatigue. "You're the closest facsimile we've got. Speak, O venerable sage."

"I think he constructed it from raw elements in the environment. You know the bit about how the human body can be reduced to a few dollars' worth of chemicals, plus water. He could have assembled the necessary ingredients from an uninhabited area where they would never have been missed."

Ray felt Kate's hand tremble. "Imagine something so unreal causing so much devastation," she said.

"Don't think about it anymore. It's over now." He prayed they could trust Mike's assurance on that point. "The hospital wants to keep you overnight for observation. Tomorrow we'll take you home."

"Home to Sara." Kate's lids drooped with weariness. "Where we'll have our baby."

Chapter 19

Throughout her pregnancy, Kate devoted herself to enjoying her home, her husband, and her daughter. Nothing except the ordinary friction of daily life, which she welcomed for its mundaneness, marred her contentment. At least, not after the fourth month, when Dr. Thom declared the danger of miscarriage past and authorized her to resume normal activities. These included sex, and Kate often recalled Ray's rueful smile when he'd heard the news. "Wonderful--aside from the usual motive, I can't get used to seeing myself as St. Joseph. You may be carrying a miracle baby, but I'm glad that doesn't have to mean a celibate marriage."

Kate had responded in mingled hilarity and shock, "Cut it out, that's either stupid or downright blasphemous!" Yet she'd sensed an undercurrent of seriousness behind the unfunny joke. Did he really fear that she saw him as an outsider in the family, an appendage to herself and Sara, useful only to protect them? Did he resent, on some level, falling into this abnormal situation? Surely by now he knew Kate loved him for himself.

He gave no further indication of such a feeling, though, and Kate's worries about the topic faded along with the vividness of her memories of battling Lucille and Eugene Martlet. The confrontations melted into a surrealistic blur in her mind. She and Ray still maintained psychic shields when they left the Ardath town limits, as a matter of precautionary habit. And she continued to practice biofeedback with Mike's help. Achieving control over her own body minimized the fear that this delivery would overwhelm her the way Sara's birth had. With the nearest hospital so far away, they planned a home delivery, just as with her first pregnancy. They would have two doctors on hand, Ray and Dr. Thom, and she trusted that Ray could meld his power with hers to ensure a normal labor, the same way they had worked together to prevent the miscarriage. Sometimes Kate thought about a remark Mike had made soon after Martlet's defeat:

"Evil always undermines itself in the long run, and the irony of your situation is a perfect example. If they hadn't attacked you, you would never have met Ray or conceived this baby. Their interference caused the very thing they were trying to stop."

Whenever this comment occurred to her, she impatiently pushed it to the back of her mind. She didn't like thinking of herself and her loved ones as pawns of some grand destiny. She wanted her children to have routinely happy lives, and now that the enemy was eliminated, they could. She intended to lead a long, humdrum life with Ray, who would retire as a venerated country doctor and live a peaceful life with her right here in Ardath. With the grandkids visiting every Thanksgiving and Christmas, so there! That afternoon when he'd stormed into Martlet's office searching for her, she'd fully realized how much she loved and needed Ray.

Mike continued to visit frequently. In July, when Kate was eight months pregnant, a month before Sara's fifth birthday, Kate gave him a second tour of the vegetable patch, after dinner, as an excuse to speak privately. "Do you think we should send Sara to kindergarten this fall? Is it wise, or, well, safe?"

He squatted down and plucked a weed from a zucchini mound. "I wouldn't want to say it's not safe. You haven't been disturbed all these months. On the other hand, I like to err on the side of caution."

With an exasperated sigh, Kate rubbed the small of her back. "So what exactly does that mean?"

He stood up, brushing dirt from his hands. "She's doing fine with informal lessons at home, way ahead of what her peers would be studying in public school. Why not let her wait another year? When she turns six, I suggest you try a private, ungraded school I know of, not far away. Calls itself Arcadia, run by a Dr. Frances Crane. She's a good woman."

"Sure, I've driven past it lots of times." She retained a pleasant image of the two-story neoclassic building in the neighboring town of Canterville, surrounded by tall trees and boasting what looked like elaborate playground equipment. "It must be expensive."

"There are scholarships. It's geared to gifted children, which Sara certainly qualifies as. And you know I'll help with a loan if necessary."

Embarrassed, Kate murmured, "We'll manage. I've got to think about it." They returned to the kitchen to help Ray and Sara, who'd already begun scraping dishes for washing.

"Not you, Kate," Ray said when she waddled to the sink. "I keep telling you to stay off your feet."

"Yeah, I guess I should just turn into a queen bee." She lowered herself into a chair.

"Enjoy it while you can," he said.

"Too bad we can't levitate the dishes into the sink and make the scrub brush work by itself, like the brooms in Fantasia," Kate said. "Then we could all goof off."

"Yes, and you remember what happened to Mickey in that film," said Ray. Sara handed him a pair of dirty cups. "What's Fantasia?"

Ray set the cups in the sink and ruffled her hair. "A cartoon movie. We'll take you to see it someday."

She didn't pursue the subject, well aware that "someday" meant "not today or tomorrow."

Mike joined them at the sink with a dishtowel over one arm. "Mickey had it coming. That falls under the category of using power for selfish or frivolous purposes. Not allowed."

"What, you mean we can't have any fun with it?" said Ray in mock disappointment.

"I don't care," Kate said, "as long as we never have to use it seriously again."

Ray endorsed the sentiment with an "Amen to that!"

Later, after Mike had worked a jigsaw puzzle with Sara on the coffee table, and Ray enlisted Drake the Dragon to read her a bedtime story, the three adults relaxed on the porch with a second bottle of wine. "I've got some news about the Institute for Nontraditional et cetera," Mike said. "You remember my mentioning they were under investigation?"

"Sure," said Ray, "tax fraud."

Kate remembered Mike's earlier discussion of the events but had mentally filed them under "no longer important."

The priest sipped his wine, then set down the goblet, linking his hands behind his head. "The organization is in ruins, their assets impounded. So far it looks like the staff will be exonerated, though. Apparently Mr. and Mrs. Martlet were solely responsible for the diversion of funds and tax evasion, and they didn't let anybody else in on the gravy."

"What about the drug connection you said was suspected?" Ray asked.

"No proof," Mike said, "and there probably won't be any. Same with the relationship to various cults, which isn't a crime anyway, aside from the diversion-of-funds mess. That tie was strictly Martlet's confidential concern, I suspect."

As uncomfortable as the topic made her, Kate forced herself to contemplate it for a minute. "You're saying he probably didn't leave anyone behind to carry on his work?"

"His work being the service of the Ancient Ones and, consequently, persecuting you?" said Mike. "Yes, that's the way I see it. The employees of the institute were only innocent dupes."

Ray rotated his glass between his palms. "What about the cult or cults he was fronting for, though?"

Mike picked up his wine and drank, gazing thoughtfully into the distance for a moment. "I doubt you have anything to worry about. If they knew of your existence, they'd have made a move by now."

"That makes sense," Kate said. "You know, this does make me feel better. Thanks for telling us."

To her relief, the conversation turned to pleasanter subjects, such as the exotic world of prime-time TV, inaccessible in Ardath without a satellite dish, and which new movies she and Ray should catch when they screened in a nearby town. Later, as Mike headed upstairs to the guest room, he said, "Maybe next time I see you, I'll get to meet that baby girl."

Kate laughed. "There you go again, both of you are so sure Sara has the sex right. Won't you all be surprised if it's a boy?"

"Whichever it is," Mike said, "let me know as soon as it happens, day or night."

Kate grimaced at a kick from the baby. "Can't be too soon for me."

* * * *

Five days later, Ray received a call from Dr. Thom just before midnight. Kate

propped herself on one elbow in bed to listen to Ray's half of the conversation. It consisted only of monosyllabic responses.

Simultaneously hanging up and flinging back the covers, Ray said, "Thom is at the Ginellis' house. He says Mrs. Ginelli's delivery looks rough, and he wants my help. Sorry to have to leave." He switched on his bedside lamp, tugged on a pair of jeans, and leaned over to kiss Kate.

"No problem." She squinted, yawned, and lay back on the pillow. "Wonder why he isn't having her transported to the hospital?"

Ray pulled a sweatshirt over his head. "Maybe labor's too far advanced, given the driving distance involved. I guess he'll tell me the details when I get there. There was a heck of a lot of static on the line; I could hardly hear him."

A faint growl of thunder punctuate the statement.

"Hope that doesn't move any closer," Ray said, putting on socks and shoes. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Now, don't start that. You have a job to do, and how were you planning to protect me from mean old thunder anyway?" She kept her nervousness about the possible storm to herself.

Laughing, he grabbed his keys and turned off the light. "Highly logical. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Kate squirmed into the sheets, in a futile quest for comfort. Her back ached. Her abdomen rippled as the baby stretched. A second later, she heard the slam of the front door, followed by Ray's car starting. Straining her ears, she heard no stir from Sara's room. Good. She rolled on her side. Her back still hurt. Fog, who'd elected to stay inside tonight, padded into the master bedroom and leaped onto the bed. He placed one paw on Kate's belly and sniffed, as if disdaining the obstruction.

"You should be used to it by now," Kate said, nudging him away. "Why aren't you in Sara's bed?" After a few more minutes curled on her side, she heaved a sigh and trudged downstairs to use the bathroom. Why did whoever designed this place stick it down there, anyway? If we ever get rich, or even semi-rich, a second bath will go at the top of the list. No matter how much space they had to carve out of the guest room. Thunder rumbled again. She prayed for the storm to drift in the opposite direction; she hated to think of Ray on the winding, unlit road in a heavy rain. We get maybe one of these a year, and it has to hit when he's gone.

Halfway up the steps, the cramp in her lower back expanded to constrict her stomach. Breathing deeply through her mouth, she leaned on the rail. She felt a trickle of wetness between her thighs. Oh, no, not that! She scurried back downstairs, making it back to the bathroom before the rest of the fluid gushed out.

Not now! Wait for Ray to get home, please! No fresh cramps followed. With luck she might have hours of labor yet. Kate took a quick shower, pausing to breathe through two light contractions in the process, then slipped on a clean nightgown and returned to her room. She got the delivery kit out of the closet, deciding not to put the sterile sheet on the bed yet.

Call Ray, she thought. Digging the local phone directory from under the bed, she searched for the number of the patient Thom and Ray were attending. Just as she started to pick up the receiver, Sara appeared in the doorway.

"How come you're awake, Mommy? Where's Ray?"

"Ray had to go help Dr. Thom." Sara was already used to after-hours calls. Kate

wondered whether to explain about the baby and decided that postponing the announcement for an hour or two didn't make sense. Especially if it accelerates all of a sudden, like last time. "I'm still awake because it's time for the baby to be born. You take Fog and go back to bed. I'll call you if I need you." Sara looked dubious about being dismissed but obeyed. Before Kate had time to dial the phone, it rang. "Kate, this is Mike." Static sizzled in the background. "I'm sorry to bother you so late, but this is important."

"That's all right, I was awake." She didn't see any point in worrying him by mentioning the cause.

"Bad news. Martlet regained consciousness today. Out of the blue, no apparent reason."

Kate's heart raced. "Is he still in the hospital?"

"No. I just now learned--" A burst of static. "--this afternoon. He left against medical advice, just vanished."

"Oh, dear God." A contraction squeezed her abdomen.

"Is Ray there?"

She gulped a breath. "Out on an emergency call."

"Be careful--" A piercing electronic whine. "--care of yourself."

"Yes, Mike. Mike, what--" The phone went dead.

Kate rattled the cradle, the usual futile gesture in such cases. She hung up the receiver and flipped the directory to the Ginellis' number before trying the phone again. She had to reach Ray, had to get him home.

The line was still silent. As if in mockery, lightning flashed. A couple of minutes later, thunder followed, and Kate heard the first raindrops drumming on the roof.

She stifled a moan. She mustn't frighten Sara. Ray will get back soon, he has to. A sharper pain assailed Kate, forcing her to resort to the faster breathing pattern. Maybe she had less time than she'd expected.

She changed the sheets, bending over to pant when necessary. Then she reclined, propped against the pillows, and struggled to remember every stage described in the Lamaze manual.

An invisible vise tightened around her middle. An involuntary scream burst from her. The pressure grew, choking off her breath. Her vision went gray. Please, God, not again!

A man's voice rang inside her head. "Kate, don't let it beat you. Control it, channel it, the way Mike taught you." Johnny's voice.

The pressure eased. She felt as if warm hands cupped her belly. She drew a long, cleansing breath and released it. "Johnny?" she whispered. She felt the wave of pain cresting again.

"You can handle it," his voice said. Invisible fingers traced the contours of her taut muscles.

Visualizing the network of fibers, nerves, and blood vessels, she displaced the pain to a bearable distance, where it could do its work without drowning her conscious will. She sensed the baby's heartbeat, more rapid than her own, and the small head poised at the fully dilated cervix.

When the contraction receded to give her a few seconds' lull, she became aware of the rain hammering on the roof, the erratic lightning and thunder, the wind lashing the tree outside the window, and Sara hesitating in the doorway, dimly illuminated by the bedside lamp.

"Mommy, you sound hurt. I'm scared!"

"It'll be all right," Kate gasped. "Go back to your room."

Sara took a step closer. "I don't want to. I want to help."

Kate panted through another contraction, taming the pressure in her lower body.

"Then sit down over there," she said. I didn't mean for her to see this, she's too young no matter how gifted she is.

Again Johnny spoke inside her mind: "Sara will be all right. Now, Kate, push!"

One tremendous surge--yes, it was like the first time, but now she knew how to guide it. She clung to awareness and felt the baby slide out. She sensed tendrils of power delicately exploring her uterus, sealing off sources of hemorrhage one by one. Another cramp, expelling the afterbirth. The release of pressure made her feel as light as a helium balloon.

Through a buzz in her ears, she heard Sara's voice. "Oh! Is that my sister?"

Kate curled onto her side and reached for the baby. With awkward movements she got a grip on the slippery body and lifted the newborn onto her stomach. She caught herself smiling as she got her first clear look. "Yes, it sure is. Sara, you can help now. Give me that washcloth."

From the nightstand Sara handed Kate the cloth, which she used to wipe the baby girl's face and mouth. The baby squirmed and let out a cry. Thank God for that, anyway! For a moment Kate soared into an ecstasy more intense than the pain it replaced.

Johnny's mental voice, sounding more distant this time, said, "Deborah Joan."

The name had been settled on by default months ago. Somehow, Kate and Ray had never come up with another that they preferred. She echoed aloud, "Yes. Hello, Deborah Joan." Warmth glowed in her chest. She turned to Sara, who stood on tiptoe staring at the red, wiggling shape. "Now you can give me the twine and the scissors." Ray had rehearsed Kate in the procedure a dozen times, in case of just this event. She tied off the cord at two points and cut it midway between. With Sara's help, she then cleaned, dressed, and wrapped the baby. "Can you bring the cradle over here?"

Sara dragged the cradle to the bed. After nursing Deborah for a couple of minutes, Kate laid her down. The baby seemed to be falling asleep. Kate changed her bed linens and nightgown, trying to hide her fear from Sara. Where's Ray? If only I could have gotten through to him!

Of course, the delivery he was attending might take hours. But if she could have contacted him by phone, he would have come home, surely. Unless he's in trouble on the road.

Limp with fatigue, she lay down. Sara stretched out on the rug beside the bed with her pillow and quilt. Fog came in, now that the commotion had ended, and nestled beside her.

I shouldn't sleep, Kate thought. There's some reason I have to stay awake until Ray gets back. Her brain was too fuzzy to let her remember why. She drifted into a light doze. Aches and twinges, rising to the surface now that the post-delivery euphoria was spent, kept her from true sleep.

The bed felt like a sailboat rocking on a lake in a gentle breeze. The room spun the way it would if she'd just dismounted from a carousel. She imagined she heard Sara murmuring to the baby, but thought she might be dreaming.

Johnny's shout reverberated in Kate's ears: "Wake up! He's at the door!"

Kate snapped awake and sat up, suppressing a groan. "Who is? Ray?" At once she knew better. An icy, psychic wind buffeted the house.

Sara scrambled to her feet. "Daddy?"

"You heard him too?" Kate said.

"Yes. He's here, and the Dark is here, too."

The cat arched his back and hissed. Johnny said, "Beloved, you have to go down there and meet him."

"I can't!" Tears trickled from her eyes. "I can barely stand up!"

"You don't have to do it alone." A flood of energy poured into her. It heated her vitals and surged through her limbs. Before she realized what she was doing, she stood upright next to the bed. No weakness, no discomfort; she might as well be perfectly fit after a sound night's rest. This strength isn't mine. How long will it last?

She gave Sara a quick hug. "I'm going to the living room. You stay here and guard Deborah, understand? And this time I mean stay."

Sara nodded. "I can fight from here. Me and Fog and my sister, too." She sat cross-legged on the bed with the cat in her lap.

Kate fleetingly wished she had a gun. After Mrs. Martlet's attack, that would have seemed a reasonable precaution. But neither she nor Ray believed in firearms around the house for protection. Especially not with a clever preschooler on the premises. Probably wouldn't be a bit of use against that creature, anyway.

She marched down to confront the enemy.

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When Ray arrived at the Ginellis' house in town, he was surprised to find it dark except for the porch light. Furthermore, Thom's car was conspicuously absent. Perhaps the doctor had called an ambulance and accompanied the family to the county hospital? Mentally calculating the time, Ray didn't think an emergency vehicle could have reached here that soon after the phone conversation.

He rang the doorbell several times before a drowsy man answered. When Pete Ginelli informed Ray that his wife wasn't even in labor, Ray began to worry in earnest.

He drove to Thom's home. Lights burned on the side of the house where the office was located. Ray hurried around to the patients' entrance, which he found unlocked. Nobody in the waiting room. Nobody in the examining rooms.

In the inner office, Thom sat in his swivel chair, his head and shoulders slumped on the desk.

Ray hurried to the doctor's side and slid his fingers under the collar of the man's bathrobe. No pulse. Putting an arm around Thom's shoulder, Ray leaned the doctor's head back. The eyes stared wide open; the facial skin already felt cooler than normal. Too late for CPR, too late for anything.

They'll diagnose cardiac arrest or cerebrovascular accident--no way to prove anything else! He bridled his rage over his friend's murder. He had to get to Kate at once.

He rushed to his car and roared up the empty streets. Extending his extrasensory vision, he scanned for Kate. His probe hit a layer of darkness and got lost in the murk. It's blocking me! He throttled his panic and concentrated on driving. When he'd passed the edge of town, the thunder he'd heard in the distance burst directly overhead. In an instant, a deluge of rain assaulted him. He had to slow to a creep, the windshield wipers whipping back and forth at the fastest setting. He could still see little more than a sheet of water. The wind drove it straight at him.

This is the other attack Johnny predicted. Our time of greatest need.

The tires skidded on the slick road. His hands ached from fighting the steering wheel. His eyes distinguished nothing but rain and blackness. The third time he

lost control of the steering, the car spun into the low rock wall at the side of the road. Bouncing off it, he pumped the brakes.

He clutched the wheel, panting from exertion and terror. Good thing I wasn't going any faster! Enough of this. He could proceed safer and just as quickly on foot. He got out and began slogging uphill, trying not to slip on the wet gravel.

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The front door flew open just as Kate reached the bottom of the stairs. She strode to the middle of the living room, choosing her ground.

Martlet, dripping wet, stepped inside. He looked gaunt and gray, as if his human facade were deteriorating. His dark hair faded nearly to white, lengthened to his shoulders, and finally reverted to a sparse sprinkling of black hairs.

"You're more trouble than you're worth, woman." Though he didn't shout, she had no trouble hearing him over the thunder. "You've killed my assistant, wrecked my enterprise. I find my way back to this plane and there's nothing left. Thanks to you, I'll have to start all over."

"Don't worry about it. You won't get the chance." Kate fumbled at her bosom. No cross--she'd left it in her jewelry box. Panic swelled in her breast.

Johnny spoke in her mind. "Remember, it doesn't hold the power; it's only a focus. The power lives in you."

That's right! Props help, but I can do without them. Our union, that's the real power! She felt Johnny's ethereal hand clasping hers, while his other one linked her up through the house to Sara, who rested her free hand on Deborah's head as the infant lay quietly alert in the cradle. The cat crouched on Sara's knees, his head high, ears pricked. Kate felt Johnny wrapping an immaterial cloak, sparkling with energy, around her. She heard the rise and fall of her own voice and realized she was mechanically chanting Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow--"

Martlet glared at her across the room. "The moment I regained possession of this shell and got free of that hospital, I summoned Lucille's spirit. Unfortunately, she'd deteriorated quite a bit already. But she did manage to give me the name of this town and the fact that you'd married Dr. Benson. With that information, it was no trouble finding the old doctor's office and initiating a conversation with him." His hair vanished altogether, leaving his head as starkly bare as a skull. A third eye appeared on his forehead. His fingers elongated and squirmed like the tentacles of a jellyfish.

"Dr. Thom? What did you do to him?" Her voice turned shrill with anger. She sensed Johnny's calming touch.

"Extracted your telephone number from his mind, of course. In view of his age, the process proved rather stressful. To my annoyance, he gave me only a vague idea of your location before he was used up. Otherwise, I would have been here earlier. So sorry to keep you waiting." He offered a small, ironic bow. The third eye disappeared. A fanged mouth split the side of his neck.

"Then that phone call was a fake." Ray was tricked! Where is he now? Dear God, is he still alive? Kate glanced at the surface of Martlet's mind and glimpsed Thom collapsed at his desk. Dead, she knew at once. Martlet's surface thoughts held no information about Ray. Thank goodness, he must be safe! She dared a quick mental sortie in search of him. Nothing. An impenetrable psychic fog shrouded the house.

"The storm I diverted here should keep your husband occupied. He isn't my main concern. Now, once more, I'll give you a chance to avoid violence. You can't

hope to defeat me in direct combat a second time."

"I'm not listening. No deals." So Martlet would still rather not fight. I must be tougher than I thought.

"Hear me out. Now that the infant is born, I don't need to kill you. Give me the two children, and I'll let you survive."

"Go to hell!" Her paranormal armor crackled like the lightning overhead.

"So melodramatic." Pursing his lips, he shook his head. "I'd hoped you would be more rational. Doesn't it make sense to choose life for yourself instead of certain death for all three?" The second mouth moved in mimicry of the words.

"Sorry, I don't see things your way. It's my feeble human intellect, I guess." Strangely, she no longer feared him. The fierceness of her anger blotted out fear. The worst he can do is kill me. I won't let him get close enough to do anything else. And now I know that death isn't the end.

Of course, if she could destroy him and avoid dying, she'd choose that option. But if the case looked hopeless, she felt certain she could annihilate him in a kamikaze attack.

"You can," Johnny told her, "but let's hope you won't need to. Hit him, Kate, now!"

Gathering threads of power from Johnny, Sara, Deborah, and Fog, Kate braided them into a coruscating whip and lashed out at Martlet. It rebounded from his shield in a shower of sparks.

His hands reverted to normal. The third eye reappeared, this time faceted like a fly's. With a snarl, he flung a javelin of green fire at her. It dissolved into her energy-cloak amid rainbow-hued ripples.

Again she struck him with her whip. He launched another bolt. Over and over they traded blows. Kate felt no pain or weakness, but neither did the enemy appear wounded. I must have beaten him last time because he underestimated me. This time he came prepared.

What reserves of extradimensional power could he draw upon? She was only mortal, and her borrowed vitality couldn't last forever. When it drained away, the postpartum fatigue would leave her helpless. And then this thing would devour her children.

No, that won't happen. There's always the kamikaze option. Mutual annihilation. She felt Johnny's arms around her waist, his energy flowing through her. Heard his voice urging her not to yield. Then she felt another presence, loving hands reaching for her.

Behind Martlet, a figure burst through the door.

"Ray!" Kate started to lunge toward him.

Johnny's mental warning stopped her. "Steady, don't break your concentration!"

With a howl of anger, Ray grabbed Martlet by the shoulders. Ray's eyes met Kate's. "Run!" he shouted. "Take Sara and get out while you can!"

"Ray, no!" Kate flung her power at Martlet, a surging blow to the face.

This time the enemy actually flinched. But instead of striking back, he turned in Ray's direction. A translucent shield formed around Ray's head and chest, while he grappled with Martlet. "Please, Kate," he gasped. "I can't hold him off for long."

"I'm not leaving you!" Drawing back her hand as if casting a dart, she threw another bolt of energy at the enemy, now only a crude facsimile of a human shape. He brushed it aside and shredded Ray's armor with a single swipe of a grotesquely clawed appendage.

A pseudopod swung out, almost casually, to land a blow on the side of Ray's

head. His neck snapped back amid an explosion of violet flames. He collapsed to the floor.

Rage boiled within Kate like a geyser about to erupt. Martlet no longer resembled a man, except in blurred outline. His body was a dark silhouette, his face a black sphere punctuated by random patterns of multicolored light.

A roar like a tornado filled Kate's ears. Through it she heard Johnny whisper, "Now, beloved. This way."

Before her a door opened in the air. She stepped through into the void. What had been Martlet followed.

Thunder, wind, and lightning ceased. Kate found herself standing upon a high cliff. The world contained nothing but the rocky mesa where she stood, a pearl-gray sky that stretched forever, and the bottomless expanse that began where the cliff ended.

In front of her hovered a patch of nothingness, relieved only by the dizzying multicolored flashes. The shape of its outline shifted constantly. On either side of Kate stood two young women in gleaming silver chain-mail. Both had brilliant blue eyes. Each had hair of honey-brown, the slenderer girl's a little darker. Kate knew she was looking at Sara and Deborah.

Simultaneously the two girls cast lightning-shafts at the enemy. The entity shimmered and fragmented, then coalesced again. Its form narrowed, solidified, and sprouted wings. A huge, black bat. It launched itself at Kate and the young women.

Each of the girls clasped one of her hands. Feeling her flesh melt, Kate seized control of the process. An instant later, she, Sara, and Deborah soared into the air as giant eagles.

The enemy retreated, flapping until he caught an updraft. The three birds closed upon the monster. It hung suspended in the void beyond the cliff. Glancing down, Kate saw far below, farther than she'd ever seen from the window of an airplane, a revolving mass of darkness. A cyclone or whirlpool. She couldn't contemplate it for more than a second. The nothingness at its center loomed even more terrible than the nothingness that had been Martlet.

Black hole, she thought. The void before Creation.

In unison, talons outstretched, she and the two eagle-maidens dove at the enemy. Their claws pinioned the giant bat and pierced it to the heart. No blood flowed, only a gaseous effusion. It screamed as their beaks cracked its wing-bones and pecked out its eyes. Together they flung the mutilated body out of their grasp. Banish him back to where he came from, Kate ordered with grim finality.

The dark shape plunged into the whirlpool and vanished.

Kate was crouched on hands and knees on the living room floor. The rainstorm had subsided into a resonant silence. The body of Martlet lay on its back a couple of yards away. While she watched, it began to shrivel. What looked like steam rose from the crumpled flesh. Within seconds, it withered to a scattering of dust. A few dollars' worth of chemicals, she recalled.

Ray was lying on his side near the open door. Kate crawled over to him, every inch a struggle against aching fatigue. She touched his neck, then his chest, begging every Power in the universe for some sign of life. Still warm, but no heartbeat. "No," she whispered. "No!" Tears blurred her vision and seared down her cheeks.

Small footsteps drew her attention to the stairs. Hesitantly Sara made her way down, one step at a time, the baby clasped to her breast. Fog proceeded her into the room and sat beside Kate.

Kate rose to her knees to take Deborah from Sara. Tears splintered their image into sparkling fragments. "Sweethearts, I'm so proud of you, both of you!" The baby waved her fists and cried softly. When Kate hugged her, she turned her head in a rooting reflex

Sara sat on the floor and placed her palm on Ray's forehead. "Can we bring him back?" Her voice trembled.

Closing her eyes, Kate linked hands with Sara. Questing for Ray's presence, she sensed a large house, its many rooms elegantly furnished, warmly carpeted and lit, but with high ceilings that echoed the visitors' steps and calls of greeting. The owner had set everything in order and stepped out. Nobody would answer their calls.

"No. He's dead," Sara whispered.

Sobs ripped from Kate's throat. She rocked on the floor, hugging the baby to her chest. Sara, weeping silently, leaned against her.

She would have been surprised to hear Johnny speak, if she'd had room for any emotion but sorrow. "Kate, you know this isn't all there is."

He echoed her earlier thought, but her own death would have been far easier to accept. "I know." Her voice rasped. She felt so exhausted that she might not move from this spot all night.

"I've accomplished what I stayed here to do. You're safe now." His voice seemed to withdraw down a tunnel, receding into the distance. "Sara, Deborah, grow strong. Goodbye, my beloved."

Then he vanished. And Kate knew beyond question that this time he would never return.

"Daddy's gone," Sara said. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown.

"So is Ray."

"Yes, they are." Moving a short distance to brace her back against the wall, Kate drew Sara's head into her lap. When her strength revived, she would call Mike. Not yet, though. "But you're both here, and we're all together. We belong to each other--always."

My babies, my family. They're all I have.

Tomorrow she would have to face a world without Ray. But not alone.

Margaret L. Carter

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii, and the University of California, with her dissertation published as *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*. Her other works include *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, *The Vampire In Literature: A Critical Bibliography*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien*. She is also the author of a werewolf novel, *Shadow Of The Beast*, and three vampire novels, *Dark Changeling* (2000 Eppie Award winner in Horror), *Sealed In Blood*, and *Crimson Dreams*, along with a fantasy novel, *Wild Sorceress*, co-written by her husband Les Carter.

Margaret and Les, a retired Navy Captain, have four sons and several

grandchildren. For fans of "Vamp Tales," please do not hesitate to visit her web site: The Vampire's Crypt at:

<http://members.aol.com/MLCVamp/vampcrpt.htm>

* * * *

Don't miss Crimson Dreams, by Margaret L. Carter, available Winter 2003, from Amber Quill Press, LLC

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