



A LOVE IN
DARKNESS
DEAN HENRYSON

A LOVE IN DARKNESS

by
Dean Henryson

Copyright © 2014 Dean Henryson

All rights reserved.

ISBN: **1496122615**

ISBN-13: **978-1496122612**

For David, Judy, Parvin, and Robert.
Thank you for all the support and help.

Chapter 1

Sharon couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that tonight she would die.

While driving back to Rosebud Foster Care at 5:34 p.m., her whole body trembled. Her nerves were sharpened around the family visit she would monitor. This mother had banged a hammer into her nine-year-old daughter's head while the father reclined in a lounge chair and watched.

Worries tangled and knotted in Sharon's mind. *The abuse happened only five months ago. Is the girl psychologically prepared for the visit? How bad will it have to get before I must end it, even though the court ordered a full hour? Will the parents be appropriate? Did I explain the rules with enough depth and reasoning?*

She sighed. She wanted everything to go smoothly.

Sharon hated children being traumatized. If she could prevent that, she would. That was the reason she had become a foster care social worker. It was measly power over the evil done to children, but at least it was something.

Turning on the Honda Civic's stereo, she surfed the oldies rock stations, but none of her favorite musicians were playing.

She longed for Johnny Cash, Buddy Holly, or Jerry Lee Lewis to buoy her spirits. Ever since turning twenty-seven and finishing college, she sought a less complicated life outside of work, like it seemed to have been around the 1950's.

Back then, a cola was only five cents and a hotdog just ten cents. Family members didn't seem so violent towards one another. That simplicity and ease would be wonderful in the present. But of course those qualities couldn't be transported through time, so as a substitute she collected CDs and memorabilia from that lost era.

Sharon braked hard and clicked off the radio.

Up ahead, an old Toyota pickup truck lay overturned beside a bent light post. In front of the accident, a man stood beside the open door of a midnight blue Mercedes. He wore a fluttering white scarf, a gray flannel shirt, and blue jeans.

He faced the accident, body frozen still.

Slowing to twenty miles-per-hour, she continued approaching.

No one else had stopped to help the crash victims. In fact, the street was deserted. It was six at night and this street only had two lanes, connecting two busier streets of Covina. Dark office buildings loomed on either side.

Although a little frightened, she slowed further. She had heard stories in the news of carjackers in Los Angeles feigning crashes to take advantage of do-gooders, but this accident appeared real.

She was torn. It wasn't exactly safe to offer assistance, yet she was a helper by nature. She had been trained early on by her alcoholic mother who was in need of someone more

responsible, forcing young Sharon to be the adult in the family. In fact, she had just about single-handedly raised her younger sister, Marlene; that is, until Marlene died from a car accident at age ten. Since her death, guilt haunted in the shadows of Sharon's life.

She screeched the car to a stop.

She couldn't believe she was stepping out. But she had to. She was compelled. Already having punched the numbers 9-1-1 into her cell phone, she waited for a response.

"Do you need help?" she yelled to the man in blue jeans standing beside the Mercedes.

He didn't answer. He seemed absorbed in something.

White light sprayed from him onto the cab of the truck. She assumed he was holding one of those high-powered, halogen flashlights. The illuminated man inside the cab was upside down, frantically scratching his face and banging his head against the window, evidently unable to roll it down. He appeared to be a large, muscular man, capable of smashing the window to pieces with one punch.

"Hello?" she called out.

The man in blue jeans continued to stand motionless with his back to her.

"Do something!"

He didn't answer, and her phone reached a tape recording urging her to hold on and someone would be with her shortly.

"Can you hear me?" She stepped closer. Maybe the man had damaged his hearing from the accident or developed a concussion that affected his reasoning. But his Mercedes didn't appear to have been dented or even scratched.

The trapped muscle-man bled from the forehead. He managed to get out of the seatbelt and turn right-side-up in the cab, and oddly, he began tearing his clothes off. A small fire rose from the truck's undercarriage. She guessed it was heating up the inside the cab.

Her heartbeat raced, and the feeling that this would be her last night alive deepened in the pit of her stomach. But she had to do something.

The emergency operator answered. Sharon desperately searched for the nearest cross-street signs--Badillo Street and Angeles Drive--and relayed them to the operator. He said he would send a patrol car and ambulance to the scene.

She stepped closer, just five feet from the man in blue jeans now, able to see his brown, leather Clark shoes. His long gray flannel shirt slapped his thighs in the light breeze that flowed down the street. His white scarf trailed behind him.

"Hello?" Her voice echoed with deathly hollowness between the two-story office buildings.

A few distant honks of cars, a lapping from the growing fire, now chewing and crackling one of the tires, and muffled curses from the muscle-man inside were the only sounds. The thought that these could be the last sounds she would hear made her feel so alone. But she pressed ahead.

Coming to the side of the lean man, she could see he held his hands together, almost in prayer, except that the edges closest to the pinkies were opened facing the car. A light was emanating from inside his hands. She assumed he was holding a very small flashlight, although she had never seen one that could be that bright, and the light was *different* somehow. Clean.

The muscle-man now only had on his boxer shorts and was scratching his body, leaving bleeding trails. His brain must have been damaged in the crash. He required immediate assistance.

The flames on top of the overturned truck drank air, rising higher like giant demons rising from hell.

Is this man with his hands in prayer crazy? Is he a religious nut? Maybe he's just enraged because the old truck almost crashed into his expensive Mercedes.

Annoyed, she brushed against his shoulder as she ran past him, noticing his light shutting off. When she reached the pickup, she kicked her foot into the window. Her foot bounced back, and her black pump fell off. She quickly replaced the shoe and stepped back to try again, but the man grabbed her from behind, dragging her away while she shouted, "Let me go."

After a brief struggle, they fell to the ground, him on top.

The truck exploded, and she reflexively closed her eyes and screamed the loudest she had ever done since the day Marlene died. She heard bits of glass showering down around her and pangs from chunks of metal hitting the ground.

Opening her eyes, she saw excited flames dancing and chasing one another around the vehicle.

Turning her head to him, his weight pressing her back on the hard pavement, the firelight on their faces, she could see his face. It was irritatingly handsome for someone who did nothing to help the crash victim. His dark brown eyes were calm, as though he had anticipated this outcome, as though it were *right*.

A strange mewl escaped her lips as she struggled underneath him, and he began lifting himself up. She shook his arms off her shoulders and pushed him back. She straightened her blue, now dirty and torn, blouse and sat up. She wanted to sock him in his handsome face, but he had saved her from the explosion.

"Why?" was all she could say.

Sirens whined in the distance.

Instead of answering, he stood--no flashlight in hand or bulking up a pocket--ran to the open door of the Mercedes, got in, and raced away.

She realized her cell phone was missing.

She searched the ground, failing to find anything. Not even a flashlight.

Chapter 2

Still rattled from the deadly crash scene, the strange man with the scarf, and subsequent police report, Sharon was sitting opposite the Brewster family at 7:04 p.m. in a creaking office chair, trying to keep quiet while monitoring them.

She hoped her golden retriever didn't mind a late night bath when she got home tonight. She had been busy this week and had forgotten the dog's bath yesterday.

Cindy Brewster was holding two Barbie dolls very still in her lap. She had been on Sharon's caseload for five months now. The foster girl had been as soft-spoken and even-tempered as an angel.

The mother clicked her tongue scornfully and complained, "Why aren't you playing?"

The girl remained silent.

She tapped the girl on the back of the neck.

Cindy launched herself off the couch onto the orange carpeted floor of the visiting room, causing Barbie dolls to fly through the air. Her tortured screams wouldn't stop.

Mary Brewster stood up, raised her right clenched fist behind her ear, and took two icy steps toward her daughter, crunching a bikini clad Barbie under her heeled foot.

Cindy rolled under the glass coffee table, arms and legs flailing about.

Unable to pursue her daughter, Mary looked at Sharon with a wiggling smile, which looked more like a worm stuck on a hook. She lowered her cocked fist, slowly unclenched it, but her body remained rigid.

Sharon felt a rush of inadequacy as the monitor of this family visit. How did things get so out of control so quickly? She rushed to the table, reached underneath, and pulled the girl into her arms, preventing the girl from hurting herself against the glass table or its metal legs.

Sharon glanced at the sole window in the room, which viewed the office hallway. Two agency guards busily conversed with another social worker. It gave her a sense of security knowing she could call upon them if the parents became violent.

"Don't you see?" Cindy cried softly. "Can't you see?"

"See what?" Sharon asked gently.

"Them."

"Who?"

The girl's head sank, blond bangs hanging into her face.

"The guards outside?"

She wouldn't look up, but shook her head no.

Mary dropped back into the couch and scooted to her husband, Joe. Both of them grasped each other's hands, eyes shifting uneasily around the room. From Joe's knees all the way down to his dirty white tennis shoes blurred in nervous vibration.

Sharon whispered, "Your mother and father?"

The girl weakly replied, "Yes."

Mary Brewster's grip on her husband's hand was so tight that her knuckles were bone white. Joe's thick black mustache quivered on his upper lip. Their faces were ashen. To Sharon's dismay, neither of them was making a move to help soothe their daughter.

She continued to hold the girl a while longer, helping to slow her diamond tears. Then Sharon reluctantly went back to her creaking chair. She had to. It was essential the parents learn to comfort their child themselves so they could repeat this in the seclusion of their home. Cindy would probably be going home at some point in the future, and Sharon would not be there to comfort Cindy or assist the parents in these types of situations.

Mary glared at her daughter sitting on the floor. Knots pulsed where her jaws connected. "What kind of foster home is she in? Just what're they doing to my baby?"

"I assure you it's a good--"

"The hell it is! Just look at her."

Sharon felt herself shrink back and heard the chair creaking in response. She tried to take a deep breath to gather her strength, but it came only in quivers. She wondered how a nine-year-old girl would feel against this woman's wrath.

"The state steals my kid and places her somewhere I don't know about, and I'm supposed to be happy!" Her head rolled on her shoulders. "I don't think so."

"I don't know what set her off, Mary, but I know she's being treated well in her foster home. Maybe if you try to comfort her ..."

The woman appeared horrified. A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed.

Joe patted Mary's leg, snorted and stood. He tentatively walked towards his daughter. He paused six feet from her by two plastic shelves of colorful toys and looked at Sharon, appearing to ascertain whether she was serious.

She nodded to him for encouragement.

Cindy's back was to Joe so that she couldn't see him coming.

He took another step and stopped. With a tremulous voice, he said, "It's okay, baby-doll. Everything's all right."

She jerked, smacking her head against a table leg and screeched. She threw herself at the wall, clawing at the paint trying to get further away from him. He took another step.

Sharon wanted to hug the girl again. She hated that the court was requiring these visits so soon.

Joe stretched his arm to reach Cindy's shoulder. As soon as his first finger touched her, she sprang from the wall and crashed into his leg, making him lose balance and fall against the bookshelf, spilling five Dr. Seuss books, while the girl scampered to Sharon and wrapped her arms and legs around Sharon's right leg. "Make them go away!"

That was it.

Even though only ten minutes had passed, Sharon had to stop this. She mustn't allow the girl to be psychologically harmed, and this visit appeared to be worsening her emotional state. Perhaps Cindy was remembering the trauma she had suffered by her parents and was regressing. "Mr. and Mrs. Brewster, we are going to have to end the visit."

"But we just began it," Mary objected from the couch.

"Honey," whined Joe, "don't argue with the social worker."

"I'm not arguing!" she spat with such venom that he flinched from across the room. "I just want to get what we're entitled."

Sharon could feel the girl's arms and legs tighten around her leg, cutting the circulation and causing her foot to deaden. "We need to end the visit now."

The mother sprang up from the couch. "But the visit is supposed to last an hour as ordered by the court."

"I was delegated," she asserted, almost losing her voice, "the monitor of this visit."

As Mary walked to them, the girl whirled around Sharon's leg to the rear, but didn't let go. Mary's stale breath smacked Sharon's face. Her upper lip had the beginnings of a mustache, black like the hair on her head. She fixed both hands on her hips and used her two-inch height advantage to look down at Sharon. "But I'm entitled to my time with *my* child."

Sharon had dealt with her share of difficult parents over the years, but something was different about these two. It was the way they made her feel, like she was nothing, worthless. She tried to sound confident. "We all signed a contract outlining the rules. You need to respect my decision."

Mary exhaled, sending decaying meat stench over Sharon's face. "To hell with your damn papers." She could see the woman's carotid arteries pulsing, blushing the cheeks. Lightning red veins broke through the whites of the eyes to the areolas of gray speckled black.

Joe came up behind his wife and rested his hand on her arm, perhaps more to hold her back than comfort her. "Okay, honey. Let's not do anything rash here."

Mary turned and almost slapped him, but at the last second checked herself. She plodded back to the couch, body stiff as a board, and retrieved her purse. She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose so hard some particles flew out. With the tissue still in hand, she walked to Cindy. "At least let me say goodbye to my daughter." And without waiting for a reply, Mary squatted and grabbed Cindy's back.

The girl screamed, tore away, and ran straight at the wall, steering away at the last second, running along it, rounding the corner, bumping toys off a shelf, stumbling into a plastic child's chair.

“I will call security,” Sharon exclaimed, “if you do not leave now.”

The mother looked perturbed, but more satisfied with herself as though sending the girl into another fit was pleasurable. She took her husband by the arm, and they walked out the room.

Cindy was collapsed beside a plastic chair, hundreds of spilled Lego blocks, and three stuffed animals. Sharon felt horrible for her.

She gently lifted Cindy to sit and asked, “What happened?”

The girl continued to sob.

“Please, you have to talk to me or I can’t help. That’s what I’m here for.”

After a few moments, she cried, “I told you. They ... my parents--” She gagged.

“I know they used to beat you, but that’s not going to happen again. You’re safe at your foster home until your parents get better.”

“They won’t get better. They *never* will!”

“Oh, sweetie, I know they’re still troubled, but we’re working with them to help them.”

“They won’t change. They’re evil.” Cindy began breathing faster, her blue eyes jerking about in their sockets.

It was hard for Sharon to continue defending the Brewsters. She didn’t like doing it, and it felt wrong. The mother had hit Cindy’s head with a hammer on the scalp so that no bruise would be seen. But the following day at school, her head began bleeding again, dripping down her neck, drawing the teacher’s attention. This led to DCFS removing her from the home. But it was part of Sharon’s job to prepare the girl for eventually returning. Whether Sharon liked it or not, family reunification was the direction the case was heading. So she said, “I understand they were terrible to you, but they’ve shown the court they’re trying. They’ve gone to parenting classes, they began individual and couple therapy, and they’re willing to visit you.”

Tears pulled down the girl’s cheeks. “They don’t care. They only want me back to hurt me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You don’t see them the way I see them.” She looked deep into Sharon’s eyes with a desperate pleading that shook her soul.

Sharon had to look away. She began picking up the spilled Lego blocks to put them back into the box. Without conviction, she said, “Maybe they aren’t ready now to have you back, but when they are, you might see them differently.”

The girl didn’t reply.

Putting the Lego box down, Sharon looked back at the girl.

Cindy had turned to the wall where two framed pictures hung. One was an unimpressive watercolor of a potted plant. The other was a large oil painting of an angel in bright white light hovering just behind and above a woman in rich velvet, purple robes sitting beside a black lake. The sky above held dark clouds and rain, brightened only by several bolts of lightning--

all of which the angel seemed to protect the woman from. Cindy's eyes locked onto this painting like a vice. "Do you believe in angels?" she asked.

"Angels? Like souls that watch over us?"

"Yes. Protect us."

"Well ... I do believe that people watch over us."

Without looking away from the oil painting, Cindy grabbed a white stuffed bear from the floor and hugged it fiercely. "I hope angels are real. I really do. I pray with all my heart."

Sharon took a couple of tissues from the box on the table and wiped the girl's face. "Come on. Let's get ready. Your foster mother will be back any minute."

She continued to hug the bear and stare at the painting. "There has to be angels. There just has to be. Someone has to be there."

Chapter 3

Cindy pulled her bedcovers up to her nose.

Her foster sister, Adriana Huffen, slept in the bed across the room. Adriana's crutches leaned against her mattress.

In the nightlight's green glow--which was too dim for Cindy--the crutches looked like a stick-monster standing beside Adriana, waiting for a ripe opportunity to stake her.

Cindy closed her eyes. She could hear her foster sister's deep, slow breathes.

She looked at the crutches again to make sure they hadn't moved. They were motionless, but not yet safe as far as Cindy was concerned. She felt like a scaredy-cat little girl, and she didn't like it, but she wasn't about to pretend she wasn't afraid and find the sticks only inches from her head, preparing to bang her to death. They seemed quite normal in the daytime, but darkness brought maliciousness to them.

In darkness, things can happen to me without me knowing. A green monster could slither out from underneath the bed, black widows could inch their way down from the ceiling on silent threads, crutches could grow or leap or anything!

Maybe she hadn't gotten over her mother beating her head with a hammer five months ago. Her therapist kept telling her that severe trauma doesn't just disappear after the body heals. She didn't think it could linger this long though. But even if her therapist were right, what could Cindy do? The crutches were still scary.

She was glad her foster mother let her have the green nightlight in the room. She only wished it were brighter.

Her foster sister was the nicest person. Cindy was only a couple of months older than the girl. They were both in the same grade, but in different schools because the social workers didn't want to keep switching schools for Adriana. Adriana cared about Cindy as a friend and a sister, but the girl had her own fears. She insisted on propping the crutches against her bed in case an emergency such as fire or mudslide or--although she didn't say it--an urgent bathroom trip. She used to have a problem wetting the bed, which really embarrassed her. She had her own history of nightmare parents. After several nights of swapping stories, Cindy didn't feel like her own parents were half bad.

Although Cindy didn't consider herself to be a selfish person, tonight she had to put the crutches on the ground where they belonged, even if it upset her foster sister. The chance of a mudslide or fire occurring was very unlikely, probably less likely than Cindy being scared to death. And, if Adriana needed to rush to the bathroom, she could still pick the crutches up off the floor. The floor was only a couple of feet from the bed.

Cindy got out of bed and made it half-way across the room before she discovered that she couldn't go against her foster sister's wishes. Four months ago, the girl without a left leg looked so serious on her first night here when she told Cindy she *needed* the crutches close by.

Instead of repositioning the crutches, Cindy took the top blanket from her own bed and threw it over the sticks.

They made a scraping sound against the wood floor as though angered. Now she couldn't see the sticks anymore. But with the nightlight behind, the blanket looked ghostly.

This would not do at all.

Adriana woke. When she saw the ghost-blanket, she gasped.

"I'm sorry," Cindy quickly apologized.

"What did you do?"

She felt like hiding under her remaining blanket. She was embarrassed by her actions and fears. "I couldn't sleep, and the crutches were giving me the creeps."

"Oh." Adriana took the blanket off and laid the crutches on the floor beside her bed. "There. I think it'll be okay. I'll just remember they're only an arm away."

"Thanks." She already felt more relaxed. Her foster sister was a special friend. For the four months they had lived together, Adriana helped make simple things exciting. Swinging on the tire-swing in the backyard became as fun as a ride at Disneyland. Sitting in the grass by the flowers became a trip on a cloud to a distant castle in the mountains. She was an imaginative talker, and her joy for life was beautiful.

A scraping noise came from the floor, but Cindy's friend was already covered up in her bed. She tried to peer through the shadows between the two beds to see where the crutches lay, but the nightlight didn't reach. "Adriana?"

Creaking on the other bed. "Yes."

"Was that you?"

"What?"

"You didn't hear that?" Cindy's heart jumped in her chest.

"Hear what?"

The scraping had stopped. Cindy waited for it return. After several seconds, it came back, closer to *her* bed.

"Did you hear that?" she asked quickly.

"What?"

The scraping turned into growling.

"That!"

Adriana asked, "What're you talking about?"

Now she wasn't only seeing things but hearing things as well. At the visit with her parents, she had *seen* darkness around them. But her foster care social worker didn't see anything. Maybe

her mother had hit her head too hard with the hammer and damaged her brain.

More scraping noises, and the growling turned into a howl.

Cindy pushed back her covers, intending to rush to the door where the light switch was, but she suddenly became afraid to put her bare feet on the wooden floor. What if she stepped on the crutches? What if they made her trip and fall then pounded her to death? She couldn't see where her slippers were. She stood up on her bed, bounced once, and jumped in the direction of the light switch. Landing on her feet, she dashed to the door and flipped the switch.

A glare hit the room.

Adriana squinted and raised herself on her elbows. Her curly brown hair was messed up. "What're you doing?"

The crutches were still on the floor where Adriana had laid them. Her clothes from earlier that day--jeans with one leg cut off, her single white tennis shoe with one white sock, and her red sweater--were crumpled together beside the crutches.

Cindy asked, "You didn't hear anything?"

"I heard you asking me if I heard anything."

"Do you see anything? I thought I heard something."

Adriana fell back onto her bed and pulled the covers over her eyes. "The light, the light, I see too much light."

And there *wasn't* anything or anyone else in the room. Cindy could plainly see that. Just like the dark glow around her parents didn't really exist either.

For the second time tonight, she found herself praying for a guardian angel.

Chapter 4

Giovanni's face dripped with perspiration at the stoplight on Bundy Drive in West Los Angeles at 11:37 p.m.

He gripped the steering wheel of his Volkswagen Beetle. But this didn't stop his hands from trembling. He didn't understand why he should be nervous, but he was. He had his pistol underneath his seat.

He *should* be blissful. It was other people that should fear him.

He looked to his right where a dark blue Mercedes idled beside him.

The scratch in his right cheek suddenly ignited with pain. Thirteen months ago, he got into a gang fight in East Los Angeles and broke a rib. That rib had been less painful than this little scratch now.

Giovanni turned away from the Mercedes, and the pain disappeared just as quickly as it had come.

He kept his eyes forward, watching the traffic signal, recalling the nineteen-year-old cunt--*Jenny* she said her name was--who gave him the scratch just three hours ago. He should have made her suffer more. He shouldn't have choked her to death so soon after using her.

The traffic light turned green.

He waited for the blue Mercedes to go--to leave--but it did not. There were only two lanes on Bundy Drive, and cars began honking behind them.

Giovanni threw the Beetle into gear and jerked forward, pressing hard on the gas, whining the engine high before shifting into second.

The girl had been tender and fine. Laying beside her on her bed, he had relished the warmth slipping from her dead body. She had been so full of energy. The tenacity in which Jenny threw her skinny limbs at him hadn't been enough to save her though. Her parents had gone on vacation, trusting her to be safe at home. It would've been wonderful to watch terror build beneath her sparkling brown eyes as he broke her weak arms and grinded the splintery bones together.

The Mercedes kept pace with him.

What the hell was up with this nut? Giovanni's heart began pounding faster and he seemed unable to catch his breath. He had heard of panic attacks from talk shows on television, and he was sure he witnessed several when he murdered people slowly, but he never experienced one himself.

He jammed the shifter into third and popped the clutch out so quickly the tires chirped against the pavement.

He could *feel* the Mercedes to the right of him. But he avoided looking it. He didn't know why it troubled him so much. He worked for the Mafia as a hit man since age eighteen, and he

usually intimidated people. Though only weighing 159 pounds, he had mean, almost black eyes, and was a deadly shot. Why wouldn't he want to meet the eyes of some goof in a Mercedes?

Giovanni flipped the shifter into fourth gear and slammed his foot onto the gas pedal.

He glanced right, and the scratch on his cheek sizzled.

Greasy sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging. He brought his shirt up to wipe his brows. Through folds in the material, he stole another glance at the Mercedes. It was still there, like a wasp that wouldn't leave when shooed.

What is this guy's problem? I didn't do anything to him. Or did I?

Paranoia swooped in. The trouble with hurting so many other people is that you always have to be alert for retaliation.

He reached under his seat, retrieved his pistol, and used his legs to hold it close at hand.

Accelerating into the next intersection, at the last possible second, he threw the wheel left, all tires screaming, sliding the Beetle sideways, jumping the sidewalk, barely avoiding a fire hydrant, but successfully making the turn off Bundy Drive.

In his rearview mirror, he saw the Mercedes continuing down Bundy.

"Haa!" Giovanni breathed easier. He hadn't been able to see who was inside. He didn't care. The nut could drive to hell for all Giovanni cared. Really, he could handle anyone who came his way. By all rights, he was a monster. This street cut through a block of warehouses.

Behind him, two headlights glared angrily.

He swallowed hard. The Mercedes couldn't have turned around so quickly. Could it?

The headlights were gaining. He couldn't see the make of the car. Looking behind his shoulder to get a better view, wiping his sweaty forehead with his arm, he kept repeating aloud, "Nothing can hurt me. No one would dare try."

The headlights mesmerized him. He thought he saw a third light coming out the front window, cold and vengeful. There was something about *that* light which scared the living shit out of him.

When Giovanni turned forward to the road--

--a parked Ford van was in front of him. He had drifted too far to the right and now--

Crash!

Chapter 5

Sharon stared at the phone in her hand with disbelief. It seemed to stare back mockingly. She slammed it down on the receiver and accidentally spilled a Styrofoam cup of black coffee over her desk.

This week's notes eagerly soaked up the liquid. She would have to redo all these ruined forms later.

Two bad phone calls had occurred in just the last two hours.

First, the call at 9:43 a.m. from that strange flannel-shirted guy with the Mercedes last night, who now wanted to *talk* to her, whatever that meant. He evidently picked up her cell phone when they tumbled to the pavement. Really she was sick of men for now--single, happy, and wanting to be left alone, especially by psychos.

The other call was the one she just hung up on, from Cindy's county social worker relaying terrible news.

Sharon ran down the hall, smacking into the wall with her left shoulder as she rounded a corner, closing the door behind her after entering her supervisor's office. "Beth, I have to talk to you."

Beth's desk faced the wall to the right. Her bony arms supported her thin body hunching over a *Cosmopolitan* magazine on her desk. Both her shoulders jutted upwards. Piles of papers and folders surrounded the *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She didn't look up. "What is it?"

"They placed Cindy back with her family last night."

Above the desk was a cheap print of a famous painting entitled *The Scream*. Hollow mouth in bizarre surprise, hands held over the ears in agony, painted by a schizophrenic man--it made Sharon uncomfortable.

Beth finally looked up. "Yeah?"

She needed Beth's full attention. She needed everything she could out of her supervisor. Cindy's worst fear was slowly coming true, and Sharon didn't know how to stop it by herself. "Not with her parents. Not yet. But with her maternal grandparents."

Beth reluctantly turned her chair to face Sharon. Her toenails stuck out from her sandals, painted black with silver stars and moons. Sharon probably would've liked that on any other person. But this anorexic-looking woman had been promoted before Sharon, despite having less experience. Beth and the director were close friends. Sharon could handle feelings of envy that would normally come from such a predicament, but Beth had proven to be irresponsible as a supervising social worker.

She replied flatly, "So soon?"

"The clearances for their fingerprints came back yesterday afternoon, and the county social worker had evidently checked the house earlier this week."

“So what’s your concern?” Beth shoved the eraser part of a pencil into her sharp chin.

“Cindy became hysterical during the parent visit yesterday.”

Beth sighed. “I’m sure she’ll be okay. The county wouldn’t place her with family unless they felt comfortable about it.”

Sharon didn’t feel understood. Her training had taught her to first validate other people so that they could open up to other points of view. “You’re probably right.”

Beth’s face brightened. “Hey, did you see the Laker game last night?”

“No,” she replied, clasping her hands together, trying to hide irritation.

“It was amazing. Kobe is amazing. Vanessa is so lucky.”

“I just feel worried,” she said urgently. “Like I’ve let Cindy down in some way.”

The supervisor’s painted toes wiggled. Her voice returned to its usual bland tone. “The biological parents will still be required to have monitored visits. Cindy won’t be alone with them yet.”

But she wasn’t convinced. Her supervisor had a tendency to minimize things. Sharon’s concerns before from another case had fallen on deaf ears. That foster mother had yelled in a rage at her during several home visits. She expressed this to Beth, with the concern that the foster mother could also be targeting her rage at the three-year-old foster girl in the home, but Beth assured her that emotional abuse to the child was improbable. She explained to Sharon how the foster mother appeared hard-nosed on the outside but was really warm and fuzzy on the inside. Sharon later discovered the child was being beaten by the foster mother.

“Cindy will be okay,” Beth continued. “There’s no way the Brewsters would risk swinging a hammer into her head again.” Her toes kept wiggling. “She’ll be fine.”

Although she would never actually do it, Sharon wanted to step on those toes. “Shouldn’t they have called and asked for my opinion? Doesn’t the foster care social worker’s observations count for anything in this field anymore?”

Beth folded her arms across her chest. “You’re responsible for the foster home, not the foster child. Cindy is the county’s responsibility.” She sighed heavily. “Placing with the natural family is a priority, Sharon. You know that. Besides, it’s cheap. No monthly payments required for fostering the child. If the grandparents are safe, there would be no reason to ask for your opinion.” She turned back to her desk and flipped through her magazine. “You seem a bit over-involved in this case. It’s appropriate to back off now.”

Sharon stood up and reached for the doorknob. “I need to say goodbye to Cindy. They didn’t even give me that chance.” She couldn’t help thinking of her younger sister, Marlene, who she also never got to say goodbye to. It had happened so fast while Marlene was playing on the grass of their front yard at age ten. The drunk driver had been speeding...

Beth was already engrossed in an article from her Cosmopolitan magazine, hunching her bony figure over it.

Chapter 6

The Greenwiches' hardwood dining chair dug into Sharon's butt. No cushions softened the backs or seats of any of the five dining chairs.

Only two chairs in the house were cushioned, and they rested directly in front of the television. These were probably reserved for Cindy's grandparents.

Mrs. Eleanor Greenwich's flabby cheeks shook as she asked in a quivery voice, "Do you want some coffee, dear?" Her short hair was frozen in gray waves. There was something excessively grandmotherly about her, like it was an overdone act. "We also have cinnamon rolls and glazed doughnuts."

"Just black coffee, thank you."

As Eleanor turned to head to the kitchen, Sharon saw a wrinkled mole the size of a quarter on the left side of Eleanor's neck with several wiry hairs. It had previously been concealed by her flowered blouse collar. Sharon didn't think the mole looked bad, but she wondered whether Eleanor felt self-conscious of it.

Pictures of their daughter, Mary, and son-in-law, Joe, were on the fireplace mantel, the dining table, the side tables by the comfort chairs, the cabinet, hanging on three walls--all straight and well dusted. But the surfaces of everything else were dusty. Even more bizarre, Sharon couldn't see any pictures of their granddaughter whose well-being they were now responsible for.

"She'll be down in a minute." Eleanor placed a steaming cup of black coffee with a coaster on the dining table, stirring into the air a cloud of dust particles. A big smile broadened her cheeks as she pushed it toward Sharon. "I'm sure she's excited, trying to fix herself up and all."

Heavy drapes darkened the windows. She wanted to pull them open and bring in morning light. This house just didn't feel right. Things needed fixing. She wasn't sure of the biggest reason why, but she knew she wouldn't want a child of hers growing up here.

Cindy stepped softly down the stairs, followed closely by Mr. Greenwich, one skinny, wrinkled hand affixed to her shoulder. This hand didn't move until Cindy sat down on a dining chair at the head of the table, adjacent to Sharon. Mr. Greenwich sat on Cindy's right, while Eleanor went to the kitchen.

Even in the dim light, she could see dark circles under Cindy's eyes and a yellow sickly color in her cheeks.

"Hi sweetie," she greeted in a weak voice, ashamed of her failed assurances to the girl yesterday of remaining in foster care.

With lines of worry grabbing the skin on her face, Cindy spoke with tremors, "It's so good to see you." She quickly glanced at Mr. Greenwich as though seeking approval.

His eyes flashed with ferocity for an elderly man, but only for a split second, then disappeared as though never having existed. He said, "Why don't you tell the foster care social worker how

good we've been looking after you?"

Eleanor came back with coffee for herself and her husband, but nothing for Cindy. She hadn't even asked the girl if she wanted a drink. Sitting, she flooded the thick wooden chair, her buttocks hanging off the back and sides, the wooden legs creaking from the burden of her weight.

"Yes." Cindy cleared her throat. "This morning we had pancakes and bacon ... hash browns, and drank orange juice," Cindy spoke, as if reciting rehearsed material. "Last night, we played Scrabble."

"Very good," said Mr. Greenwich.

Their grandparental demeanor seemed more and more like a tired façade that would soon break. Leaning across the table, Sharon gently ran her hand through the girl's hair, surreptitiously checking for bumps or broken skin. "How have you been feeling?"

"Good ..." She stole a glance at Eleanor. "Very good." She looked down, cleared her throat again, and said blandly, "They treat me nice here." But when she looked up, her eyes were puddles.

"Sweetie, I never got a chance to say goodbye to you."

"I know," she said, choking and looking down.

"I stopped by today for that reason."

The girl barely nodded.

Speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Greenwich, Sharon asked, "Do you think we could have a few minutes alone?"

Eleanor raised her eyebrows and spoke quickly, "The county social worker didn't say anything about time alone with the girl. She just said you could say goodbye. I like to follow the rules, Ms. Wilson." She sipped her coffee and then set it down. "Please don't ask me to do something I cannot."

"Of course not. But I wouldn't think the county worker would mind if--"

"I don't like to assume things."

"I just thought since Cindy and I knew each other, you--"

"You thought wrong." Eleanor had completely lost her grandmotherly demeanor. Each wrinkle in her face now appeared carved from years of rage. Each sagging clump of flesh was now pulled tight against bones hardened by years of strict, cold, uncaring behaviors. She glared at the girl. "I'm sure you could tell Ms. Wilson anything here that you could tell her in private."

"Yes, this is fine," Cindy answered in almost a whisper. "It was nice of you to come, Sharon." She said more strongly, "I've missed you."

Eleanor's lower lip curled out, exposing the bottom row of yellowed teeth. "I'm sure you do, darling." Turning to Sharon, she had a wild look in her gray eyes, reminiscent of her daughter's. "How long have you known Cindy?"

“Five months.”

“How often did you see each other?”

“Three times a month.” She believed Eleanor already knew this. The grandmother had to have known if she had been talking with Mary or Joe. “It may not sound like much, but the time we spent was quality time.”

Eleanor picked at the mole on her neck, inadvertently or *purposely* pushing her flowered collar further back. “I’m sure it was.”

Mr. Greenwich interjected, “Look, we want you and my grandchild to have closure, but how long will this take? We’ve made plans for Disneyland today, and the longer we wait, the longer the lines will get. Isn’t that right, Cindy?”

She sat still in her chair, her arms and legs motionless. “Yes, Grandpa.”

“I’m sorry,” Sharon apologized. “I ... my intentions were not to disrupt your day, just to express care for your granddaughter.”

“We appreciate that, Ms. Wilson, but we assure you she has plenty of care *here*.”

A single tear rolled quietly down Cindy’s right cheek, pausing briefly halfway.

“Yes,” Sharon unwillingly agreed, “I’m sure she does. Really, I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Mr. Greenwich stood up, pulling Cindy up by the arm, “Okay, then let’s say our goodbyes.” Eleanor also stood.

The girl’s head lowered.

Sharon felt awful. She pushed her hard chair back underneath the table, knelt down, and gave Cindy a long hug. When Sharon’s arms slackened, Cindy’s still held tight. As more time passed, the girl’s arms grew *tighter*.

Mr. and Mrs. Greenwich began shifting their weight from one leg to the other, their eyes meeting at times, the air becoming tenser by the second.

Finally, Eleanor groaned as she peeled off her granddaughter’s arm and pushed the girl into her husband. “Goofy, Donald Duck, and Mickey are waiting for you.”

Mr. Greenwich fixed his wrinkled, skeletal arm around his granddaughter’s shoulders and almost had to drag her up the creaking stairs. Halfway up, she turned to Sharon with the saddest, frightful look on her pale face.

Chapter 7

Across the street from the Greenwiches' house, Sharon pulled a tissue from the half-full box she kept in the passenger seat of her car. Almost all kids initially placed into foster care stained their faces with tears. The bond with their parents being ripped--even abusive parents--was difficult.

She used the tissue now to dry her own cheeks and eyes.

Cindy was off her caseload, so she didn't have much say in the girl's life. Sharon could inform the county social worker that the grandparents' home wasn't the best place, but the girl had no visible signs of abuse. It's hard, if not impossible, to convince social workers that a child should be taken from her natural family just because the home doesn't *feel* good. It had appeared that Cindy hadn't been sleeping well, but that was not a condition for which DCFS breaks apart families.

From the car window came a *rap ... rap ... rap*.

She put the tissue down and turned to the window.

Outside, stood the man who had run from the crash scene last night, bent over with one hand on his knee and the other holding her cell phone against the glass. A light stubble shadowed his sharply sculptured jaw and cheeks. Strands of his dark brown hair curled over his forehead.

"Can I come in?"

All her doors were safely locked. "Who are you?"

"Someone who cares."

"Is that why you left the man in the truck to burn?"

"You don't know who he was."

"What does that matter?"

He gazed at Sharon soberly. "He wouldn't have come out, even if you had reached him in time."

"What?"

"Did you notice his door was unlocked? But even if it had been locked or jammed, he could have easily broken a window."

"What're you saying? He was suicidal?"

He shrugged. "In a sense."

She huffed. "How could you know that?"

The man stood up straight. He still wore blue jeans, but had a white t-shirt on today. It was snug and revealed a well-developed, firm chest and broad shoulders. "Am I going to have to

stand outside here and talk through this window?"

"Why shouldn't you? You might as well be responsible for his death. Maybe you should be standing in jail."

He looked troubled. Shades of doubt and despair rippled across his face. "Would you have used these words on him?"

"What're you talking about?"

"You don't know *who* he was, do you?"

"Of course not."

He sighed. "Think of a case of sexual abuse you've encountered in your career."

She could think of plenty. One in particular, though, stuck out. A toddler girl was prostituted out by her drug addict mother to pedophiles so the mother could get money for Heroin. By the time the authorities stepped in, the toddler was badly damaged in the genital area. She died of gonorrhea meningitis.

He bent forward again, eyes level with Sharon's, and spoke slowly. "Imagine the perpetrator."

She scooted away in her seat. "Who are you? An officer? The FBI?"

"Will you let me in now?" He glanced back at the Greenwiches' house. "The sun is getting hot out here."

"Why should I trust you?"

He licked his lips. "I did save your life yesterday."

They appeared to be wonderful lips. Tender and soft in such a masculine, hard face. "What?" she asked, caught off guard. Then she replayed in her mind what he had said. "Oh."

She considered his words. If he hadn't have stopped her, she would have been blown into tiny, charred bits, along with the crash victim. Alone, she would have continued attempting to break the truck window. Could this man outside really be *all* bad? If he didn't care about anyone, he would have let her die. He would have just stood by and watched her deadly mistake.

She studied his brown eyes. They were calm, like when he had done nothing to help the man in the overturned pickup truck. How could he have done that? What kind of person could do that? "I think you should stay where you are." She cracked her window. "But give me back my phone."

He stuck the cell-phone through the crack and she took it. It had a few scratches.

The morning light gilded a few beads of sweat forming on his forehead. It was another beautiful Southern California day, already over eighty degrees at 10:45 in the morning.

"If you're not with the police or FBI, how did you know the man was a predator?"

He leaned forward until his face was almost touching the glass. "How do you know the girl is in danger?"

“What girl?”

“Please ... you know who I’m talking about.”

Her heart raced. Really she didn’t *know* Cindy was in danger, but just felt it. And how did he know her feelings? He must have been following her, maybe had tapped her phone at work or even planted a microphone in the Greenwiches’ residence. He wasn’t supposed to know these things. What else did he know about her? She felt exposed.

“I saw you crying,” he said. “What were those tears for?”

She looked away. “None of your business.”

“Maybe it is.”

“Who are you?”

“Laif.”

“Laif?” she repeated loudly.

“Laif Dryson.”

She glared at him. “I mean, how do you know all this stuff, and where do you get off sticking your nose into other people’s affairs?”

“Can I come in?”

“What are you? Like a vampire, needing permission to come in and suck the life from women?”

He laughed. It was a free, deep laugh, not one of maliciousness, but genuine amusement. It reminded her of her favorite singer, Johnny Cash, with his low-pitched, sexy voice. Then he turned away, and Mr. and Mrs. Greenwich were standing on the front porch of the house, looking out at them.

Laif raised his shirt to cover his head and ran to the dark blue Mercedes twenty feet up the street. No goodbye, no explanation, just running away. This seemed to be a pattern with this guy.

She watched the Mercedes drive off. That’s all Sharon needed--another man who leaves without explanation. She was glad to be rid of *Laif Dryson*. Her ex-boyfriend had been enough, abandoning her with no explanation the day after he proposed marriage. He had issues with commitment the whole time they had been going out. It always had been her who tried bringing the relationship closer, creating intimacy, and fostering its growth and development. He always seemed to resist. Why would someone do that? It didn’t make sense. She was better off without him. She was better off without *any* man in her life right now.

But all her girlfriends had somehow found men that could commit. They had gotten married early--perhaps too young--right after high school. They had grown away from Sharon, mostly because they stuck together, as though marriage bonded them not just to their husbands, but to other married women as well.

She looked at the Greenwiches’ porch. They were headed back inside.

What on earth was she going to do about Cindy? Maybe she couldn't do anything. Hopefully the girl was fine, just nervous about returning to family, and all Sharon's concern was for nothing.

But it didn't feel that way.

Cindy's old foster home was only a mile away. She thought she might pay them a quick visit.

Sharon pushed aside a stuffed pink teddy bear, a purple rabbit, and a green frog to make room to sit on Cindy's former bed.

She was glad the frog was just stuffed. Reptiles and amphibians had always made her squeamish. They just were too slimy, scaly, and alien-like. And getting bitten by a rattlesnake at the age of nine didn't help matters. She had almost died. Mom had been too drunk to drive to the hospital, so she called an ambulance instead, which took thirty long, painfully throbbing minutes to get to their house. A hospital trip in Mom's car would have taken only ten. After that, Sharon and her sister stopped going into the deserted lot across the street to play, even though the owners hired an exterminator to rid the lot of all snakes.

Standing against the wall of Cindy's old bedroom were two wooden dressers, green paint so thin in places that you could see the natural wood color.

Adriana Huffen was sitting on the other bed across the room, her crutches leaning against the mattress on either side of her like twin protective towers, protection that should never be necessary for such a sweet nine-year-old. Sharon wished all the children on her caseload were as easy as Adriana. She was exceptionally bright, in spite of the occasional B grade she brought home. She was open with her feelings, but not haughty with them. She was able to get along with other children, regardless of how often they teased her, and this was frequently. She never caused problems in the three foster homes she had been placed in, despite the chaotic home she originated from.

Because of the severity of abuse from her natural father, she would never return home to him. She had been on the adoption track for over nine months now. But unfortunately not many families were interested in crippled children. If Sharon were married, she would adopt this girl in a second.

She adored Adriana's genuineness, compassion, and courage in the face of atrocious evil.

But as it was, Sharon could barely get by herself financially--besides the commitment of attention, energy, and time a child also required. Though with a husband, she was sure she could share the responsibility of raising this girl.

She sighed and asked, "Sweetie, did you notice anything strange about Cindy before she left?"

The girl squirmed between the crutches, her brown bangs washing across her clear white face. "She was nervous."

"What do you mean?"

"She would wake up in the middle of the night, talking weird stuff."

“What kind of stuff?”

Adriana crinkled her nose in a cute way. “Like hearing things when no one was around.”

Auditory hallucinations. This worried Sharon. Recent clinical theory informed that the disease of schizophrenia could be part biological and part environmental in origin. Foster children went through so much emotional stress, and Cindy’s case was particularly extreme. If she was stressed to the point of experiencing psychotic symptoms and she had a schizophrenic gene, she had to receive professional help before the symptoms worsened.

“Did she say what kind of things she heard?”

“No.”

“Was she tense about anything?”

“Her parents. She never wanted to go back.”

Sharon closed her eyes, but shame burned behind them anyways. She wished she could have done more to prevent the girl’s reunification with her family so soon, but that decision was out of her hands. The judge, county social worker, and child’s attorney held the power in these decisions. After the parent visit yesterday, she left messages with the county social worker and the child’s attorney describing exactly what happened during the visit. But that evidently hadn’t been enough. Opening her eyes, she asked, “Did she say why she didn’t want to go back?”

The beautiful girl frowned. Sitting there in her pink dress, her eyes were older than her age. “Sharon, do you know her parents?”

Guilt made her eyes drop. “I’ve met them once.”

“Cindy lived with them. She’d seen through the disguises they wear for other people.”

“What do you mean?”

“The masks,” Adriana explained. “The fakeness.”

She looked into the girl’s dark brown eyes. “The mask like your father put on for others?”

“Yeah. But she doesn’t really know.”

“Know what?”

Adriana frowned. “I’ve had more time to work through my stuff. Each time I think I know my father, I learn something new. It makes it better when you know exactly who your parents are, but it’s hard.”

Sharon assumed her guilt must have been making it difficult to understand the little girl. “Cindy doesn’t know her parents?”

“I guess what I’m saying is she can’t accept them for *who* they are.”

Sharon nodded. “Who are they?”

Adriana looked over Sharon’s shoulder. “Who’s he?”

She turned, and Laif Dryson was standing in the bedroom doorway. He said, "I know who they are."

She felt anger rise inside her, but she kept a lid on it because she didn't want to lose it in front of Adriana. This girl had already experienced far too many emotional outbursts during her limited nine years of life, courtesy of her father. "How did you get in here?"

"I told the foster mother I was a social worker from your agency." He smiled. "Sorry." He had a beautiful smile.

The girl broke down the twin towers of her crutches, clinking them together, stood on her single leg, and then positioned the crutches under her arms, hobbling her way to him. She extended her hand. "Hi. I'm Adriana." Her eyes gleamed and face blushed, as though a prince had walked through a forest and found her room. He squatted and took her hand in both of his, saying, "It's nice to meet you, sweetie. You have a wonderful way about you."

"Why, thank you. Please come and sit with us."

"No," warned Sharon. "Don't come. Adriana, you know better. You don't know him."

But Adriana's eyes glued to him as she spoke. "Oh come on, Sharon. I meet new social workers almost every other month."

"He's not a social worker."

"Well ... he seems nice enough."

"You don't know him."

He said, "Cindy is not psychotic."

"How long have you been eavesdropping?" Sharon asked.

He stood. "Look, are you going to stop questioning me and just talk?"

"I thought I was talking, Laif." Then she immediately regretted using his name. Why did she call him by name? Really, she didn't want to acknowledge his invasive presence and wanted to give him no power or belief that he was welcome here.

Adriana had this dreamy look in her eyes. "Yes, let's talk."

"No," she quickly warned.

"Laif, what month were you born?"

He smiled. "October. I'm a Libra, if that's what you're asking."

"A Libra. That's wonderful. I'm a Scorpio," the girl chattered. "It's a constellation in the Southern Hemisphere, close to Libra and Sagittarius, holding the bright red star Antares--"

"Stop." Sharon was feeling out of control. She wanted to stick a large cork in the girl's mouth and smack Laif.

"--and Libras and Scorpions have been known to get along well together," she continued without pausing for a breath. "There is a good energy they share that the other constellations

don't. I'm not sure I understand it all, but the thing that most impresses me--"

Sharon took Laif's arm and escorted him out of the room, away from Adriana, down the hall, out the front door, and onto the grass of the front yard.

Hidden somewhere inside three large pepper trees in the yard, birds chirped, squawked, and twittered.

"Why don't you get into your Mercedes and drive off? You don't belong in this. You're not a social worker. I don't even know what you are."

"I'm not unlike yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She made tight fists with the material of her white cotton skirt, groaned and said, "I've got way too much to think about right now--"

"That's part of the reason I'm here, if you'd just listen."

"I *am* listening!"

"Really?"

She looked away, eyes burning. "Okay. I'll listen, but only if you promise to leave and not come back."

He didn't respond.

She waited.

He cleared his throat.

She waited a moment more, then looked him in the eyes. "Well, aren't you going to talk? You've finally got my attention."

He held his hands out. "It's difficult to say."

"You spend all this time and energy following me and trying to speak with me, and now that you have my attention, you can't say--"

"Please."

She folded her arms across her chest and held her thoughts.

"Cindy's not psychotic."

Just to the left of his shoulder, she noticed the curtains of Adriana's bedroom window drawing open. She sighed, and looked back into his eyes. "She certainly sounds like she meets the diagnostic criteria."

"Just listen. Cindy's blessed."

"Blessed?"

Adriana came into view through the bedroom window. Her face and hands pressed against the glass, fogging it, looking longingly at Laif, distracting Sharon. Sharon groaned and moved a little to the right so that his broad shoulders blocked sight of the girl.

He continued, "She has a gift."

"Gift?"

"A talent."

"A talent to hear things and see things that don't exist? Are *you* psychotic?"

He looked away. And strangely, she missed his eyes on her.

"Sorry," she allowed an apology, "but what are you talking about?"

"I can relate to Cindy."

"So can I."

"I mean I know what she's going through. I've been through it."

She had no response. As far as she knew, the only people who've been through hallucinations were other psychotic people.

He asked, "Have you ever tasted a sunrise?"

"What?"

"Ever smelled the song of a mocking bird?" He looked into the tree and breathed. "Ever heard the flavor of barbequed chicken? It's a wonderful melody."

Sharon took a step backward.

His dark brown eyes flashed to her and he stepped forward. "I know you must have *felt* evil before, but have you seen it? I mean actually *seen* it, as dark steam rising off a person's skin."

She was getting scared. He was freaking her out.

"I have."

She moved around him and quickly walked to the front door of the foster home, hoping he wouldn't follow.

He didn't.

Chapter 8

The trip to Disneyland was a lie.

That was okay with Cindy though. She really didn't want to go anywhere with her grandparents. Her grandfather always seemed to get too close, rub against her, and somehow find ways to accidentally touch her in private areas when no one was looking.

Spending the morning by herself in the backyard was fine by her. Even though there was no playground or toys outside, it was better than inside the house. The yard was empty except for several logs that had never been hauled away after Grandpa cut down the only four trees that had been there.

She sat on one of the logs beside the solid wooden fence that separated this property from the Enerds' backyard. Considering climbing the white fence and running away, she felt better.

She didn't want to see her parents again.

Sharon had lied to her. Sharon had told her that she wouldn't have to go back with them just yet, that they were still working on becoming better parents. Well, they were coming over in just a few hours, coming to pick up their daughter, whether parenting classes and therapy had helped them or not.

A multicolored snake slithered under the fence from the Enerds' yard. Cindy moved back on the log, and it spotted her and stretched its head up to flick the air with its tongue. After seeing its scrawny little legs, she realized it was only a lizard and scooted closer.

It wriggled its body through the grass, coming to the log.

She jumped when a man with flaming red hair popped his head over the fence. His hair stood six inches straight up on his head, and Cindy had never seen anything like it before.

"Hello," he greeted.

The man was Black, which didn't matter to Cindy, although her parents would have been mortified. Cindy's family talked bad about Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and Asians. She was curious because she rarely got to speak with Black people, but she was also a little concerned because no neighbor of her grandparents would ever be African-American. They would never live in a neighborhood that had even one such family in it. So this man must be a stranger. She remembered a Black family once was considering buying a house on this street, and her parents drove by, gave the family dirty looks, sneezed and spat at them. That family never came back.

"Do you have a voice?" he asked. "Or did Fred steal it?"

"Fred?"

The lizard inched closer to her, his tongue darting in the air.

The Black man with red hair said, "Fred, my gecko."

“He’s yours?”

“Well ... I wouldn’t call him mine. He probably wouldn’t like that. He likes to think he’s independent. I play along to keep him happy.”

She smiled. “What’re you doing in Mrs. Enerd’s backyard?”

“I’ve brought you a gift.” He raised his arm over the fence and held out a small wooden box.

Cindy backed up a few steps. Sharon had always told her not to accept candy or gifts from strangers. Strangers could be dangerous. Strangers may hurt you. They could pull you into their cars and take you away from your family. But in Cindy’s life, strangers *never* hurt her. It was always her family who did that. To Cindy, strangers had been nice, caring, and friendly.

“Don’t be afraid.” He dropped the box onto the grass and disappeared behind the fence. “Fred,” he called.

The gecko scampered back underneath the fence and disappeared.

She heard soft footsteps on grass, getting softer as they became further away. The man was leaving.

A box ...

Green blades of grass stretched half-way up it.

A gift, no wrapping paper, just a wooden box the size of a baseball was hers to have. Beautiful designs were carved on its sides. A glittering brass latch held the lid closed.

Cindy just stood there. Although he gave it to her, she felt odd about taking something that wasn’t hers. She wondered whether her grandparents would approve of this gift. Of course they wouldn’t, especially from a Black man. They would make her throw it away immediately. If she was going to keep it, she wouldn’t tell them.

She was hesitant about opening it. Who knows what could be inside? The man had a gecko. Maybe he also collected spiders, or millipedes, or deadly mosquitoes with malaria virus. The box seemed harmless enough, but perhaps not what was inside.

She hesitantly walked over and picked it up.

Chapter 9

Sycamore Park in Pomona was almost empty at 8:30 in the morning on Saturday. Sharon hadn't slept much the night before from worries about Cindy.

Although her supervisor would think it a breach of professional boundaries, Sharon was conducting an investigation of the Brewsters during her time off. And maybe it was a breach, but who else was going to help Cindy? If professional edict enabled the suffering of children, what good was it?

Maybe Sharon's motivation stemmed partly from losing her sister at age thirteen. But Sharon didn't want to think about that or go there emotionally right now. Maybe later, maybe with the right person to help comfort her and listen and support her, but not now. It was a horrific memory she avoided for the most part.

She sat hidden behind a large Sycamore trunk with her two-year-old golden retriever, Cuddles, watching the Brewsters by the playground about two hundred feet away.

Sharon had on a brown skirt and sandals, and the dog took advantage of this by licking Sharon's bare knees, calves, and feet.

The name *Cuddles* came naturally a year and a half ago when she picked the puppy up from the Humane Society. Cuddles was the cutest thing she had ever seen. Although the dog was now full-grown, the name still fit her well.

Sharon couldn't see the grandparents anywhere. They were supposed to be providing proper supervising for the girl.

She wasn't sure because the county worker hadn't returned her phone calls, but it was unlikely the parents had unmonitored visits with their daughter yet. The grandparents should be here watching over Cindy with the parents.

She took a snapshot of the family scene with a digital camera she had borrowed from work, and she dropped it back into her purse. When she combed her fingers through her dog's long, golden-brown hair, the dog licked Sharon's mouth.

"I don't like spying, Cuddles, and I suggest you never do it."

The dog's tongue darted at her cheek.

She patted Cuddles on the back. "I just need some incriminating evidence."

Cindy absently kicked sand as she walked around the monkey bars, the cement pipes, the swings, and the two slides. Her parents sat on the bench in the shade of a tree near the edge of the play area. Their smiles contrasted with their daughter's lost expression.

Sharon noticed the girl holding a small object in her right hand.

She raised the binoculars, which were strapped around her neck, adjusted the focus, and had to track the girl a minute before she could get the right angle to see what it was.

It was a small wooden box.

Cindy wasn't tossing it in the air. She wasn't sitting down and studying it, trying to figure out how it opens. She wasn't pushing it down the slide to watch it fall and wasn't showing it to the two other children in the sand area. She just held it as she walked around.

Sharon took the dog's leash and snuck one tree closer to the playground, then squatted by the trunk, scratching her face on the bark as she peeked around it.

Mary jumped off the bench and screamed vehemently at her daughter, shaking her index finger at the poor girl. All Sharon needed was to observe Mary hitting the girl once, maybe get a picture of it; then she would have evidence for the county social worker. The mother's hand came close, but never touched her daughter.

She wished she had sophisticated equipment such as a directional microphone to hear distant conversations. Even the threat of a beating would be damaging to the Brewsters' case. But that kind of equipment was more appropriate for the police or FBI. Her type of investigation was never conducted by Rosebud Foster Care or even DCFS.

As the girl began to cry, a man in a white T-shirt and blue jeans walked quickly across the sand area to them. Sharon moved the binoculars onto him and recognized him immediately as Laif Dryson.

What the hell is he doing here?

She hoped he wasn't in a psychotic state, which he claimed was some sort of gift.

Cuddles licked her hand.

When he reached them, Mary shook his hand and laughed with him. They sat on the bench beside Joe. They talked and smiled as though they had been friends for years.

Well, at least Laif had interrupted the mother's corrosive yelling at the girl.

Cindy sat in the sand, watching them as she dried her tears. No one paid attention to her, not even the other two children using the slide.

Sharon desperately wanted to run to the girl and hug her.

Cuddles began to whine.

Just who was this Laif? She wished she had spent a little more time discovering him and his interest in the girl. Why had he run from the Greenwiches yesterday, yet now mingled and laughed with Mary and Joe? He had said he could relate to Cindy, but was now laughing with her abusers.

The other two children ran across the grass to their mother calling them from a car in the parking lot. Within a couple of minutes, that family drove off.

Laif stopped conversing with the Brewsters. No other people were around.

Cuddles whined louder and tugged on the leash.

He stood up and moved back a few steps. Sharon wondered if he was going psychotic. His hands were folded as though in prayer. Pearl white light shone from them like that night she had seen him at the car crash, except this was visible in broad daylight.

She pulled out the digital camera from her purse and almost lost hold of agitated Cuddles.

Mary and Joe jumped behind the bench and hunkered down, holding each other. In that meager shade, shadows accumulated around them.

She couldn't believe her eyes. She took a few snapshots to confirm this.

Cuddles barked, scaring her half to death. "Shhhhhh."

The Brewsters stood and a hungry darkness erupted from their chests, eating the light from Laif, causing Sharon to gasp.

He fell to the ground.

She dropped the camera into her purse and moved back.

Joe kicked Laif once, twice, three times, and kept kicking. She wanted to intervene, to stop Joe, but didn't want to get caught, unable to explain the reason for snooping into their private affairs. Cindy sprung from the sand, grabbed her father's arm, and tried pulling him away. He pushed her to the ground.

Sharon dug into her purse for the camera again. A push with a fall might be considered abusive.

Cuddles ripped the leash from Sharon's hand and ran toward the sand area.

"No," she called, trying her best to stay quiet.

She moved out from her hiding place, afraid of getting involved, but walking towards them anyway. She didn't have much choice with her dog about to storm through. "Cuddles!" she yelled, but it was no use. The Golden Retriever ran with unabated intention.

Cuddles made it to the sand, throwing globs of it into the air with her quick paws, and just before she reached Joe, she leapt high, jaws agape--despite this dog never having growled at, let alone bitten, anyone before.

Blackness lashed from Joe's chest like a great whip and cracked on the dog, sending her yelping to the ground.

What on earth is that? It couldn't have been a real whip because it quickly vanished.

Sharon was sprinting towards them now. With no cover she was easily seen, and Mary picked up her daughter and ran with Joe in the opposite direction, where their car was parked. By the time Sharon reached the sand area, the Brewster family had driven off.

Cuddles whimpered on her side. Laif was still.

She felt her heart pounding against her chest as she checked the entire scene. As a social worker, she was trained in first aid and CPR, but that knowledge seemed to have evaporated from her. The only thing she recalled was to check the scene for danger.

What next?

Cuddles stood up, a bit shaky.

Sharon was horrified of making a mistake, paralyzing her actions. She didn't want to mess up and hurt Laif.

This was completely opposite of last night when she dove headfirst into danger at the crash scene. She cursed herself. Last night, it was obvious what step to take: get the guy out of the car. But what does one do when the victims have been attacked by shadows? Was she losing her mind? She must have been seeing things. Right?

This wasn't supposed to have happened. She came to this park only to observe. It had been a beautiful sunny day. In fact the sun was still out, but it felt too bright and hot now.

Call. That was the next step.

Call for help. Or if she couldn't call, ask someone else to do so. Her cell-phone was in the car, one block from here. She looked around the deserted park. *Screw that.* Anyways, calling didn't seem entirely correct considering what she had just observed, which couldn't be explained to any medical personnel.

Sharon knelt beside Laif to check his pulse. It was steady but a little fast. She bent down close to his nose to check for breaths. She felt exhalations tickle the skin on her neck. He was alive.

Relief washed over her.

Her dog slowly walked to her, and she stroked the dog's fur. Cuddles licked Sharon's hands, whining less than before.

Laif turned on the ground and moaned.

Sharon helped him sit.

He looked at her, his eyes deep, mournful, sparkling light brown in the sun.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Evil," he said with a dusty throat.

"What?"

He took a deep breath. "Lies so dense they take physical form."

Chapter 10

“Get back in your seat!” Mom screeched from the front of the car, a puff of black steam escaping her mouth.

Cindy wished she couldn't see those things. She would have closed her eyes, but they were too widened with fear to close.

“Back in your seat!”

She didn't understand why her mother kept saying that because she was *already in her seat* and could only push her butt all the way against the back pad.

Mom turned to the front, black steam leaking from her ears.

Cindy swallowed hard and began shaking her head. *It's not true*, she thought. *I can't be seeing these things. They're not possible.*

While Dad skidded through residential streets, she remembered the man at the park who fought her parents. She wished she had his courage.

At first, he seemed normal, but when she looked hard at him, she heard soft harp strumming. Then that light came from his hands and comforted her for a moment. She hoped her parents didn't hurt him badly.

Just how did they hurt him? Black shadows had jumped off their chests. She shook her head, over and over again. *That is impossible. Impossible. I must be wrong. Something else must have happened.* She shook her head harder. This made her dizzy, but it was better than feeling like she was losing her mind.

Driving too fast into the driveway, scraping the bottom of the car, Dad screeched the brakes, barely avoiding crashing into the back wall of their garage, and then he used the remote to close the door.

No light was on, so the garage faded into pitch dark. With her loss of sight, Cindy's other senses heightened. Now she could smell her parents: a scent of rotting meat. Also, they chattered amongst themselves. *How are they making that noise?*

She was going crazy.

She picked up the box from the seat beside her. The wood felt nice against her fingers. The texture was smooth. The box was like a security blanket for her, but she was also afraid of it. It was puzzling, but she didn't dare find its answers.

She held tight to it as Mom yanked her out of the back seat and dragged her into the house. Cindy stuffed the box into the pocket of her skirt, afraid of it being discovered.

“You stupid, uppity bitch,” her mother growled. “Think you're special. Think you're better than us, trying to save that sick man.”

In the past, Mom made Cindy do most the house cleaning. Now she dragged her by the hair into the bathroom, flicked on the lights, and swung her over the toilet.

A thick brownish sludge floated in the water. Mom opened the cupboard under the sink and got out a container of powdered cleaner, a sponge, and a toothbrush. "I want this whole bathroom spotless. You're not leaving until it's finished." She slammed the door shut as she left.

Cindy remembered her foster care social worker saying that her parents weren't all that bad. Mom had been working with the court to eliminate her problems. She had begun counseling with Dad and individual counseling, and finished parenting classes. The court trusted them now. Grandma and Grandpa trusted them. The county social worker trusted them. Everyone trusted them.

Mom wouldn't bang her head again.

She flushed the toilet, but some brown crud was still stuck to the bottom. She got the powdered cleaner and shook it into the toilet bowl, then began using the toothbrush to scrub the sides.

Mom wouldn't kill her while dad watched. They were better. If Cindy just did whatever her mother asked, everything would be fine.

Something burned against her right thigh. With her hand, she felt the box through the material of her skirt. She had forgotten about it. For some reason it had heated up. She felt vibrations from something eagerly moving within its wooden walls.

She sat up. She didn't need any more trouble right now.

Her arms trembled as she struggled to pull it out of her pocket. As soon as she got it out, it felt hot in her palm, and she threw it into the bathtub.

The box echoed against the tub as it bounced before coming to rest.

She leaned back against the wall, watching the tub, dreading that something might pop out of it. Just who was that Black man who gave her the box? If the contents were good, why didn't he keep it for himself? Who gives away valuable things?

After fifteen minutes, she began to feel tired rather than afraid.

Cindy slowly crawled back to the toilet bowl and continued scrubbing with the toothbrush, deeper and deeper, until she had to put her hand underneath the water to reach the brown crud stuck on the bottom. This made her feel sick, but she continued. She shook more powdered cleanser into the bowl and coughed from its dust. But everything was better now.

Just as long as her mother didn't come back.

Chapter 10

With Laif's arm around her shoulder, Sharon helped him inside her apartment.

Cuddles followed closely behind.

For a brief moment she couldn't believe she was doing this. She suddenly felt upset. She wasn't sure at whom though. *At Laif for being so mysteriously appealing? No. Maybe at my mother for molding me into a helper? At myself for overplaying a helper role now? Is Laif really safe?*

This distressing feeling vanished as she continued to breathe in Laif's scent, so close, his firmly muscled arm and body so warm. Her heart fluttered.

As she led him to the couch, he limped favoring his left leg. He was a victim of something. Laif, although strange, didn't seem dangerous right now, and he was in need of help.

She opened the curtains letting in daylight. Her apartment had only the bare essentials of furniture. That was fine with her though. She wasn't impressed with an abundance of things, but rather an open, sparse area--a good feng shui. And it was cheaper that way too.

Her only decorations were four prints of impressionistic paintings on the walls. One was of Buddy Holly, another was James Dean, the third was Elvis, and last was Johnny Cash holding June Carter--the love of his life. This was her favorite.

On the kitchen counter were several shiny 1950's coins in a brass bowl, a James Dean cookie jar, and an old ticket in a glass frame of a Roy Orbison concert that she had found at a pawn shop. The trash can in the corner appeared in both looks and shape as Betty Boop.

She asked again, "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

"I'm fine. Just need to recuperate."

She thought it odd she cared about his well being, but she did. This man, she considered him to be a murderer only twenty-four hours ago. Now, she questioned her previous assumptions. He didn't *feel* like he could ever harm her. Besides, she wanted answers. And Cindy's parents hurt him, so perhaps he wasn't all that bad. And he had saved Sharon's life, which no other man could claim.

She slipped out of her sandals.

On the living room table, DVDs lay scattered about. She was an avid movie-watcher, her favorites being modern love stories and horror flicks. And when she could find a well done film that mixed both genres, she really treasured it. She didn't like old movies from the fifties or sixties though. She felt better leaving that reality more to her own mind's creation rather than to a story. It felt more personal to simply listen to a song or hold a coin from that era.

Sharon had so many questions for Laif that she didn't know where to start.

He rubbed his right leg. "You saw, didn't you?"

“I’m not sure what I saw, but I got some snapshots.”

He sighed. She sat next him on the couch, with Cuddles on the floor looking attentively up at them.

“You saw. Maybe not the whole thing, but you saw.”

She began stacking the DVDs in a neat pile on the table. “What did I see?”

“Concentrated lies.”

“Inside the Brewsters?”

He nodded, his face wincing in pain as he stretched out his right leg.

“I’ve had a bad feeling about them for a while.” She considered offering him heat packs from her first-aid kit in the closet. But she delayed this because she still was unsure whose side this man was on. She spotted him, after all, laughing and talking with the Brewsters before this all happened.

“Everyone’s got a little evil in them,” he said, “but the Brewsters have a lot.”

“I wouldn’t say everyone.”

He chuckled. He reached down and ruffled Cuddles’ fur and scratched behind her ears. “Maybe not cute dogs like this.”

Cuddles gave her biggest dog-smile. She was a pretty good judge of character. The worker at the Inland Valley Humane Society said she must have been beaten by her previous owners from bruising discovered by their neighbor who brought her in. The previous owners had left for Vegas for a week without leaving food for the puppy. After nights of howling and whining from their apartment, this neighbor busted a window, brought the puppy back to his place, and fed her table scraps until the owners returned. But the owners became livid over their broken window. They told him to keep the puppy since he cared so much. The neighbor didn’t want Cuddles but was gracious enough to drop her off at the Humane Society.

Sharon didn’t believe Cuddles would allow just anyone to touch her. Cuddles had tasted her share of evil in the world, was now sensitive and cautious to it, and wanted no more.

She asked, “Why were you laughing with the Brewsters?”

“I was trying to get on their side ... or rather appear to be where they are.”

“Why?”

After a moment of hesitation, he asked, voice trembling, “Do you have water?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve got so many questions, I’m not being the best host.” She went into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from her Arrowhead dispenser and began to boil water for herself.

“Do you want coffee instead?”

He stood up and remained motionless, unable to answer.

“I’m making it for myself. It’s no trouble.”

“No. I’ll try the water. Everyone needs ... a little ... water every day.” He came to the kitchen counter and sat on a stool. Cuddles, not wanting to leave his side, followed and lay to his right. Despite it being cool in the house, fine beads of sweat appeared on Laif’s hairline, and he looked anxiously at the glass that she had set on the counter.

She stated, “You still didn’t answer my question.”

He drained half the water down his throat and pushed the glass a full arm's length away, splashing some against the sides, a few droplets spilling out onto the countertop.

She frowned at his odd behavior.

Laif grew pale. He spoke quickly with his eyes fixed on the droplets. “Yes. Why indeed do I meet them where they are? It is uncomfortable to take on an evil disposition. I mean *really* take it on, projecting the small evil inside myself to appear as the whole.”

She shrugged. “Then why?”

He looked at her. “I thought it might help ease their minds so they could handle the truth better. They are Cindy’s parents, after all.”

“Truth?”

“That’s what I do.”

“What?”

“It’s not unlike mandatory therapy the court requires abusive parents to attend. Yet it’s quite different. Mandatory therapy wouldn’t help the kinds of people I deal with. They wouldn’t listen.”

“What do you do?”

“Imbue truth *into* them.”

She rose on the balls of her feet, leaning forward onto the counter on her elbows. “Force them to face the truth?”

He nodded.

“How? With that light?”

“My gift.”

“And that guy from the crash. You did it to him?”

He nodded. “And others.”

“You said he committed suicide.”

“Many girls barely survive the emotional pain after being molested. Some can’t and kill themselves. Most have to stay in denial for years, crumbling their lives. He had been denying he had done any wrong. When he was forced to face the truth--all of their pain--he couldn’t handle it. I’ve never met an evil person who could.”

She wasn't sure she liked the idea of forcing the truth on people. But she couldn't help being attracted or at least interested in the concept.

She had often wanted the most difficult children on her caseload to face their self-defeating behaviors. They would fail classes because they refused to put out effort; they would fight other kids in school and get into trouble; some would start drug use at age ten, join gangs, or become pregnant at age twelve. These kids were just so *hard*, it seemed like she could never get *through* to them. It would be nice to use Laif's power in a good way. She wondered whether he had been using it to benefit people.

"What does all this have to do with Cindy?" she asked.

"She's in danger. She's like me."

The water was boiling. Sharon reluctantly moved to the stove and turned off the heat. "You mean she has this same gift?"

"Not yet." He looked away. "For me it began when I was twelve."

"She's in danger from her parents, isn't she?"

He nodded.

"She told me she never wanted to go back with them and was quite emotional about it."

"Being under evil's subjugation is ... difficult." He reached for his water glass, pulled it to his face so quickly that he accidentally splashed himself, eyes widening, body recoiling, stool tilting backward, gasping for breath as though drowning. And quickly she moved to reach for him, but missed because she was too far. He smashed flat onto his back against the floor, the glass still tightly clasped in one hand.

Cuddles stood up with her ears perked, looking at him.

Sharon ran around the counter and kneeled beside him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," he said adamantly.

He looked rather silly as he twisted himself around to sit, trying to avoid the puddle on the floor. She had to hold herself to stop from laughing. Something was strange about Laif and water. His knuckles seemed to pop out around the empty glass.

"Can I get you more water?" she asked, feeling a smile sneak the corners of her lips up.

"No, I'm fine," he said quickly. He picked up the stool with his free hand and set it beside the counter again, but further down from the puddle. Sharon was still watching him. He turned away from her, appearing embarrassed, ashamed, or uneasy--she couldn't tell which. "Really. I'm not thirsty anymore." He sat down, holding the glass firmly affixed to the counter. Although only a swallow was left inside, a 7.0 earthquake couldn't shake the liquid out now.

She went to his side. "Can I take that from you?"

He looked at the glass for a moment, and his grip slowly slackened. He offered a faint smile as he handed it to her. "Thank you."

This *Laif* was a bit odd, but she didn't feel unsafe. She put his glass in the sink, poured the hot water from the kettle into her cup, and stirred in some granules of instant coffee. She turned back to him and let the weight of her stare rest on him, just to see how he would take it.

He looked away. "Like I was saying, being under evil's control is terrible."

She moved closer to him and sipped her coffee. "Isn't the term 'evil' a bit extreme? I mean, if we all have some in us, isn't 'weakness' a better description?"

He looked at her, considering her words. "Incomplete though."

She leaned on the counter closer to him, trying to figure this man out. "But 'evil' seems too strong."

He didn't answer.

"Isn't that more appropriate for biblical references, for Satan or demons?"

"Sharon, evil exists here on earth, in this lifetime," he spoke passionately. "How could it not? Goodness exists here, and wherever goodness exists so *must* evil."

Is he talking about himself? she wondered, sipping more coffee. "It just seems that evil is more than just dishonesty."

"The Devil has been called 'the father of lies.'"

She nodded.

"Mrs. Brewster took a hammer to her daughter's head. Mr. Brewster sat by watching. What more do people have to do to classify them as evil?"

She recalled something from her case files at work that he might not know: Mr. Brewster had an alleged history of sexual assault against a minor ten years ago which had been unfounded and dismissed. And when Cindy went for her physical exam the day after being pulled from her home, the doctor found evidence of trauma in the vagina area, possibly indicating rape. However, the girl denied sexual contact with anyone. Regardless, Mr. Brewster wasn't the ideal model of a good father.

She pressed, "But what do those things have to do with dishonesty?"

"Everything." He looked out the sliding glass door at the early afternoon sun. "You'd have to embrace lies to distort reality enough to justify hammering a girl's head. Lies that prevent you from stopping, prevent you from seeing the damage done to your family, to have come to the point where you no longer care."

"Perhaps."

He turned to her with a heavy grimace. "What do you think Brian David Mitchell said to Elizabeth Smart when she asked him why he was abducting her?"

Sharon recalled the eleven-year-old girl's story of months of rape and threats to her family. She shrugged.

“He said God told him to do it. Obviously a lie. Adolf Hitler was very dishonest. And what do you think Saddam Hussein said when he was hiding out from American troops trying to liberate Iraq? ‘The Americans are persecuting my people.’ Yet when he was in power he had chemical weapons kill thousands of Iraq’s people. Lies were always close to his heart.”

“Not everyone would agree with that.”

“I don’t expect everyone to. It’s the lies we tell ourselves that are most hurtful. These allow us to sit back and watch other people harm innocents.”

“Okay. But what was that white light that came from your hands?”

“Not everyone sees those things.”

“I’m sure a reporter would be interested in my snapshots.”

“The pictures you took will appear normal. There’s something inside *you* that allowed you to see the shadow and light.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Appearing deep in thought, he stared at the print of Johnny Cash with June Carter. “Sometimes when two people come into close contact, both their gifts become enhanced.” He paused and turned to her. “Maybe around me, your sight amplified.”

“This all sounds too extraordinary.” She poured herself more coffee and gulped down the whole cup. She felt a warm heaviness in her stomach and the buzz of caffeine slowly accelerating her thinking. She remembered something. “Cindy told me she hoped angels were real.” She hesitated, admiring his gorgeous, sculpted face. “Are you ... an angel?”

He looked down. “We’re all born with a talent to develop. I’m just a person who’s got this one.”

“Like Cindy.”

“Yes. Like Cindy will.”

“I’m not sure what to believe right now, except that Cindy needs our help.”

Chapter 11

Faint television laughter drifted on the cool, night air from neighboring homes. Sharon wondered, underneath this mirth, if other parents on the Brewsters' cul-de-sac abused their children. Just how prevalent was the silent suffering of children in our society?

Squatting on the sidewalk, she peeked between the branches of a chokeberry bush, then began rising.

Laif held her down by the shoulder. He whispered loudly, "We can't just stroll into the house and take custody of Cindy. I know that's what you social workers are used to doing, but this isn't that simple."

There was no moon, but there was one bright yellow-orange street lamp behind him, silhouetting his body. "I still think I should notify the county social worker."

"It's Saturday night," he countered. "Even if you got a hold of her, she'd have you put away. Shadow and light coming from people's bodies?"

She nodded. She wasn't used to his strange world.

"Besides, I'll bet the Brewsters already got to the county worker."

The sound of the cicadas grew in the bushes around them, drowning the television laughter.

"What do you mean?"

"Got her psychically into a lie."

"They can do that?"

"Three questions if you can answer in the affirmative will arm you against lies. Am I good? Am I strong? Am I worthy?"

"I don't know," she said playing with him. "Are you?"

A dog began barking several houses down.

He directed, "Let's focus on Cindy right now. We need her to help us help her. Otherwise it's all for nothing. They'll use her old hurt to sway her to stay with them."

"She doesn't like them. She told me so." A cold breeze snuck up from behind them, caressing Sharon's shoulders and making her shiver.

"Easy to say when fear runs high. But she has lived with these people her whole life. They *are* her parents--the only love she has known. There's a part of her that will always seek for them to care, no matter what they have done. Paradoxically, because they have hurt her, this increases a sick bond to them. Bits of this hurt erupt out from her defenses, causing neediness and dependence on them. She perceives them as having the power to stop the hurt. After all, they initiated it. And as they do stop it, her positive feelings for them grow. It's a condition akin to Stockholm Syndrome, in which prisoners begin to identify with their captors."

"I *know* what Stockholm's syndrome is," she stated, irritated. But she did like how eloquently he explained the condition, like nothing she had ever read in a textbook. "What can we do?"

"We need to talk with Cindy alone. She trusts you, and we can use that as a road in."

She recalled that it was impossible to talk to Cindy alone at her grandparents' house. Her parents would no doubt be more resistant. And after the park incident, they certainly wouldn't let *Laif* anywhere near her. "This isn't going to be easy."

The living room light went off ... then the kitchen light.

She inferred, "Looks like they're going to bed."

"Cindy's window is open. All we have to do is pry the screen off and climb in."

Sharon scrutinized the dark outline of his face. She could lose her job if they were caught. "That's breaking and entering."

"No one said fighting evil was all pretty."

She considered his words. Working as a social worker, she had always tried to follow the law. It was mostly right to do that. No one could point a finger at her and tell her she was doing wrong, except for when she became overinvolved in this case. It was very important for her to conduct her life in the right way, and to be morally correct.

Thoughts of her younger sister threatened to overtake her now. She would have broken the law without a second thought if it could have saved Marlene.

Helping Cindy was right.

In a dimly lit room, which was probably the Brewsters' bedroom, a shadowy figure seemed to not walk but float by the window. Sharon hunched closer to the chokeberry bush, despite the unlikely possibility of being spotted.

"We have no other choice."

She offered, "I made an appointment yesterday for Monday at ten in the morning at the Pomona DCFS office. We can talk to her then."

"We can't wait any longer. Let's move before they get into bed and any noises we make become amplified in the silence."

She followed him across the neglected lawn, its long, dry blades of grass slicing at her ankles.

Cindy lay on her bed, trying to ignore the aches in her muscles and joints from squatting on her knees and scrubbing the bathroom for hours.

She was to blame for her mother's anger. Mom wasn't always nice, but when she got really upset, it was usually because Cindy did something wrong.

A click came from the window. Then silence.

Yellow-orange light from the street lamp was beaming through a crack in the curtains. Mom allowed that outside light in because she knew Cindy was afraid of the dark. Mom *did* care about her.

A creak came from her window.

Cindy looked at the curtains but saw nothing. She wished Adriana were here--minus the scary crutches of course. Having a friend to sleep with was nice. It had been only one day since leaving the foster home, but Cindy already missed her friend's kind presence. She missed swinging high on the tire-swing, laughing with the amazing girl with one leg, so happy about life despite having so much loss. That girl gave Cindy something Cindy couldn't describe that was vital.

She glanced at the wooden box on her nightstand, afraid of staring too long, not wanting to tempt anything inside to burst out. She wondered where the Black man had gotten it.

Maybe he didn't know what was inside either. Maybe he gave it to her expecting her to never open it.

It rested motionless on the nightstand.

She cried softly in her bed, her mind racing for explanations of her mother's anger. One image that stuck was of the man at the park. Cindy had tried to stop Dad from kicking the man. Surely they were angry she took his side over theirs. They must have thought that she didn't love them, that foster care had spoiled her, and that she believed she had found better love from outside their home. She should have never given them reason to doubt her. She was to blame.

Angry at herself, she pulled her hair until she felt tingles of pain at the roots.

Another creak came from the window. A breeze billowed the curtains for a moment, yellow-orange light bursting through. The folds settled back around the form of a man. He was bent over, getting something from the outside.

Cindy's chest shook with fear.

Who was coming into her room so late at night?

Was it a new form of punishment? Had Mom and Dad made one of their friends do this to scare her? She should have never been a bad girl. But what if it were a total stranger? Her parents would want her to scream then. Maybe she *should* scream. He may want to kill them all and steal money and the small gold-plated clock in their living room.

Someone else formed along the curtains, a leg first ... then a butt, lower back ... shoulders and a head--a shorter person than the man.

The yellow-orange light brightened the entire room.

Cindy pulled the bed covers up to her eyes.

The two intruders whispered among themselves, probably planning their assault.

She thought of hiding under her bed, but what if goblins lived there? Childish thought, yes, but she had always been afraid of things like that. Hiding in her closet was just as bad. Mom had once locked her in there for hours, and she had been terrified. Her bed was the safest place she had ever known in this house--wait, that wasn't true.... She didn't know why, but she just knew it was not true. Something had happened in her bed, something unspeakable. Now she was really terrified. She began breathing faster.

She had nowhere to go.

She held the covers tightly over herself, trembling, wondering if these people liked to break children's bones.

They were through the curtains now.

If they were just robbers, she should be still. That way they might think she was asleep. Then they might ignore her and take whatever they came for. Cindy stopped breathing, but she couldn't stop her tremors. She closed her eyes all the way to thin slits, barely seeing through them.

They stepped to the right side of her bed, the side closest to the window. She shut her eyes completely. One of them whispered, "Cindy ... Cindy."

They knew who she was. How? She pinched her eyelids tightly together.

"Cindy," a woman said louder.

She risked saying, "Go away."

"We've come to talk--"

"Leave me alone," she said shakily.

"--about your parents."

"I didn't do anything."

"Cindy. It's Sharon. Your social worker."

She hesitated. It could be a lie. "Sharon?"

"Yes."

She waited a moment, then opened her eyes. The man was holding a lighter in his hand with a dancing flame. It was the same man from the park who had been fighting with Dad. If her parents knew she was talking to *this* man, they would cut her head off. "You have to leave."

"But Cindy, we came to talk with you."

"My parents don't like you. They wouldn't want you here."

Sharon knelt beside the bed. "I know what's going on and so does Laif. We've come to help."

"You can help by going away."

"Please, Cindy. We know how badly your parents treat you."

“I deserve it.”

“You do not! Don’t ever say that. Do you hear me?”

“I’m not good.”

“Laif, do your thing with the light. Show her the truth.”

Cindy looked at the man. He was holding a lighter. But what was he going to do with it? She scooted away.

The man called Laif turned to Sharon with a torn expression. “I can’t with her. She’s innocent.”

Sharon appeared as though she were going to gouge Laif’s eyes out and sob at the same instant. She turned back to Cindy. “Listen to me. You *are* innocent. It’s your parents who are guilty. They are the ones who aren’t treating you well. If they were, you would never feel the way you do about yourself. Remember when you knew at the parent-visit Thursday that they were evil, and you told me you didn’t want to go back with them. Why do you think you said that?”

“They made me go back, Sharon. You promised they wouldn’t.” Cindy started to cry. “Why did you lie? I thought you cared.”

Sharon protested, “I do--”

Footsteps came from the hallway, coming closer, and Laif let the flame vanish as he and Sharon dropped to the floor.

The bedroom door swung open, and the hall light shed a path to the bed. Mom followed it. “Cindy ... you’re crying.”

She wiped the wet trails on her cheeks. She tried not shaking, but Mom was so close to Sharon and Laif that it was nerve-racking. Cindy would be in so much trouble if they were caught in her room.

Mom sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry I had to be rough with you tonight. It’s just sometimes you need discipline growing into a young woman. You have to believe I have your best interests at heart.” She gave a cold peck on Cindy’s cheek, turned, and left, closing the door.

Cindy heard a grinding snap, and the lighter ignited in Laif’s hand.

She waited until her mother’s footsteps faded away. “Please go. Now.”

“But your mother is lying--”

“Please. She’s in a good mood. If you leave, things will be better.”

“But we need to talk, just for a bit.”

“I’m going to get into trouble. Don’t make me bad again. I can’t take it anymore. Please leave. Right now. Please--”

“Cindy, stop. You need to listen.”

"You don't understand. Please, please, please. I haven't done anything wrong to you. Please do as I say."

"Come with us," Laif offered.

Cindy considered that for a moment. It would be nice not to be yelled at or slapped anymore. Laif seemed nice, and she knew Sharon was caring when not lying, but after running away with them, Cindy would be placed back into foster care, and then her parents would eventually get her back. But this time, they would be *really* angry. Sharon betrayed Cindy before, and she might do it again.

Although Cindy had no intention of following her words, she threatened, "I'll scream."

Laif and Sharon backed up.

"Just leave."

"We'll see you soon." The lighter went off.

She breathed a sigh of relief as they disappeared through the curtains.

Chapter 12

Streetlights glared painfully into Sharon's eyes as she drove her Honda Civic north on Moon Road back to Sycamore Park. Laif's car was still parked there from earlier that Saturday morning.

She felt hot with irritation. "What good is your talent if you can't use it on good people?"

"They have to choose that direction. Self-determination is essential. I can't *make* them see the truth."

She shook her head. She rolled her window halfway down, which hurled cold air inside with sounds of flapping flags.

Laif continued, "They have to embrace the truth themselves. Besides, Cindy is still innocent, only ten. She is on the road to becoming, probably a good person, but we don't know."

"What do you mean?" she shot back.

The car engine sputtered and died. She looked at the instrument panel and saw the fuel gauge on empty. Something like a groan-growl-sigh escaped her. "This is perfect." She coasted to the side of the road and tried to restart the engine, but with no success. Paying attention to the fuel level had been the last thing on her mind today.

He asked, "Do you have roadside assistance?"

She glared at him.

"There's a gas station two blocks from here. We can walk."

She got out of the Honda and pulled on her brown, wool jacket that she had stored in the back. Her exposed legs and feet were still cold though. "What else could go wrong?"

He folded his arms together. "Come on. It'll be warmer when we start walking."

As they made their way down the sidewalk, she noticed rundown houses on both sides of Moon Road. When they had been speeding along in the car, the neighborhood seemed safer. Ahead in the distance, she could see the blue and white lights of a Mobil gas station.

"The young have choices," he instructed, "good or bad directions. They can make certain mistakes as children, but as they grow older, their direction hardens." He waved his hands as he talked, like an annoying teacher that she wanted to smack. "Young adults become responsible for their paths, their actions, and for the care of others."

"Are you trying to say that sweet, innocent Cindy could be headed for a life of evil?"

On their right was a house with windows broken out, paint peeling, and a couple of Asian teenagers in baggy pants standing on the front porch, looking about quickly like they didn't want to get caught for some wrongdoing. Sharon was a little frightened and was glad a paladin for goodness walked beside her.

"It's possible," answered Laif with sadness.

“How could you presume that? She’s wonderful. A child of truth you said.”

“As we all do, she chooses her own path.”

“I don’t understand. I could never picture that girl hurting another person. Ever.” Her legs began warming as they progressed.

“Perhaps. But could you see her hurting herself? Could you picture her hurting a beautiful, talented, innocent, lovely person such as herself?”

“You mean suicide?”

“Or a culmination of smaller self-destructive behaviors. Cutting on her arms as a teenager, getting lost in drugs, hooking up with boys who treat her poorly. Just because you don’t hurt others doesn’t make you good. You have to keep *everyone’s* feelings in mind, including your own. It’s not an easy road.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” She always thought bad people hurt other people. If anything, bad people cared *only* about their own feelings.

Laif looked ahead as he talked. “She has a lot of good she is supposed to do. If she doesn’t take care of herself, that goodness won’t exist. Others won’t benefit. She will have essentially taken away the help she was supposed to offer. That is *not* good.”

“But she’s just a child.”

“Right now, yes. She is on the path of becoming. Don’t forget her parents were once just children too. Innocent, lovely children--perhaps emotionally distraught from their parents’ abuse, but nevertheless children.”

Her head felt like it was spinning. She wished she had coffee to help her concentrate. Just one more block separated them from the gas station. She would get coffee there first, before anything else. And she was really craving her MP3 player right now with Johnny Cash’s *Walk the Line*, but that wouldn’t be at the gas station.

Suddenly he stopped.

She turned around. He was staring earnestly at the house to the side of them. It was about eleven at night, and all the lights were out, except for the sputtering blue colors of a television from one of the rooms on the first floor. “What is it?” she asked.

“Evil.”

Before she could say anything, he began sprinting across the front lawn. *Oh God*, she thought, *where’s he going?* But she found herself following.

It was a narrow two-story house. A trellis rose from the bottom to the second floor. Laif’s eyes fixed on a window of the second floor. “In that room.”

“What’s in that room?”

He began climbing the trellis. It didn’t look very stable. She warned, “Be careful. I’ll stay down here so we don’t bust it.” But she didn’t think that he expected her to go up with him anyways.

He didn't even seem to hear her as he climbed. The window was about a foot above the trellis. When he reached it, he let go of the last board of the trellis with one hand and placed his fingers on the glass, peering inside.

With her neck craned back, she whispered, "What do you see?"

He didn't say anything. Barely balancing on the trellis with his feet, he put his other hand on the window as well, light growing from his palms, brightening the room. From her position, all she could see was the room's ceiling.

A girl screamed. Sharon could hear her yelling to her parents about a peeping-Tom. Dogs began barking from neighboring houses.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed.

"What? What's going on?"

An alarm rang inside the girl's house, and outside sirens blared in Sharon's ears. The front porch light and several other lights spotlighted the front yard, illuminating her. Laif began scurrying down. She heard cracking and realized that the trellis was breaking away from the house. She jumped out of its path and turned to watch him looking behind his shoulders, falling backwards, releasing a quiet moan. Before the wooden structure clattered against the ground, he sprang away from it and landed in some bushes.

Sharon was shaking all over. She rushed to him.

Winded, he breathed, "I'm all right."

"Thank God. Let's get out of here."

A man burst out of the front door with a rifle. He didn't appear to notice her and Laif in the bushes. Luckily the outside lights didn't illuminate that area of the yard. She could hear police sirens in the distance.

A pit bull bolted out of the open front door, sprinting as fast as its stubby, muscular body could, growling, salivating, and spitting.

She grabbed Laif by the arm and pulled him up, and when she looked back at the resident, he had already walked out into the middle of the yard and spotted them. "Hey," he yelled, "stop right there!"

They ran with a primal survival instinct guiding them, heading for the neighbor's fence, the pit bull snarling behind them, closer each step, Sharon almost feeling its hot breath at her ankles, but not willing to look back and risk tripping. They leaped up onto the wooden fence and climbed, jumped into the other yard and scuttled through, and with the sound of a dozen angry cats, sprinklers hissed on, showering them as they headed for the street.

Another animal began mewling, and she noticed Laif slowing and swatting the air with his hands, but then she realized the animal was Laif, his cries tormented as any she had ever heard. She fell back and grabbed one of his spastic arms, dragging him forward through the artificial rain to the sidewalk, where they kept running in the direction of the gas station.

After passing several houses, he fell to the ground and shook violently, slapping his pants and T-shirt, squeezing his sleeves to wring the small amount of water they contained, pulling at his jeans.

“What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

But he just sat there on the sidewalk in his fit for half a minute.

“Laif, talk to me.”

A police cruiser screeched around the corner and passed them, heading toward the house they had left in a mess.

She asked, “Can you stand? If you’re okay, we better leave now.”

He nodded, got up, and they jogged the rest of the way to the gas station.

Laif was more than winded. He went into the bathroom and stayed there for twenty minutes. When he came out, she already had finished a cup a coffee and purchased a red plastic container filled with gas. His white T-shirt and blue jeans were almost dry. She could see a mound of damp paper towels overflowing the small trash receptacle as the bathroom door closed. He had told her not to ask about his fit again when he first locked himself in the bathroom. So she didn’t. She figured he would talk about it when he was ready. Besides, she had other pressing questions.

“Were you able to save the girl?”

His head sunk. “I failed. She was swallowing a bottle of pills. For some reason, I can’t affect suicides. It might have something to do with the victim and perpetrator being the same person. We interrupted her, but she’ll try again another night.

“Is that why you couldn’t show Cindy’s parents the truth? Are they suicidal?”

“No. Together, they’re too strong in denial.” He took the gas container from her to carry.

As they headed back to the car, taking a longer route to avoid the scene at the broken-trellis house, Sharon found herself in a bewildered daze. Everything the last twenty-four hours seemed to be hitting her at once, overwhelming her. She hadn’t felt like this since getting separated at the carnival at age nine from her drunken mother and Marlene. Encountering scary clowns, high stilted men, and smelling cotton candy and popcorn for thirty minutes, she walked around in a dizzy numb state, her world ending, believing she would never see Mom and Marlene again. And now with Laif, he felt like a complete stranger walking beside her.

She asked, “Who are you?”

A park packed with trees and brush was on the opposite side of the road. The crickets sounded especially thick, overlapping their chirps as one continuous song. The air smelled of musky licorice.

He didn’t answer.

“You have to work, right? What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a secretary at an art gallery.”

“A secretary?” She laughed. “Where did you get the money for a Mercedes?”

He didn’t answer.

She kiddingly socked him on the shoulder. “Tell me. Come on, I’m sorry I laughed.”

He looked at her.

“You have to admit, it’s odd having all your talent and working just as a secretary.”

“Not all my adventures fail like tonight’s.” He said this, his voice weighed with sorrow, making Sharon feel worse, desire rising inside her to hold and comfort him. “The daughter of a wealthy businessman found me chasing off her molester. The father was grateful beyond words. A few other people have also felt a need to repay me, despite my protests.”

“We didn’t fail.” She took his hand in hers and held it tightly. They walked in silence to her car.

Chapter 13

A hairy, green monster lurked around Cindy's room. She stiffened. Its claws were as big as steak knives. It came to the side of her bed, grabbed her, pulled her up, and then drove her back down into the mattress.

Cindy woke with her mother shaking her.

Spittle flew out of Mom's mouth as she screamed. But the next moment, she changed back to the monster from the dream.

Cindy was terrified. What was happening?

"Uuupppp!" Mom yanked Cindy out of bed by the arm, sending shocking pains through her shoulder and into her neck.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the wooden box trying to wobble off the nightstand.

Mom dragged her into the bright hallway, causing her to squint. When they got to the open hall closet, she saw a metal storage container inside. She had never seen this before. Its lid was open with a padlock hanging loose on the bottom part of the latch.

No toys were inside. It must store something else.

She was wide awake now. She wondered what she had done this time. Was it that her mother somehow found out Sharon and Laif were here? Sharon would have never told Mom. Maybe she had spotted them as they were climbing out the bedroom window.

"Get inside."

A tear trickled down her cheek. "But why?"

Mom slapped the tear off. "I said *get inside*."

She didn't move. She felt like the walls were closing in around her, and she began to have trouble breathing. The metal container seemed to shrink before her very eyes. She couldn't possibly fit inside there.

She heard her father's footsteps stomping down the hallway.

Mom ordered, "Get in, you self-righteous bitch." She grabbed Cindy's arm, digging her fingernails into the skin. "Did you hear me?" A smile crawled only up the left side of her face as Dad reached from behind and cupped her breasts.

He kissed her ear and pleaded, "Let Cindy sleep in our bed tonight."

Mom's twisted smile dropped.

He kissed her neck, causing a spasm in her left eye.

She stared at Cindy with such hatred that her face burned red and began to shake.

Dad looked at Cindy as well, but his eyes were hungry and serious. His face glistened with sweat. "I miss Cindy sleeping with us."

Mom twisted out of his grasp, picked Cindy up by the hair, making her scream and squeeze shut her eyes. Mom crammed her into the metal box.

Darkness jumped inside with her as the lid slammed into Cindy's protesting arms. She sobbed as the last bit of light vanished and a suffocating feeling constricted her chest.

She could hear the padlock being placed in the latch and tried banging her hands on the lid, but there was no room. She was squatting on her feet, knees bent into her chest, with her back curled forward. She could feel the cold metal walls on all sides of her. She couldn't move. She breathed harder and faster, pleading with her mother and father.

Cindy heard her mother reply, "Stay in there, dirty whore. He's mine." She heard sloppy smooching between her parents. Then Mom spoke close to the metal box, voice vibrating it, shivering into Cindy's head, "You're an ugly bag of bones. He'll never fuck you again, slut."

Cindy didn't know what her mother meant, but she kept hearing those words as though echoing off stone walls in a tomb, and they became lonely, frightening voices in her head, as they repeated again and again in the darkness.

Chapter 14

Sunday morning was cool, bright, and clear.

Engine noises from lawnmowers and leaf blowers throbbed the still air of Laif's condominium complex in Diamond Bar.

The landscaping was meticulous, bushes cut in perfect circles or squares, grass exactly one inch tall everywhere it grew, and not a spec of trash anywhere. Trees were the only plants allowed to grow wild without man-made shaping. These included birch, pines, and palms trees.

Sharon passed under an arbor arch with ivy growing up it. His door was shaded and to the right, the numerals *131* above it.

She knocked. No answer.

After waiting thirty seconds, she knocked again.

She looked up and could see that the numerals faintly glowed florescent green. There was no doorbell.

She knocked louder. Her watch read seven in the morning. He did agree to seven, didn't he? That's what she remembered--an early start to track the Brewsters. She was just about to knock again when the door creaked open.

A blurry eyed Laif asked, "What time is it?"

"Well hello to you, too." She stepped inside, moving past his groggy, topless body. "Are you ready?" Her voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling. A large skylight dripped yellow morning light onto the spotless white carpet. The place smelled of incense. He had on dark purple pajama bottoms. His chest was lean and muscular, with a hard, rippled stomach. She had trouble taking her eyes off him.

"Did we say seven?" He yawned.

"Com'on, Laif. You're not even dressed."

He dragged his feet to the deep, brown, leather couch and slumped in it.

She noticed several sheets of paper taped to the cream-white, living room walls. Looking closer, she saw they were quotes. One read: "Humanity: we have such great potential, if we can only survive the weaknesses in ourselves that we see in others." *Deep*, she thought, and it held her attention for a while.

A number of unframed paintings hung on the walls. One was of a man skiing down a hillside not of snow but of pink, blue, yellow, red, and violet flowers, cornering and spraying a rainbow of petals; another was of a sculptor carving a man's figure out of a dead tree in the middle of a dry, cracked lakebed devoid of life.

She was taken aback by the art. Their metaphorical meanings were multifaceted, deep like the quote, and mysteriously striking. She wanted to spend more time with them and look around his place at her leisure to learn more about this eccentric man.

Pulling her attention back to Laif, walking to the couch, she asked, "Did you at least eat breakfast?"

He rubbed his eyes.

"I'll get breakfast ready and you get dressed."

"I got to thinking last night ..."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know ..."

"What?"

"I don't know whether I can do this, Sharon."

She sat on the couch beside him. It was comfortable. She wore a short skirt, so she could feel the cool leather against her legs.

He hesitated, then said, "I'm a failure."

"What're you talking about?"

"I can't even show Cindy's parents the truth. How can I help, if I can't do what I'm supposed to?"

"We can help her in other ways. Just because your gift didn't work, doesn't mean we're powerless."

He tried to smile but couldn't quite manage. "People have avoided me. I used to think it was because they didn't understand. But maybe it's because I'm bad. Maybe all the times I've been unsuccessful are adding up so that I'm part of the problem."

She shook her head.

"Cindy is important. Really. This is my chance in life to make a profound difference, and I'm too weak."

She touched him on the shoulder. It was warm. "You're not bad or weak."

"I'm weak."

"This is ridiculous. I swear if I hear any more of this, I'm gonna puke."

"I've committed my life to the truth, and I'm not about to turn from it now."

She kept her voice mild, despite irritation growing at his self-flagellation. "The truth is you're too hard on yourself. We all have weaknesses."

"But this is my job. I've failed Cindy."

He sounded like her mother. Sharon remembered dreading going home from school and trying to cheer Mom's emptiness, trying to stir life back into her alcohol soaked skeleton.

She said, "You're failing her right now by letting this get you down." She got him by the arm and pulled him off the couch. "You're going to your room to get dressed, then you'll eat breakfast, and we're getting out of here to find a reason to remove Cindy from her scum-bag parents."

He dragged himself out of the living room to the hall. Before he entered the gloom, he turned and said, "Thanks, Sharon."

"Don't mention it."

Like everybody, she had her share of down times, but the thing that always pulled her through was remembering her strengths and not giving up. She tried to never feel sorry for herself for long.

She went to the kitchen and looked around. The rich wooden cabinets appeared glossy, as though freshly coated with a lacquer. Inside one were fifteen boxes of Total Fiber cereal. Inside another were fifty cans of fat-free pea soup stacked neatly. Another held seventy boxes of macaroni and cheese. *Not much variety in this guy's diet.*

She went back to the first cabinet, took out a cereal box, and pulled out a carton of milk from the refrigerator. Mixing the contents in a bowl, she yelled, "Hurry up."

She decided to look through the fridge as she put back the milk, just to get more familiar with Laif. She was happy to see no beer, unlike so many other bachelor pads. Four 24-packs of root beer, one carton of orange juice, and another carton of milk populated the shelves. No food.

She sat on the couch and turned on the television to see what station he watched. A child abduction that occurred about a week ago was being outlined in detail on the news, from the dragging of the six-year-old girl into the car, to the driving of the girl into the deserted mountains, and then the torture and strangling of her. Sharon felt nauseous and turned the television off. "You're cereal's getting soggy!"

She picked up some magazines in the rack beside the couch. They were issues of Scientific American, Psychology Today, and Yoga Meditation. She smirked. Imagining him in some strange yoga position while explaining the laws of the universe to people was too easy. She put the magazines back.

There was no music lying around. *How could someone live without music?* She could not picture herself living like that.

Sharon went to the wall to look at another quote: "Communication is a two way street. It's not simply about sending information, but also receiving. It's not simply about being heard but also hearing." *Nice.* She decided to use this on him if he ever stopped listening to her.

She risked going down the dark hallway towards his bedroom. "Laif, I'm coming. You better be decent." Dim light issued from a partially open door at the end. She passed several paintings of gigantic waves being surfed, perhaps fifty to sixty foot walls of water. This was odd given Laif's past reactions to water. At his bedroom entrance, she stopped.

The room's sole window gaped open with the screen off.

He was gone.

Chapter 15

Sunday, Sharon's surveillance of the Brewster home proved fruitless. The curtains had been drawn and even with binoculars, she had been unable to see anything from her car.

She filled that day with worries of Laif. Normally, she would be angry that he had abandoned her, and it confused her that she was worrying instead. She had no idea what happened to him, and she wanted him to be all right.

That night, her sleep was restless, and she woke up several times to find herself standing in the living room and staring at the print of Johnny Cash holding June Carter. Their love made her shiver. She folded her arms. After a while, she would go to the kitchen sink, sip some water, and go back to bed.

Monday morning at 10:00 a.m., she waited sleepy-eyed on the first floor of the child empathy project beside the Department of Children and Family Services office in Pomona, feeling as though she were Alice, having fallen down the rabbit hole into Wonderland.

Pat Yomogusta, Cindy's county social worker, was having the Brewster family come in for a session of child empathy. The parents--if they showed up--would be on the second floor. Sharon had convinced Pat last Friday to allow her to see Cindy again to give her two stuffed animals and the stuffed frog left behind in Jenny Myer's foster home.

Sharon set the pink teddy bear, the purple rabbit, and the green frog on the humongous couch, twenty feet in length and seven feet tall at the back. Because the couch seat was so high, she had to pull herself into it, which was difficult in her blue jeans because they kept making her slide off. Once sitting, she took the two stuffed animals into her arms, mostly for security.

But she pushed the frog further away from her. Even though it was only stuffed, she didn't like carrying it, being around it, or looking at it.

If it were a live amphibian, she wouldn't have been able to carry it at all. Frogs were green. Of all colors to be, they had to be a slimy, disgusting, puke green. And they leaped, possibly straight at you! You never saw any *green* mammals. In fact, frequent representations of aliens were little, green humanoid creatures.

Her eyes traveled the enormous living room. The ceiling rose thirty feet. Gigantic paintings of nature clung to the walls with nails as thick as thumbs. She had to crane her neck up to see them. Across the room, forty feet away, rested a television the size of a movie screen. It probably didn't work, but it gave the right impression.

Two fully dressed mannequins stood twelve feet high in the middle of the room, frozen in an intense argument, fingers pointed at each other like guns.

This room was constructed for parents to feel the way a child experiences a violent home.

Being adults, we forget how insignificant children may feel and how much more threatening for children violence perpetrated by adults can appear. A lot of money was spent just to offer this perspective for abusive parents, but if it could get a percentage of them to a greater

understanding, it was considered well spent. Keeping a single child in foster care for a year costs taxpayers an average of about 8400 dollars. There are over sixty-thousand children in foster care in California alone. So, in general, we pay around 500 million dollars a year in California.

A life-like statue of a German Shepherd dog stood beside the couch, five feet tall, looking more like a small horse, petrified in a sniff of Sharon's right leg. Its white teeth were the length of her fingers.

This room really worked.

Being here made Sharon feel like she did as a child, small and insignificant. She could picture her parents--the size of giants in that room--yelling, throwing things, and having parties all night long, as they had done on many occasions. A single adult foot stepping on her hand could break it. Imagining ten giants hopping around on drugs, she connected back with her childhood anxiety.

She snapped out of it when the front door--a garage-size door--opened with a great creaking, and Pat Yomogusta guided Cindy inside.

Slipping off the couch, literally falling to the floor in her sandals, she then walked through shaggy green carpet that came up to her ankles. She saw, waiting in between the fibers, a cockroach the size of her hand. It moved its legs spastically and made her jump. Inspecting it more closely, she saw it was not real, but mechanical.

Cindy was utterly dwarfed by the room.

When Sharon finally reached them, Pat told the girl, "I'll come get you in fifteen minutes." Pat appeared half Asian and half Caucasian, standing several inches shorter than Sharon, probably five feet and two inches. "Sorry to have to use this room," she told Sharon, "but it's the most convenient one right now."

Before Pat could turn to leave, Sharon pointed and informed, "Look at these dark circles under Cindy's eyes. Her face looks pale. She looks as if she hasn't slept in days. What do the grandparents say about this?"

"Just that," she answered matter-of-factly. "That Cindy's been having trouble sleeping. They say they're going to enroll her in therapy to deal with it as soon as they can."

"Why are the parents allowed unmonitored time with her?"

Pat sighed and rolled her eyes. "They've been doing everything they're supposed to, taking parenting classes, going to psychotherapy. We need to give them a chance, Sharon. They *are* her parents."

She remembered telling Cindy something similar after the first monitored visit with Mary and Joe Brewster. Sharon had made a mistake then, which she hadn't been aware of. She wouldn't be able to convince Pat to place the girl back into foster care. Pat wouldn't see her own mistake until it was too late.

When the county social worker reached the tiled foyer, her heeled footsteps echoed off the walls. The front door closed with an immense weight, which ended in an ear-breaking clap.

Something about the construction of the room *amplified* sound. Sharon didn't doubt that they actually had installed hidden microphones along with amplifiers and speakers to heighten sound.

She searched for chairs, but all of them were unreachable for Cindy. She led the girl to some steps to the dining room that adults would need to crawl up, but the first step was a comfortable size for sitting.

"You brought Billy, Jilly, and Hermit," the girl said with only a trace of excitement.

"Yep. Which one is Hermit?"

"He's the frog."

Figures, she thought. People even name frogs odd names. They must sense the difference, even though not repulsed by it as I am.

As she handed the pink bear, purple rabbit, and lastly, the green frog to Cindy, Sharon leaned close and scanned the girl's arms and hands for bruises or burns. Her skin was clean though. The parents had dressed her to impress the county social worker. She had on a clean white blouse, and a brown plaid skirt with shiny black shoes and white socks. Her blond hair smelled of fruity shampoo and was neatly combed.

Sharon waited for conversation to begin, but the girl just sat quietly.

Cindy held the stuffed animals and frog tightly in her left arm. She grasped a wooden box in her right hand. Sharon remembered it from Sycamore Park. It was small and carved with exquisite decorations. As Cindy spun it in her hand, Sharon was struck by its beauty. It looked like something that should be in a museum or an antique store, not in the hands of a nine-year-old girl.

Cindy set it down on her lap. It had no imperfections.

Trying to make light conversation, she asked, "What do you got there?"

Cindy crammed the box into her skirt pocket and used both arms to hold the stuffed animals and frog.

Evidently, the box was not good conversation. Maybe no conversation would be comfortable. The girl probably felt bad about herself. It was sickening that just two nights ago, Cindy believed she deserved to be maltreated.

Sharon wondered what the Brewsters had done to silence their daughter. Talking about things helped. Keeping things inside hurt. Something must be eating the girl up inside. Sharon was going to find out what that was.

She combed her fingers through Cindy's hair, surreptitiously scanning her scalp, neck, and shoulders for burns, bruises, or scrapes. "How've you been?"

She wouldn't look into Sharon's eyes. "Okay."

Sharon didn't believe that for a second. If abusive parents didn't get better psychologically, they got better at hiding their abuse.

She wanted to check the girl's feet and ankles for marks. "Let's play hop-scotch." She began taking off her sandals as a cue for Cindy to take her shoes off as well.

"I don't feel like it right now."

She slipped her sandals back on and tapped her ear with her index finger, racking her brain for a way to unobtrusively check the girl's body. She could inspect Cindy's stomach if the girl's blouse was loose enough. "How about you show me if you can do a hand-stand?"

"I'm kind of tired," she answered softly.

"Tired? Why? Haven't you been getting enough sleep?"

Cindy turned her head away and shivered.

"What's wrong?"

The two stuffed animals slipped from her arms onto the floor, only the frog remained.

Sharon worried about the father's sexual assault record. If he really was a sexual deviant, it's rare to grow out of those demented desires. "Is something bad happening at night? Is someone coming into your room?"

She didn't answer.

"What's going on?"

Cindy drew her legs up and curled her arms around them, rocking forward and backward.

She felt defeated. "What're they doing to you, Cindy? Are they touching you inappropriately?"

The girl seemed to be crawling deeper into a shell of her own making. Laif was right. They did need the girl's help to get her to a safe place. But how could you turn a child against her parents? Even if a part of her wants to tattle on them, it's difficult because she will always love her parents, no matter what kind of horrors they commit.

A mechanical flea the size of a quarter jumped high over her legs, startling Sharon, and it continued hopping towards the dining room.

She put her arm around Cindy. The girl continued to squeeze her knees into her chest. Her back was tight and hot. "Please Cindy ... please ... tell me if something is wrong. I can only help if you talk."

Chapter 16

The Grind had cozy nooks streamed with scents of strawberries, oranges, raspberries, and blueberries.

Sharon placed her mixed berry drink on the hardwood table. Her thoughts drifted from Cindy to Laif. She had been getting used to talking with him about the girl's plight and actually enjoyed his company.

She wondered whether he could be the one she'd been waiting for all her life. She only wanted to get married once. It was an exceptionally special experience which she didn't want to waste with the wrong man, do in a flippant manner, or attempt at an immature age.

All her friends had married too young, and she believed most would grow apart from their husbands as they neared their thirties.

Sadly, but true, half of all marriages now end in divorce. Half! Those were poor odds. If a man ever divorced her, she would give up on men altogether. Forever.

She sipped her drink and thought of the flower garden she was developing in the small backyard of her apartment. She had planted a variety of seeds -- lilies, roses, sunflowers, daisies, and California poppies. None of them had grown. The best they could do was reach towards the sky with dry stems, nothing budding. She wondered if she was this way as well, destined to live her life alone, no beauty reaching outward to attract other elements of nature.

She started when Laif sat down opposite her. His hair was messy curls. He wore a short-sleeved, tan shirt that was buttoned irregularly so that one collar was higher than the other. "Time is running out."

Stunned by his appearance, feeling like she was imagining him there, she couldn't speak at first. Then she asked, "Where have you been?"

"I just missed you at the child empathy building--"

"How did you know I was here?"

"--so I followed you here."

Saturday night, she had told him of the appointment. She was silent. She felt a bit irritated that he had left her and now just popped back. She wanted him around but consistently, not popping in and out whenever he wanted. She needed help though. Now *she* was the one who felt like a failure. Her visit with Cindy had offered nothing.

He said, "I feel I need to explain a little."

She nodded.

A blender began whirling behind the counter.

"I've had some failures the last couple of days. The Brewsters, the suicidal girl, my personal life too. The last long-term relationship I had, I was eighteen. After high school, I started my

path of truth telling, and it scared her off. Since then, getting close to women has been ... difficult." He held his head in his hands and messed with his hair.

She wasn't sure she understood. She blinked several times and leaned on her elbows.

"They were all weighing on me. All at once. I'm sorry."

She held his hand.

"But I did have some success. I saved a woman from rape yesterday."

She squeezed his hand and smiled a little.

"That's why I left you. I sensed I had to. If I went back into the living room and explained, I would have missed the rapist. As it was, I just barely crossed paths with him."

A knot stuck in her throat. She felt selfish for wanting him around so much. He was important to others as well. Perhaps he was *more* important to others than to herself. She swallowed hard and managed to say, "That's great."

"Are you upset?"

"No," she answered quickly. "I was ... I just feel ... like a failure now." She told him about her visit with Cindy and how the girl clammed up.

"We can't force her be open."

"But I'm supposed to help children talk. That's what I thought I was good at."

"You'll have your chance again. It's not over yet."

She nodded. Just like Laif, she had succeeded with other children, and the struggle to save Cindy wasn't over. She reached over and unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt to fix it so it wasn't uneven. But she hesitated when she saw his chest. Really, did this need to be hidden? Quickly breathing again, she buttoned it up right.

"Thanks." He looked out the window.

"What's the matter?"

"We must act fast. Every hour that passes, Cindy's potential to help people drops. I feel something ... bad."

"What do you mean?"

The room was stuffed with more conversations than it could hold. He leaned closer. "There're trying to turn her against good."

"Her parents?"

"Yes."

"How come we're running out of time?"

"They're succeeding. I can feel it. Her soul diminishes."

“Why would they want to do that?”

“So they can control her. If she is weak, she is controllable.”

Sharon felt sick. Of course, she had seen this time and time again in her profession, but she hadn't recognized it explicitly as evil. Almost all forms of abuse are about control and keeping victims weak. “What will she be like if they turn her?”

“She'll grow up like them. Essentially powerless in her soul, so needing to control others to feel powerful, to feel complete. Exerting unfair influence over others would manifest in all parts of her life--her work, her relationships, her children. This transfer of sickness, modern-day psychologists have termed *the cycle of abuse*.”

“Let's go then. Let's stop this cycle dead in its tracks.”

“There's something else.”

“What?”

“Something, really dark ... the worst I've ever felt.”

“What?”

“It's coming.”

“What is?”

Laif shivered. “I don't know.”

Chapter 17

Adriana's eyes creaked open.

Because she had a dental appointment at 1:00 p.m., she didn't have to go to school today, which was fine by her.

The late Monday morning light crawled through the open window, laughed quietly among the white curtains, and drifted into the room, lapping against her bookcase full of Dean Koontz, Stephen King, and bird watching books. She loved horror stories, even though her life seemed to have stemmed from one.

Ever since her father--in a rage over spilled milk on the kitchen floor--took the ax from their garage, pushed her down, and swung the blade through her left thigh, she had been fascinated with reading. Maybe it was because other kids no longer wanted to play with her. Without a left leg she couldn't ride bicycles, she couldn't play hopscotch, couldn't run and jump with other children, couldn't skateboard, roller skate, play tag, climb trees with boys, play kick ball, play *any* ball, or take long adventuresome walks. No one she knew but Cindy wanted to put up with her differentness.

But maybe it wasn't those things at all that made her want to read. She dreaded being teased. And other kids made up many terrible names for her: monster, deformed girl, cripple, alien from space, creature, ugly duck, elephant girl, and several other names she could not repeat. One boy at school used to love to push her over at recess and stand above her, yelling "Freak!" while other kids circled and watched.

Even though some of the nicer kids didn't call her names, in their eyes she could see discomfort and twisted pity. She hated this more than anything. It separated her from them more than her absent left leg.

In her books, she found adventure, solace, and companionship with characters who accepted her for who she was, wouldn't make fun of or look at her strangely, and would take her wherever they went without thinking her a burden.

And since she lost her leg, bird watching had also become a hobby. Seeing them free to fly anywhere they chose gave her a great sense of peace. Just last week, she even saw one missing a left leg like herself, hobbling around the front yard, but completely normal and capable when he flew away.

A glass of water sparkled on her nightstand, half full.

She filled that glass every night. When she woke--which tended to happen five or six times a night--without even opening her eyes, she could reach for the water, sip it, and fall back into her dream. In dreams, she still had two legs and could run around with the other kids. She would laugh so loud and clear and see bright smiles on children playing with her. When she woke, she didn't want to hobble to the bathroom to quench her thirst, being reminded of her disability. For a whole night--at least in her mind--she had two legs.

Her crutches leaned against the side of the bed. Yesterday's clothes lay in a pile on the floor. She always left them on the floor because she didn't want to walk around in only her underwear to put her clothes into the hamper down the hallway. She felt ashamed of her body.

Her foster mother, who Adriana was supposed to call "Aunt Jenny," said she would buy Adriana pajamas soon. Jenny was waiting for the monthly check from the foster care agency to arrive to purchase them. But Adriana had been in the home already four months now and still had no pajamas. She felt too scared to ask her foster mother about it again because she might be seen as a nuisance or a snotty handicapped girl. She didn't want her foster mother to think she needed special treatment just because of her missing leg. Really, she was just glad to be in the same home for this long, and she didn't want to jeopardize that by asking for too much.

She sat up and took a sip from the water on her nightstand. It tasted stale.

To her surprise, across the room on the other bed, Cindy sat quietly.

She held a small brown box tightly in her hands, knuckles the color of bones. Her eyes looked into nothing.

Adriana sat straight up. She didn't know how long Cindy had been there, but the girl was fully dressed in a blue T-shirt and jeans, white socks and black tennis shoes. There was mud on her shoes and on the cuffs of her jeans. Her hair was messy as though she had been running.

"What're you doing here?"

Cindy's eyes continued to look steadily into nothing. She was gripping the box so tightly it appeared it might bust.

"I thought you went back with your parents." Adriana tossed aside her covers and slipped into her one-legged jeans from the floor. "Don't tell me they blew it. Don't tell me they hit you again."

Adriana was used to foster children coming in and out of her life. Inconsistency was what being in foster care was about. Children could be here one week and gone the next. Sometimes they were moved to a home closer to a new county worker assigned to their case just to make traveling easier on the county worker. Sometimes they were placed back with a natural family member who the state considered safe. Adriana had no other family to be placed with besides her crazy father.

Cindy seemed to have not heard anything. Her eyes looked glazed.

Adriana hopped to the closet and took out a white blouse, a pink knee-high skirt, white underpants, and a white sock. She sat down on the floor behind the bed and began taking off her old clothes and pulling on the fresh clothing. She asked, "What do you got in the box?"

There was only silence. And she couldn't see her foster sister's reaction.

After raising herself on her leg, she hopped back and got her crutches situated under her arms and moved to the older girl. "Did you run away?" She touched Cindy's face. Except for the warmth, Cindy was like a statue. This wasn't good.

"Aunt Jenny!" Adriana called.

No one answered.

She remembered Jenny was going to the grocery store this morning. Foster parents weren't supposed to leave foster children unattended, but Jenny sometimes did for short periods. She told her foster children not to tell the social workers or court, otherwise they might have to leave the home. Nothing bad had ever happened to Adriana when she was left alone.

But now she felt scared.

She wanted Jenny. No, she needed her here. Cindy was obviously in some kind of trouble, and Adriana didn't know how to help.

There were no other foster children in the home since Zoey, a fourteen-year-old girl who used drugs, was placed somewhere else. Adriana had no one to ask for guidance. If she called the police, then the social workers would discover that Jenny broke the rules and Adriana would have to leave.

She liked living here. She was getting used to it, and she didn't want to be forced to move again, and probably have to change schools, getting new kids eager to tease her. It was always worse the first few months of a new school, until the school officials, teachers, and parents talked with the mean kids.

Besides, Jenny would be back soon. Cindy was breathing and apparently physically okay, so she didn't need a doctor right away.

Adriana touched her foster sister's hands.

The girl flinched and pulled the box closer to her stomach, but she still didn't look at Adriana.

"Well, this is awkward." Adriana had known Cindy to be a compassionate and understanding friend. She accepted Adriana, and Adriana never felt uncomfortable around her. Now Adriana wondered what her foster sister had experienced to get her zoned-out like this, and Adriana began to get angry, not at her friend but at whoever had done this to the girl. She didn't want to ask Cindy about that right now though and cause more stress. "Aren't you going to tell me what's in the box?"

The girl turned away. Adriana left her crutches leaning against the bed and hopped to the other side of Cindy to face her.

The girl didn't seem to notice.

"Look, you can trust me." Adriana put her hand on her foster sister's knee.

She thought she saw Cindy's eyes blink and turn slightly toward her, swelling with sparkling liquid, then drying as a desert.

"Tell me what's in the box."

Suddenly, her eyes widened as though a bloody knife was thrusting towards her.

"What's the matter?"

"It's not safe.... It's bad."

“The box?”

Cindy eyes glazed over again, looking through Adriana.

Bump!

Adriana jumped.

Another bump sounded, which she could tell was coming from somewhere else in the house. Her heart beat fast. She went to the window and looked out. Jenny’s van wasn’t outside. Whoever caused that noise wasn’t her foster mother.

Adriana reached across her friend to get the crutches, pulled the girl up by the arm, and began leading her to the closet. It was dark inside and they could hide there.

But half-way there, Cindy pulled away from her.

“We have to hide,” Adriana whispered. “Someone’s here. Someone who doesn’t belong here.” She tried to get Cindy by the arm again, but the girl wasn’t going to be led in there.

Clacking footsteps from the wood floor of the hallway. Doors creaking open. More footsteps.

“Cindy, snap out of it.”

Her eyes remained glazed. Her body was limp, hands tightly grasping the box.

The box seemed the only link Adriana had to her foster sister, the only thing important to Cindy. With both crutches wedged in her armpits, Adriana grabbed the box, pulled it *and* Cindy towards the closet, and almost lost her left crutch.

She looked at Adriana. “Don’t. You don’t want to see what’s inside.”

They were a couple of feet closer to the closet, but Cindy had regained strength and wasn’t budging.

Some hushed voices in another room. Something falling off a wall and crashing against the floor.

“We have to hide. Don’t you understand? It’s not safe here.”

She looked confused. Her grip on the box slackened. Adriana used this opportunity to yank with all her might. The box ripped from Cindy’s hands, but with that force, Adriana slammed into the wall and fell to the floor, her crutches clattering against the closet door, the box ricocheting off the wall, chipping off a piece but still remaining closed. The box rolled across the ground to Cindy’s feet.

She stooped and picked it up, not showing any awareness of Adriana’s position.

From the floor, she complained, “Great. I’m sure they heard that.”

Footsteps rushing through other parts of the house. Doors opening and closing quickly.

“Come on, Cindy.” She crawled under her bed and lifted the dangling spread to peek out. “Hide under here. Hurry, it’s safe here.”

All Cindy did was slowly walk to the bed. Adriana heard it creak under the girl's weight as she sat.

More footsteps rushing through the house, closer.

From her position, Adriana saw the bottom portion of her bedroom door being opened. Scuffed, brown high heels entered first, then dirty sneakers followed. They rushed to Cindy on the bed.

Adriana heard a loud slap, which made her cringe. Her friend began crying.

There were some electronic beeps. A man's voice said, "Mary found her.... No, no, she's fine.... We will bring her with us." Another beep. "Let's go." Adriana saw shoes moving, including Cindy's muddy black tennis shoes, toward the door.

She couldn't let this happen. Whoever they were, they weren't invited into this house. She reached for her crutch and thrust it between the legs of the heeled woman called Mary, and after a moment of tangled legs and wood, the woman fell with a thump.

Her red face smashed into the throw rug, eyes widening as Adriana slid further under the bed. The woman scuttled along the floor with the quickness of an alligator, a hand lashing onto Adriana's ankle, Adriana trying to shake it off, and the woman pulling off Adriana's sock, but then her other hand catching Adriana's blouse and dragging her out, smacking her head on the bed frame in the process.

"Ouch!"

"A misfit. And it's trying to save Cindy." Mary chuckled and shook Adriana, causing her head to whip back and forth, rattling her neck bones. Then the woman turned to the man. "It would be fun to do it with a cripple, wouldn't it, Joe?"

A sickening smile rose on the man's lips. He licked them. "Yes, yes."

"Call up Hank. We have another to bring."

Mary started coughing. It wasn't normal. She was smiling between each. Adriana smelled rotten eggs. The woman spat out a green, slimy substance, which hung from her lips as it stretched its way down.

Cindy's eyes grew wide. She recoiled in Joe's arms as though a dragon were hatching from her mother's mouth.

The saliva string broke, sending the green glob at the end splattering into the throw rug.

Chapter 18

“When I got out of the shower,” explained Jenny Myers over the phone, “Adriana was just gone.”

“Why would she run away?” Sharon asked weakly, disheartened by this news. She pushed aside literally ten pounds of paperwork on her desk. “She *liked* your home.”

Jenny began crying. “I know. She has no one to call family but me. I don’t know why she would leave.”

Sharon felt absolutely horrible. This precious girl was too innocent, too sweet, too vulnerable to be out in this hostile world alone. Old feelings of loss threatened to take Sharon away, but she gripped the phone tighter and demanded, “There has to be a reason, something that would motivate her. Think, Jenny.”

“I don’t know. She’s been so happy here.”

“Has there been anything in the last week that upset her?”

Static rose on the line as Jenny’s sobbing escalated. “I still can’t believe she’s gone. I just don’t understand. I’ve tried my best and--”

“I know it’s terrible. Stay with me, Jenny.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just ... go ahead.”

“Anything upsetting to Adriana?”

“She was sad when Cindy left.”

“That’s normal. You say it’s thirty minutes Adriana’s been missing?”

“About.”

“Hopefully she’ll wander back. In the meantime, call the police and have them make a report. We have to do everything by the book, for Adriana’s sake.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Call me back as soon as you find out anything.”

“I will.” With three more sobs, Jenny hung up. Silence filled the receiver. Adriana had no reason to run away. Sharon’s stomach burned. She opened her desk drawer, retrieved a bottle of Tums, and chewed three large tablets, tasting the chalky fruit flavor.

Sharon reported the missing girl to her supervisor and then called the county social worker, but only got the voicemail. She dialed several numbers to find out who the duty worker was that day and told him about Adriana’s situation. She wrote down the contact information from the phone calls in Adriana’s office file, wrote down the date she contacted the county office in her agency tracking form, and began writing a special incident report on the computer regarding the situation.

But then she stopped.

The calls and paperwork were bureaucratic nonsense, which would not help Adriana in any way. The only thing they accomplished was to help remove her agency from further blame if it were investigated or taken to court regarding this lost child. Rosebud Foster Care could offer the court documentation that proved they were compliant and responsible within reasonable limits. But that would not bring back Adriana.

Sharon leaned back in the chair, trying to figure where the girl might have gone. Maybe she had a friend in the neighborhood, someone she wanted to visit, and hopefully would return. If Adriana was sad her foster sister left, could she have walked to Cindy's house? It's possible. They lived close enough. But Adriana knew she shouldn't go places unsupervised. She knew foster children had to be supervised by people fingerprinted with the agency wherever she went unless it was to school. Adriana wasn't a kid who broke rules. She always did her chores, finished her homework and turned it in, never had any behavior problems at school, despite other children teasing her--this rebellious run just didn't fit.

Sharon eyes rose to the corkboard above her desk. Among foster parent fee rates, duty worker days, dates of emergency on-call weekends, were some pictures of bubble people--cute, plump, simple drawn people by a foster boy several years back. They had inspired her, given her reason to continue her hard work, like this boy had done in spite of terrible burns all over his body.

The phone on the desk rang. She considered not answering. But because of its potential of being related to Adriana's disappearance, Sharon picked it up.

Laif spoke on the line. "The Brewsters haven't been home since I got here at eleven. I first checked the grandparents' house, but only the Greenwiches were there." He paused. "You there?"

"Yeah. Sorry, just lost in thoughts."

"I'm hungry. Can you pick me up a burrito?" Laif had called in sick today so that they could keep surveillance on the Brewsters. He worked as a secretary at an art gallery in Orange, which Sharon still found difficult to believe, such an ordinary job for an extraordinary person.

"Okay. Call me on my cell if you see something, anything. I've got a crisis here I'm dealing with."

She picked up her work bag, gathered her keys and purse, and looked at her wristwatch. It was 12:30 p.m. She figured if she got lunch afterwards, it would take fifteen minutes to get to Jenny's home in Pomona. Because of unpredictable Los Angeles traffic, she got there in about twenty-five minutes.

She paced Adriana's room.

Jenny stood at the bedroom doorway, looking in. "Why did it have to be Adriana? Why her?" She shook both her hands in the air then placed them over her red freckled cheeks. "For God's sake, she's only got one leg."

The foster mother appeared sincere--her sorrow at the loss of the foster child--but there was something that didn't feel altogether honest.

Adriana's crutches were gone, but her closet was full of clothes; her bed wasn't made, and her pajamas were nowhere to be found. Adriana always made her bed. It was as though she had woken up and walked out of the house.

"Has she ever gone anywhere only in her pajamas?"

Jenny rubbed her cheeks. "Ah, no. Never."

"You bought them for her two months ago when I asked you to, right?"

"Of course," Jenny said in a louder voice.

A funny odor was in the bedroom. It smelled like rotten eggs. This smell had never been in the room before. She felt dizzy, and then sneezed.

She went to the bathroom. Jenny followed.

The girl's toothbrush and toothpaste were on the counter beside the sink. Sharon touched the toothbrush. Dry. She opened the right drawer. Inside were Adriana's hairbrush, nail clippers, and body lotion. She pulled back the shower curtain and saw shampoo and soap on the rack. Rosebud Foster Care was tight on rules, and one of them was that shampoo had to be locked because of the danger it posed if swallowed. Sharon understood that some of these rules were ridiculous to live by, making the kids feel more like they're in prison than foster care, and she had never pressured foster parents about unlocked shampoo. "Adriana sure didn't pack heavily."

"I don't even think she showered," Jenny said. "Look." She bent down and touched the bottom of the tub. "It's dry. She's usually meticulous about showering every day. I think it's because she's so self-conscious about her body since —"

Anxious to focus on finding the girl, Sharon interrupted, "How long were you in your shower for?"

"Oh ... I don't know. About fifteen minutes maybe." Jenny quickly turned away, straightening some towels that were already straight on the rack.

Sharon walked back into Adriana's bedroom. She looked inside the closet again. According to Jenny, all of Adriana's shoes were there except for the white tennis shoe. Two months ago Sharon had done a clothing inventory for a quarterly report to Adriana's county social worker. The girl had five shoes, not pairs but just individual shoes for her right foot. Sharon circled the bed and saw a white tennis shoe halfway underneath Adriana's bed. She reached down and picked it up. Four right shoes were in the closet; so all the girl's shoes were accounted for.

Adriana wasn't the kind of girl to leave her bed messy. But she especially wouldn't run out of the house without a shoe on her foot.

The girl valued her only remaining foot and had expressed fears about it being bruised or cut--somehow made imperfect like her left stump of a leg. So what could have happened for her to leave without a shoe? Adriana had no natural family who wanted her back. No pre-adoptive parents who might steal her away. In fact, it was difficult to get anyone interested in handicapped children. If someone did kidnap her, why? The foster mother certainly wouldn't

pay a ransom. The state wouldn't pay. And who would be brazen enough to come into the house when an adult was present?

"Do you have any relatives that might have stopped by today?"

Jenny shook her head. "Sometimes my brother comes by, but he's vacationing in Arizona right now."

The rotten-egg smell came back, drifts of it catching in her nose.

She saw something small and brown on the floor by the closet. She picked it up: an elaborately decorated wood chip. She recognized the pattern but couldn't place where she'd seen it before. "You know what this belongs to?"

Jenny examined it. "I don't think I've seen anything like it before."

In the back of her mind, she knew where this wood was from. It just wasn't coming forward.

The smell of rotten-eggs grew stronger.

Jenny was a bit of a neat freak. She usually washed clothing twice a week, sheets and bed linens three times a week, vacuumed two times a week, and steam cleaned the carpets every month. Why did it stink in here?

As Sharon paced, she noticed it was worst by the green throw rug in the middle of the room. Sharon leaned over it for a closer inspection and became dizzy again. Strange, but she lost all her thought of the wood-chip's origins. Even stranger, she began to feel *different* in some way. She almost lost her balance.

The foster mother grabbed Sharon's shoulder. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

Evidently picking up on the stench as well, she apologized, "Sorry. I don't know why it smells." She went to the bathroom, retrieved some potpourri scented spray, and sprayed the room emphatically.

Sharon coughed and walked out, stuffing the piece of wood in her jeans pocket.

Chapter 19

Cold air galloped through the open car windows, lashing Adriana's hairs against her face.

Beside her sat Cindy, a blank look fixed in her eyes. Her parents were in the front seats, unconcerned that their open windows hammered coldness into two children's hearts.

Cindy began mumbling rapidly to no one in particular, swatting the air with her hands as though mosquitoes buzzed around her head. She had a crazed look in her eyes, full of tight energy that could burst.

A minute later, the girl appeared dazed again, rigidly sitting straight, her head still as stone. All the time, her wooden box was held tightly between her thighs.

Emptiness ate at Adriana's chest. Although the scenery was beautiful--dry riverbeds chasing alongside the road, rolling hills reaching higher into the sky, crows darting and jumping in the air--she felt so very alone.

Who would know where they had gone? Who would make sure they were well fed, got enough sleep, and were properly cared for? These adults seemed to be the *opposite* of caring. As they laughed between themselves, Adriana's heart ached deeper. Their laughter did not include her. It sprung from selfishness, sounding familiar to the kids' laughter at school who found teasing her entertaining.

Underneath large trees that allowed dabbles of sunlight through, the car slowed. Up the dirt road several mobile homes appeared abandoned. They were rusty in spots, the curtains in the windows yellowed, holey and torn.

They stopped beside the second.

She didn't want to be here. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. How were she and Cindy going to get back to the foster home?

Watching Mary and Joe get out and open the back doors, she started to breathe faster. Mary yanked her out by the arm, not bothering to offer her the crutches from the car floor, dragging her across the gravel as she tried to hop on her right leg. The soft skin of her bare foot becoming scratched and cut, she felt like crying.

Behind her, Joe held Cindy's hand.

A large banner hung between two poles in front of the mobile homes. It read *Discipline Camp. April 13--20*. Great, thought Adriana, a perfect place for two kids to be stranded for a week.

The mobile home was bigger inside than it looked outside, probably connected to other mobile homes. They went down a long hall, which had five other doors. At the end, was a single room with a small living and dining area, a kitchenette, and a bathroom. A man rose from the booth, eyes squinting. He had a scraggly beard, bushy brown eyebrows, and thick circular glasses with scratched lenses dotted with white specks of dandruff. "So these are the girls, huh?"

"We've tried our best with our daughter, but she won't behave," Mary complained.

“She just doesn’t get it,” whined Joe, shaking the bearded man’s hand. “We’re very pleased you could help, Hank.”

“Helping you helps us all. We need Cindy. She’s a powerful, lovely girl.” Hank’s sun splotted hands held Cindy’s smooth face, and she cringed out of her daze and pushed his hands away.

His arm pulled back like a tightening spring, hand squeezed into a ball, and he shot it into her head. She crumpled onto the ground like a rag doll.

Adriana screamed.

“We’ve tried the physical stuff. It hasn’t gotten anywhere. We need your expertise.”

“She is stubborn, isn’t she?” Hank ran his fingers through his beard, and some crumbs and other particles dribbled out. “There is strength in numbers. Together we can break her.”

Cindy was on the floor, her arms around her head, knees drawn against her chest, shaking.

It was shocking to Adriana how nobody paid attention to children’s feelings around here. It was like children didn’t matter. She continued to scream, but louder.

Mary scratched her nose. “We’ve done what we’ve been taught about proper discipline, but it just hasn’t worked.”

“You and Joe aren’t at fault. You can’t expect to tame such a child alone.” Hank went to Adriana and punched her in the mouth, silencing her and causing a tooth to feel loose. She cried quietly.

“What if even together we fail?”

“Won’t happen.” Hank explained, “Everyone has a breaking point. First thing all parents should know is that children need fear. If a hand won’t bring it, the simple matter of discovering their weakness and *using* that is needed.”

In addition to her sore mouth, Adriana’s leg felt tired and swollen. She didn’t have her crutches to rest on like she normally would do, and she didn’t have the option of switching weight onto her other leg like two-legged people do when standing. She bent onto the couch to sit.

Hank spun around so quickly his beard curved through the air. “Who told you you can sit?” He pulled Adriana up by the hair and slammed her against the wall, sending tingles of pain through her spine. “You don’t move until *we* tell you.” He looked over his shoulder to Cindy’s parents. “The cripple has a *wild* nature about her. She is going to be fun.”

Mary blurted, “Yeah, when she’s cold and dead.”

Hank began laughing. “Like a fish.”

Adriana turned into the wall, away from these horrible people, her lip bleeding, her back aching, her tooth loose, her leg begging for rest, but her mind forcing the muscles to support her weight. She stared at the cracking gray paint and wished she were someplace else.

Chapter 20

Sharon stretched out of her car and then leaned back inside to retrieve two lemonades, one leg rising off the ground, her sandal almost slipping off.

Laif's heart stopped.

Her tight blue jeans inched down as her white blouse crept up, exposing her lower back, seizing his attention.

He had to pull his eyes off her and back to the Brewsters' house.

He could hear her walking to his car and wanted to watch. He loved the way she moved--confident with a swing of femininity. But he stayed his focus mostly on the Brewsters' house, feeling guilty for two more stolen glances of her.

She slunk into the Mercedes and closed the door. She handed Laif his lemonade and burrito from Paco Taco, flipped back her brown hair, and asked, "Have you been smoking cigarettes?"

"Just one." He felt self-conscious about his sparse habit. "I only smoke one cigarette a month. That's not bad."

She made a disgusted face. "It stinks."

"Sorry. It's been quite boring here. They must have left." He took a sip from his cup, and his face curled from the tartness. "I bet they took Cindy with them."

"Why would they do that?" she asked evenly.

He looked into her eyes. He couldn't quite place it, but something was different about her, something artificial. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"Why *wouldn't* they take her? She's their daughter, and they want her on their side." He bit and ripped a section out of the burrito. Chewing, it was warm and delicious.

"I don't know." She gulped her lemonade without the slightest flinch. "How can you be sure?"

Something was odd about Sharon, and not just with her mannerisms. She had never questioned the Brewsters' capacity for ill will. "I told you, Cindy is powerful. These people will do anything to gain more power in their lives."

She spun her cup nervously in her hands while looking out the window at the Brewsters' home. "How can we be so sure these parents want the worst for their daughter?"

"What're you saying?"

"Maybe they know what's best for her," she said turning towards him, self-righteousness igniting her eyes.

He put his burrito down. "I can't believe you're serious. This is the last thing I'd expect from you."

"Maybe I don't fit into what *you* think I should be," she asserted. "Maybe I'm a free spirit, with a will and a mind of my own choosing."

"That's not what I mean." He looked down at his legs. He couldn't face her right now. Something had changed in her, something he didn't like. This moment reminded him of past experiences in which his father would *switch* on him--nice one moment and furious the next, sane one moment and crazy the next, believing the family was safe one moment and the next being surrounded by government agents attempting a raid.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just want us to think things through, so we don't do things we might regret." She took her taco out from the bag and began to munch on it.

"You've seen what the Brewsters have done both physically and mentally to their daughter."

"But why have you given up on them? They're part of humanity. Don't they have the same indomitable spirit for goodness we all have? Shouldn't they be given the same chance that we have to prove their goodness and--"

"They've been given that already. They've blown it."

She continued insistently, "Yes, they have done bad things in the past, but how can we just stereotype them as evil?"

He felt like wringing her neck. He hated these disturbing feelings inside him.

Setting his lemonade in the car's cup-holder, he wrung his left wrist. He couldn't believe they were even having this discussion. He spoke quickly. "The mother blamed her daughter after she discovered her husband had been sneaking into Cindy's room at night to molest her. As punishment, Mary bludgeoned her daughter in the head with a hammer. Some choices we make we cannot turn back from. We cannot turn over a new leaf after having done exceptional harmful acts. Sometimes our actions define us." He couldn't believe how much this was affecting him. His heart was doing a salsa dance in his chest.

"How can you be so close minded? You of all people, the one who considers himself good. Shouldn't you be more open-minded, compassionate, and forgiving for *all* humanity? And the hammer incident was only alleged--"

Laif suddenly understood his feelings. He was terrified of finding himself alone again. When he met Sharon, he felt a connection with her which he hadn't felt with anyone before. It filled him with contentment and quiet joy. He never wanted this to be severed. But it was now, leaving him alone again--alone in the truth, floating amongst the many people submerged in murkier waters. He was tempted to dunk his head into those waters as well, just to be a part of other people, just to stop feeling so responsible, just to feel connection with Sharon again.

"--and the sexual abuse was never substantiated. It was never proven that the father did anything."

He pushed open his car door, got out, and paced around outside, sucking deep drafts of fresh air. He could never submerge his head in lies. To dunk his head in that muck would make him feel even sicker than isolation. Doing so would negate the harm that befalls victims of evil. Doing so would be a turn *towards darkness*.

His fist clenched his hands and looked back at his car.

Inside the Mercedes, she put her taco down and crossed her arms across her chest, sighing.

But of all people, he believed she would be the last to fall from the truth. Her life was about fighting for children who have been victimized, helping them grow, uncovering lies that seeped into their souls over the years from the weight of abuse. How could she act different now?

She leaned toward his open door. "Aren't *you* running from the truth in some way? Aren't you denying the--"

He slammed his door shut, muffling her voice. That was *not* Sharon in the car. Something else was with them.

Chapter 21

Adriana felt naked without her crutches. Her leg ached and throbbed, crying for rest. She looked longingly at the booth seat across the room, just to sit. Sitting was so underrated. Nobody thought much of it until they weren't allowed.

Hank had taken Cindy into another room. When he had grabbed her, she looked frightened and dropped her box. It rested on the floor beside that oh so comforting bean-bag.

Cindy's mother was sitting in a chair reading a newspaper, her face smug. She had her legs crossed, the top one swaying up and down, seeming to mock Adriana for missing one. Mary let her left shoe slip halfway off her foot, dangling it as her leg worked. So relaxed, you could never tell she had done any wrong in her life.

Adriana's eyes sank to the floor. The box was only a few feet from her.

Squiggles, cuts, and soft depressions decorated its surface. A small corner had been chipped off, exposing fresh wood.

She wondered why her friend guarded it so much. What was inside, and had Cindy ever seen? Why would she be afraid of it, yet keep it nearby all the time? Maybe it could save them.

To decrease the pressure on her leg, Adriana tried to lean against the wall more than she was already doing. A ledge stuck out about half an inch in which she put her fingers.

But it was useless. Nothing could replace crutches. With them she could walk blocks and not tire; she could stand and support her weight using her arms.

Nothing in this room resembled crutches. Dented cans of food lay sprawled on the counter in the kitchenette, dirty dishes overfilled the sink, clothing and newspapers littered the room, and the smell of stale breath and decaying food rode the air.

She could hear her foster sister's sobbing and occasional screams next door. Something had to be done. But who could she turn to? All the responsible adults in her life were gone.

It was the story of her life.

More recently, it was because she was crippled. But having been abused by her father didn't help her case any. She was not only a cripple, but a used and battered one. Who in their right mind would want such a damaged child? She could get over her father not loving her, but she couldn't get over no one ever loving her. That was what really hurt, people *continuing* to abandon her.

She cried quietly for a few minutes, not wanting Mary to hear.

Mary set down the newspaper, retrieved a rope from the cabinet, took two steps to the corner by a pole that ran from the floor to the ceiling, and ordered, "Get over here, freak." When Adriana reached the pole, Mary pulled Adriana's wrists behind her back around the pole, then tied them tightly together. Then Mary left.

At least she could finally sit, and she plopped down. The floor was carpeted, which offered a little cushioning.

In front of her, only four feet away, lay the box. It was all alone on the dirty brown carpet, standing out in the unwholesome room. She thought she could smell the scent of freshly cut wood from it. She twisted to lay on her side and reached with her toes, but just missed the box.

From the other room, she heard a symphony of coughing, sneezing, and burping. She wondered what the adults were doing because her foster sister was silent.

After a minute, she heard footsteps and quickly straightened herself into a sitting position. The door opened and Mary entered, cradling her daughter in her arms. She gently sat the girl in the booth around the table. "There now, baby. Everything is gonna be fine. Mommy loves you."

Adriana felt sick to her stomach hearing these words. They were so contradictory to everything she had seen about Mary. She wished with all her might that someone could bang sense into these idiots and make them really care.

Love was *hard* to come by. Adriana knew this firsthand. The highest love she ever felt was the love she had for herself. She wasn't sure where this came from. Nobody had really taught her. But she knew she cared, not in a spoiled, self-centered way, just genuine caring. Although it was a lonely feeling, at least it was warm.

Cindy appeared half conscious, eyes glazed, barely able to support herself.

"Mommy is going to get you a drink."

As the woman passed by, a rotting egg stench forced Adriana to exhale and tighten her nostrils and eyes closed. There was a clatter of plates and silverware being pushed aside. A hiss of water came from the kitchen faucet. Then it stopped and footfalls landed, forming a sound-trail back to Cindy.

Adriana opened her eyes to see Mary snarling at her daughter. Then without a word, she left.

Adriana whispered, "Untie me."

Cindy just eyed the watery glare of the glass of water in front of her.

She whispered louder, "Snap out of it."

Cindy continued staring at the glass as though its contents represented all the limited love her mother possessed, treasuring that liquid with her eyes, not wanting to look away, not wanting to drink it and forever be without evidence.

"Can you at least kick the box to me?"

With those words her head twitched.

"Yes," Adriana said, excited, "the box."

Her eyes shimmered in a flurry of blinks.

"Remember the box? It's on the floor here."

After several spasms, Cindy spun away from the water and dropped to the floor. She picked up the box, sat back down at the booth, and placed the box between her legs.

“Open it.”

Cindy looked at her friend. She spoke in a thin, frightened voice. “Don’t ever say that. It can’t be trusted.” She looked back to the water glass, eyes losing life. “It’s dangerous.”

She seemed to be changing in some awful way. Cindy hadn’t acted this odd in the foster home. “What did they do to you? What did they want?”

“They wanted to love me.” She leaned forward to the glass as she spoke. “They are loving me.”

This was maddening. If she could, Adriana would’ve clapped her hands together in front of the girl’s face to try to shock some sense into her. “What are you talking about? I heard you crying in there and screaming.”

She turned to Adriana. “Don’t be silly. They love me.” She looked back at the water, reached with a trembling hand, then pushed the glass away at the last second.

She smiled. “They care for me.”

Chapter 22

Laif opened the car door and got back inside the Mercedes.

He could feel the vein in the center of his forehead bulging and throbbing. He reminded himself that he liked Sharon and that she was a good person. They could get through this together, but he still couldn't look her in the eyes.

"Who did you see today?" he asked quietly, as he stuffed his burrito back into the brown paper bag, having lost his appetite.

"What does it matter?"

If she only knew how much it mattered. If we stumbled upon Jeffrey Dahmer in a dark alley, it would matter. If we bumped into Osama bin Laden before he funded the terrorist attack on the twin towers, it would matter.

"Believe me, it matters." He opened the glove box, pulled out his pack of Marlboro Lights, withdrew another cigarette and jammed it in his mouth. He wasn't going to light it, although he was tempted. He didn't need to light it. He could taste the sour bitter weed simply by sucking air through it, as he often did.

"This is ridiculous. You're not my husband or father. I can see whoever I want."

Something had gotten inside Sharon. Something was manipulating her. "Who?" he said impatiently. "Who?"

She chuckled.

"Who?"

"You sound like an owl."

He didn't respond.

After a few moments, she replied, "I was just working, okay? Did some home visits, went to the hospital to pick up a baby, placed the baby in a new foster home." A smile blew open her face. "Oh, you should have seen him, Laif. He was so cute. His eyes were bugged out and his cheeks were so mushy, you just wanted to pinch them."

He started the car, pulled away from the curb, and drove down the street, well below the speed limit. "Did you come in contact with Cindy's parents or grandparents at the child empathy building?"

"Of course not. I would have told you. Why are you asking these questions? Where are we going?"

It was never easy being with people in denial, but it was most difficult with those Laif felt close with. They were, after all, the ones who were supposed to know better; they were supposed to continue being close. But denial wedges itself between the greatest of friends, lovers, and family members. "I know someone. He might help us." He drove faster.

She picked up her taco and continued to crunch it. Between bites, she asked, "Is this really necessary? Honestly, I have another child on my caseload, Adriana, who is in more trouble than Cindy."

"There's a condition some psychic people can cause. They force others into lies. A little of something inside themselves enters you, like a psychic virus." He took a right turn at the corner, a little too fast, causing the Mercedes' tires to squeal.

She put one hand on the dashboard, steadying herself. "Slow down. I don't see the need for the rush."

"You will." He accelerated out of the turn. "Our belief in the lies causes us to withdraw from ourselves."

They passed an abandoned church, weeds squeezing out cracks in the asphalt parking lot, the big wooden cross rising from the roof in a tilt, yellowed paint vigorously peeling.

"Great," she replied, "now how does this concern me?"

"Did you go anywhere the Brewsters had been?"

"I don't think so. They weren't on the same floor as me in the child empathy building. Then I went to Cindy's old foster home."

"Why did you go there?" he said quickly.

"It had nothing to do with Cindy. The foster child in the home, Adriana, is missing."

"That's odd."

"Not really," she spoke as though reciting from a textbook, "because, unfortunately, running away from foster homes is not uncommon among older foster children."

Laif turned onto the 57 freeway ramp and headed south. "How old is she?"

She appeared confused. "Nine. She's *nine* years old."

He could picture a teenager running away, out of rebellion, but a nine-year-old in a safe family usually clung to the family, its security, and its values. Deep down inside--underneath her denial--Sharon must also know that.

After forty minutes traveling down three freeways to Costa Mesa, he exited on Mulberry. Taking a few more turns, he arrived at his old friend's house. But he had to park in the lot of a convenience store across the street because Creo had no driveway. Creo preferred natural settings and plants around his home.

They exited the Mercedes and crossed the street to the rust colored house, walked up the well-tended dirt path lined with sweetshrub, elderberry bushes, and bright purple flowers.

Before he had a chance to knock, his friend opened the front door.

The first thing he noticed was Creo's flaming red hair, darting and shooting upward, some strands long, some short. It seemed disharmonious with his rich black skin, lime green sweats, and brown T-shirt. Laif liked his friend's natural black hair color and style much better.

“What brings the goodhearted Laif here?”

Laif huffed.

Creo laughed richly and stepped aside as they walked inside.

The interior was ultra-modern, well-kept and clean, with colors that soothed the eyes--ocean blue, fern green, earth brown, mild pink. Creo led them to his living room with three black leather chairs, one of which Laif sank into too deeply, armrests raising his arms up to his shoulders.

Laif finally replied, “I’m only as good as you.”

Sharon sat on a large black leather couch across from the three chairs.

Creo remained standing beside the fireplace. “You know I don’t walk the same road as you.” Although it was April, Christmas lights twinkled around the mantle in a multitude of colors. Creo always cherished that time of year. Laif recalled him whistling Christmas songs while sun-bathing on his deck last June.

“Obviously. But sometimes two roads lead into one.”

“Who is the pretty woman?”

“I’m Sharon,” she answered with irritation, “and I’m not pretty. Umm, I mean I’m not *just* pretty.”

Laif looked at her. Her dark brown hair seemed to have grown warm highlights with the colors of the Christmas lights. Her feet in her sandals curled in self-doubt. Truly she was much more than simply a pretty woman. He wouldn’t have felt anything for her but lust if her beauty was only skin deep. Many women were beautiful, but few were attractive on the inside *and* out.

Suddenly he felt a strong desire to spend all seasons with her, to experience her through the ups and downs each year brings, to grow with her through life’s trials. It wasn’t just her indomitable spirit, her complex mind and wit, or her courage that spurred this, but her very essence.

His strong feelings unnerved him. They were too raw and unfocused. He cleared his throat. “This is my friend, Creo, who believes he is neither good nor bad.”

She rose and extended her hand to shake his, but he didn’t offer. Instead, he began pacing around the unlit fireplace.

She sat back down with a grimace.

“I know why you have come. One of your dreams, fairy tales, seeks to be fulfilled, where goodness triumphs.” He shook his head, and his red flared hair swayed. “When will you see reality, Laif?”

He scooted forward, which was difficult to do sunken in the chair. “The truth is always there, like a cup of water on a table. It is our choice to pick it up and drink or leave it resting, only to watch glimmers.”

This stopped Creo, and he sat on the couch beside Sharon. A smile grew slowly up his cheeks like poison ivy. “They forecast rain tonight.”

Laif gripped the armrests tightly. He wondered why he had chosen to use the metaphor of a glass of water of all things, spawning his friend's taunting.

"Yes." Creo leaned forward. "Rain, Laif. What do you think about that?"

He felt his chest tighten and his heart quicken.

Creo plucked a butterscotch candy from a crystal bowl on the marble coffee table, unwrapped it, and plopped it into his mouth. "Why would one who holds the truth be so fearful of rain?"

Sharon asked Laif, "You're afraid of rain?"

"Not merely afraid," informed Creo, "but absolutely phobic." He sucked hard on the candy, his cheeks visibly contorting.

Laif's head sank. He felt ashamed that his deepest weakness was fully exposed so soon. He wanted to look strong in her eyes, at least for a while longer--especially since he already revealed feelings of failure just two days ago. "No one can face the truth entirely," he justified. "We only have perspectives from where we stand in life." He was squeezing his knees tightly together, hating how much his weakness controlled him. "It's impossible to see all sides at once. Because our perception is limited, we must cherish what *can* be seen."

"Enough of this inexplicable talk. I find it tedious. What I like is reality, and it's that you seek my help."

Laif took a deep breath. "There's a girl, one such as us. She has been through much suffering."

Creo leaned his forearms into his thighs. "And who was there to help us in our misery?"

Memories threw him back to the seventh grade. He used to play in the Sonora Junior High School band, but he was the only violinist. He wanted to be in a symphony, but Sonora had only a band. Some guys in the trumpet section used to pick on him and call him, "Gay boy." It wasn't exactly a masculine thing to play the violin.

About halfway through the semester, right around when puberty was settling in, his senses melded for the first time. Instead of *hearing* their torturous comments, he *saw* them--red and violet snakes curling out of the boys' mouths and striking. He got scared, which seemed to make the boys taunt harder. The girls from the flute section turned around and giggled at him as well, and he *felt* that on the skin of his shoulders as hot coals. He came home that day feeling insane like his father.

"Look, we really don't know," Sharon countered, playing with her hair with her index finger, "if Cindy needs our help at all. Laif, for some reason, is obsessed with the idea that she does."

Creo leaned back into the couch, put a finger to his lips, and studied her.

Deep thunder roared quietly in the distance.

She asked, "What're you looking at?"

"You."

"What?" She turned to Laif, discomfort in her eyes.

Creo explained, "A dust trap."

"I don't know what you're talking about." She looked small and fragile, sitting beside him in the big leather couch, ensconced in her denial.

His hand rose before her forehead.

"No," Laif shouted, rising off the chair.

"What? The man of truth, of goodness, does not want friends to be enlightened?"

His palms were sweaty. He swallowed several times. "She may not be ready."

Creo lowered his hand to his lap. "Not ready like you?"

He felt nervous, spotlighted.

"Do you ask the people you enlighten if they're ready? Do you give them a *choice* to find the truth on their own, at their leisure?"

"That's different. You know that's different." Laif was breathing hard, as though each word were a work of labor. He sat back down.

"So you say. But would they?" Creo suddenly looked tired, wrinkles pulling his eyelids half closed.

"With Sharon, the risk isn't worth it. She has too much good in her heart to force her to see a single lie."

"What are you guys talking about?" she asked, "Who's carrying the lies in this room? Me, you, or Creo?"

Creo scratched his chin, not taking his eyes from Laif. "There's not much risk. If the lie is a part of her own doing, then there would be risk, but it's from the dust trap. It's artificial. I can centralize the energy so as to undo only what they have created."

This was too scary. As far as Laif was concerned, this was using Sharon as a guinea pig. He stood up and walked to her.

Every time Laif forced someone to see truth, they either became insane or killed themselves. Given, these people held *many* self-deceptions, and the ones they held were very deep and anchored. But he did not want to take any chances with Sharon. "It might expand outward to other lies in her life, ones she isn't ready to face. You don't know for sure that it will remain centralized."

"Aren't you the one who believes Cindy's life is at stake?"

How did he know her name? Did he meet with her already?

"You know as well as I, her time is running out." Creo raised his hand, but Laif pushed it back down.

"Let's try the old way--teaching--before we do anything rash." Laif knelt before Sharon and fixed on her brown eyes. "I want you to focus."

She stopped playing with her hair and sat up straight. "Okay."

"Good." He spoke in clear, slow, melodious words: "Close your eyes and picture yourself falling into yourself ... Knowing all parts of your being. See a bright, blue flame there. Let this symbolize truth." Her lips appeared curled in doubt. He spoke more forcefully. "Allow it to burn brighter inside. See this as the most important part of your life."

She opened her eyes. "I can't ... this isn't making sense."

Creo stood up and began pacing.

Laif scooted closer. "You can. Believe."

She closed her eyes again.

"Picture a ball of blue force ... let's call it motivation for truth. Picture this ball rolling through you and growing ... bigger ... bigger now ... until it engulfs your entire being ... making the truth the highest importance in your life."

"I *do* regard the truth highly. I don't feel like I'm in a lie." She flipped her eyes open.

"Please, Sharon, just concentrate."

Creo moved behind the couch, shaking his head. "You can't teach people knowledge they believe they already have."

She closed her eyes, but they fluttered back open after only a moment. "Look, maybe you guys should be the ones doing this. Why am I labeled as the liar?"

"No one called you a liar. But you do have to believe you're imperfect."

"Enough," Creo declared. "Time is slipping." Before Laif could react, Creo's hand opened inches from her forehead. Fear coursed in Laif's heart, fear of the unknown, fear of the power behind truth, fear of Sharon's fragile love breaking into a thousand tiny pieces, never able to reunite. A white light pulsed from Creo's palm, lasting just a fraction of a second--

--yet her face disappeared in that white glare.

She swayed as though she were going to faint. But she caught herself.

Laif should have blinked, should have closed his eyes, but he had been too worried for Sharon, too much in need to watch her to keep her safe.

From the little light that fell into his eyes, he saw himself at age four watching his father beating his mother. That was impossible though, because he never had any memory of her. Ever. His father had told him she left the day after his birth.

Sharon looked over her shoulder and glared at Creo. "You asshole." Then several tears spilled. Laif expected this reaction. Anger and hurt were normal when someone was confronted with a denied truth. Her arms opened as she turned toward Laif. Her lips were trembling, and she hugged him, softly at first, then tighter. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I had been thinking that way."

Her body was soft, warm, and supple. He never expected or experienced a hug so pleasant and comfortable. He didn't want it to end. "It's not your fault. Their dust is powerful."

She gently moved away from him. "We can't leave Cindy with them. I can't imagine what she is going through, but if they do to her what they did to me ..."

"I know. We need to--"

"Do not think me completely coldhearted," Creo interrupted. "I knew of Cindy's coming weeks before you ... and I offered her my box."

"She needs *us*."

"You always meddle in other people's affairs. Think you can save the world?" He jabbed his index finger at Laif. "She has a choice. Let her decide her fate."

Sharon countered, "We don't live in a vacuum. We live with each other. We're there to help one another."

Laif admired her gutsy attitude.

Deep thunder boomed. Creo went to the window and stared outside.

"Are *you* afraid?" she asked.

He continued watching the darkening sky. "Only a fool wouldn't be."

"It's getting chilly in here." She scrunched her hands in her pockets.

Creo went to a cupboard, retrieved a blanket, and draped it around her shoulders. "I haven't offered you guys anything to drink. How 'bout some hot tea?"

She pulled out a chip of wood from her jeans. "I forgot about this. I found it in Cindy's old foster home. Then I smelled something and grew dizzy, something like rotten eggs, and I couldn't remember things."

"Let me see that!" Creo plucked the chip from Sharon's hands and held it at eye-level. "It certainly looks familiar to me."

"Why?" she asked. "What is it?"

"It's part of the box I gave Cindy."

"Of course! I remember now. What's in it?"

Creo set the wood chip on the coffee table.

Laif didn't really know what the box was. All that was important was that it could help Cindy if she chose. He asked Sharon, "Whose bedroom did you find the chip in?"

"Adriana's, which was also Cindy's old bedroom."

"It probably broke off when she used to live there."

"I gave her the box," Creo informed, "when she needed it most, *after* she was placed back with her family last Friday."

“Then how did this chip get into Adriana’s room?” she questioned.

“Cindy must have either returned or sent the box to Adriana.”

“She couldn’t have mailed it because I saw the box with her this morning at the child empathy room. Mail doesn’t go that fast. And it wasn’t chipped this morning, so sometime between 10:30 am and 12:55 p.m., when I arrived at the foster home, somebody entered the foster home with the box.”

“If Cindy returned with her parents,” Laif proposed, “that would explain the dust trap.”

They all were silence for a moment.

As she looked into his eyes, she reflected, “It’s rather strange how Adriana disappeared right around all this.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Laif affirmed.

“Coincidence?” she asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Me neither.”

Chapter 23

The box was the only thing that stirred Cindy.

Adriana had to use whatever means she could to snap the girl out of her diseased mental state. Adriana didn't enjoy manipulation, but sometimes a good-natured controlling act was necessary. Even doctors do it sometimes. They might strap a girl into a straightjacket or inject her with drugs. So what was wrong with Adriana doing something gentler than that?

"If your parents love you, why're you afraid of opening the box?"

Cindy didn't answer.

"You have a rare gift, parents who really care." She had to swallow hard after she said that. She hated lying, especially about Mary's love because it was so sick. Adriana continued because it was for the best. "You should be able to face everything with courage."

Cindy's eyes shifted back and forth, then looked down at the box between her legs. "Some things weren't meant to be faced. Some things *need* to be hidden."

Adriana said sadly, "My parents' aren't here to love me. In fact my father hated me, but I'm not afraid to open the box."

Her face turned bright red. "Be quiet! You're stupid." She paused to breathe heavily. "The box must stay closed." She tightened her legs around it and placed both hands over the lid.

"I'm *not* stupid. You wouldn't have gotten that 'B' in math if I hadn't helped you."

"Shut up."

"What's the matter? The truth scary?"

She looked in Adriana's eyes. "You don't know the evil inside it."

"Evil can't be in a box. It's in people."

"It's in there. I can feel it. I don't know why you can't, but I can."

"Are you sure?" Adriana doubted.

"Of course I am." She moved her hands and stared down at the box.

"But your parents love you." Adriana heard herself pleading, hated it, but kept it up anyway. "Their love will protect you. You have to trust it. Love, after all, conquers all."

"They do love me. I know that." Her hands trembled beside the box.

She couldn't believe how easily Cindy accepted her false words. She was sure her acting was terrible. She almost wished Cindy would call her on it. It had been horrific when she played in the school play last year as Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, receiving only laughter from the audience of students. "With love you can do anything. You have support. If you don't get rid of the evil, the box may open on its own!"

Cindy's eyes widened.

"Or someone else may open it. Someone without their parents' love. It's best if you open it."

"Their love *is* protecting."

Adriana's face squeezed into a sour grimace. She couldn't believe her friend was buying all this bullshit. "Yes. It is. Go ahead."

"It's like shelter in a storm."

"Better than shelter, like a bunker."

"Home. I'm at home with them."

Now Adriana was feeling almost as deceitful as Mary. She went this far only because she knew her motivation was different. She was lying out of love for her friend. She reminded herself she just wanted to bring Cindy back, not *keep* her under control. "Open the box, at least a crack, just to see a little bit."

"Just a crack? Just to see if I can get rid of it, for good?"

"Yeah. A crack." Adriana tugged on her binds, but they were tight.

She moved the box on top of her legs, and her fingers trembled as they traced the decorative designs. They slowly moved to the single latch on the top-front of the box. "Just a crack," she repeated softly.

But right then, her mother walked in, carrying a steaming bowl of soup.

Cindy pushed the box back between her legs. Adriana wanted to cuss so badly, but she pressed her lips together and watched as Mary placed the soup on the table beside Cindy's untouched water.

Mary sat across from Cindy. "The air is drier out here. You need more liquids."

"Yes, Mom."

"Your father and I have a meeting we need to attend tonight. It's all for you. We're doing everything we can to raise the best daughter."

"Thank you, Mom, for all your love." She picked up the spoon with her right hand and slowly brought the steaming broth to her mouth, gently slurping.

Adriana almost jumped out of her pink skirt when Mary slapped Cindy across the face, sending the spoon flying across the room. "Don't slurp," Mary exclaimed. "It's impolite. Do you want people to think we raised a pig?"

The girl touched her red cheek and quietly answered, head bowed, "No, of course not."

"Why do you hate me so much?" Mary tilted her head back, raised her fisted hands high, and strained her voice to a crackle. "Why do you do these things to me?"

"I don't hate you," she protested. "I'm not trying to upset you."

"Look at your mess." Mary rushed to the kitchen, ripped off a paper towel from a roll, and raced back to wipe the spilled soup on the seat, the tabletop, and the floor. She had missed the dribble that had fallen onto her daughter's blue T-shirt. "You're almost ten. You need to start behaving like it." She rose with utter disgust on her face, threw the wadded towel into the trash, and stomped to the door.

Cindy lifted her head. In a thin, pleading voice, "You still love me, don't you?"

The woman stopped dead in her tracks.

Adriana wished she had a shotgun right now. She would aim it at Mary's legs and take one of them out to see how well she could manage being handicapped. No, that was bad. It was too much like her father, but she couldn't help fantasizing about it anyway.

Mary turned slowly and assured, "Of course, I do. I'll always love you." She marched back to Cindy and squeezed her daughter's hand.

Speaking mechanically and with razor coldness, Mary explained, "You know, sometimes I might have to be tough, but it's for your own good. I'm just trying to teach you lessons to get along in society. I am teaching you things that are going to help. The Bible says consistent teaching and discipline are necessary for children. The house without discipline breeds disobedience and disrespect. Discipline is necessary so that you can function. I'm teaching you now in our home what will help you later in life. Everything I do is in your best interest, Cindy." She raised the girl's hand to her mouth and kissed the back of it, leaving a sloppy wet splotch.

Cindy's eyes filled. "Thank you, Mommy. Thank you for caring for me."

Adriana was about ready to puke. The air was so thick with lies that it pushed on her gag reflex.

"Now finish up. Mommy will be back soon to check on you. She loves you more than anyone." Mary got up and left.

Cindy retrieved her spoon from the floor, rinsed it in the sink, and sat back at the table. She spooned soup into her mouth, carefully and quietly, her back straight as a board, her arm trembling, though not enough to spill the soup. The poor girl was terrified to make another mistake.

"Cindy," Adriana whispered, "the box ... let's see what's inside now."

But her foster sister wouldn't look at her. Cindy just kept spooning soup.

Adriana felt defeated. Cindy's mother appeared to have absolute control.

Adriana waited for her friend to finish eating. The girl seemed intent on accepting this gift of nurturance from her mother. When she was done, Adriana mustered as much determination as she could and lied, "They really love you, don't they?"

"Yes. They do."

"So, you have everything you need to peek into the box."

Cindy turned toward her. "You're just saying that so I'll open it and let out the evil. You're jealous of my mother."

"No," she said truthfully.

"You can just forget it." She picked up her water glass and held it to her mouth, but didn't drink.

"I just don't want the evil to go on. I think you're strong enough to get rid of it. You can't keep the box safe forever. It's going to break or someone else will open it. We have to deal with it."

Cindy looked confused, torn, and then resolute. "My parents will know what to do. I'll ask them." She set the water down.

She was afraid of this. Whatever was in the box, Cindy's parents would spoil like they did with everything. "You shouldn't tell them. If they know, they might open it and get hurt."

Cindy frowned. "You're right." She moved from the booth to sit on the floor, several feet from Adriana.

"You have to fight this now. If they find it when you're at school, they'll get hurt."

She looked at the box between her legs. "I could bring it with me, wherever I go."

"That's impossible."

Her hands fidgeted. Her index finger touched the latch then retracted as though touching fire. "I don't know."

"You don't believe your parents love you?"

"No! I do." She brought her finger to the latch quickly and flicked it back. She brought the box level with her nose. "Are you sure?" she said weakly.

"Yes."

"You are my friend, right?"

"Of course."

"You wouldn't lie to me?"

Adriana felt horribly torn. She had to lie. There was no other way, but not about this. She could not lie about this. It felt like too much. She simply answered, "Just do it."

Cindy opened it, millimeter by millimeter, her eyes close to the crack, peeking in, cheeks tight and red.

Suddenly she snapped it shut. She breathed fast and loud. "I'm not sure about this."

"I understand." Adriana sighed. "It's difficult."

"Maybe we can just hide it somewhere." Her face relaxed.

"Stop trying to avoid it. That's dangerous. We wouldn't be able to see it, and something could sneak out."

She hesitantly placed her fingers back on the lid. As it slowly rose, she moved her head closer to the crack. She let out a squeak, snapped the box shut, flipped the latch back on, set the box on the floor, and slid it behind her.

Her eyes closed as her breathing sped. She hunched her back and kept repeating, "It can't be.... It can't be."

"Cindy?"

"It can't.... It can't be...."

"What did you see?"

"It can't be true.... It can't...."

"Cindy," Adriana said louder.

She opened her eyes and tears spilled out. She crawled to Adriana like a cat that wants to be petted but is too afraid. "It was dark inside. Then I was back in my bedroom ... in the dark ... and ... someone was on top of me."

"You were here the whole time."

"I don't know what's happening to me."

"It's okay."

"It's *not* okay. Something is very wrong."

No duh, Adriana thought, frustrated that it took her friend this long to admit that. "What was inside?"

Her eyelids fluttered. She turned white. "More ... terrible things ... I can't ..."

Adriana waited.

"Why did you tell me to look in the box?"

"I was trying to help."

Disturbed understanding formed her face. "You want me to doubt my parents' love, don't you? What kind of friend would do that?"

She ignored Cindy's accusations. "I think you did it wrong. You have to open the box all the way."

"You want me to believe in lies. I know what's in there now." She scooted away from Adriana until her back touched the side of the booth seat. "I thought you were a friend." She began sobbing.

Adriana felt rotten. She didn't like her friend to go through pain. She felt like saying, *throw the box away and never look into it again*. But would a friend really do that? Would a friend sit by and let Cindy continue to slip into her abusers' ugly grasp? She spoke, but her voice was thin and lacked determination. "I am your friend. Try again, but all the way."

Cindy wouldn't listen. She stuck the box between her legs, squeezing it tightly while crying.

The door to the room whipped open. Mary stormed inside. "What's going on?"

Cindy continued to cry.

"What's the matter?" She went to her daughter. "Stop sniffing."

Cindy tried choking off her tears.

"Stop it! What do you want from me?"

Try dropping dead, thought Adriana, but she was too scared of Mary to let out a peep.

"I'm afraid, Mommy. I'm afraid to tell."

"Tell me." More gently, she insisted, "You can tell me."

"But you might think I'm bad."

"Go ahead. I'll listen."

"Mommy? Do you love me, really?"

"I told you earlier I do. Now stop this nonsense."

"I looked in this box." Cindy looked down. "It made me afraid ... of you and Dad."

Mary reached for the box, but Cindy put her hands on top of it and held it tight between her thighs. She warned, "No, Mommy. It's bad."

"Let go. I need to see."

"I'm afraid. I'm afraid you won't love me anymore if you look."

"Stop being so weak and pathetic. You're making me sick."

But Cindy held fast.

Mary cocked her hand back threateningly, but her daughter wouldn't release the box. Her hand whacked against Cindy's face, and the girl's arms went to her cheeks as she cried out.

Mary tore the box from Cindy's legs. She undid the latch, but something stopped her from opening it. She appeared ... nervous.

She redid the latch and called for her husband several times. He came after a minute. "What?" he asked, irritated.

She held up the box.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Cindy had it. She said it made her afraid of us."

"Yeah? So?"

"We don't know what's inside."

Joe turned to Cindy. "Where did you get it?"

Her hands lowered from her red cheeks. "A Black man gave it to me. At Grandma and Grandpa's, when I was in the backyard."

"A nigger?" Mary and Joe held the small box together, whispering among themselves.

Joe undid the latch and began to slowly open it. Cindy's head bowed. Both Mary and her husband were staring at it. Before the box was even open a crack, they shut their eyes and rubbed them, screaming as though someone were sticking hot needles in their retinas. Joe barely managed to redo the latch, and he threw the box.

It landed next to Adriana.

Mary and her husband swatted their bodies, arms, and legs, and bumped into each other because their eyes were tightly shut. Adriana moved her leg over the box, hiding it.

After fifteen seconds of swatting themselves, the parents cracked their eyes open and glanced around the room for the box, but they gave up quickly, not seeming interested in finding it any time soon.

Adriana heard parts of their whispers. She caught something about Sharon and the man from the park having sent a nigger to deliver the box. Then she heard something that chilled her--about sending a dark mist to hurt Sharon and Laif.

Mary's voice sped up and grew higher in pitch until she didn't sound human anymore.

Chapter 24

Sharon walked with Laif across the cool grass of Creo's green lawn, feeling burning sun on her arms, thinking how uncompassionate Creo was to have not offered help.

He had given the excuse of needing to be *neutral*. She believed that if there were too many people like him, this world would be a cruel, heartless place.

She remembered with some pride when she was fourteen that her mother had the strength to leave her stepfather, Ralph Anderson. Mom had quickly married after Marlene's death, as though trying to replace the loss.

Ralph seemed nice during the first few months, buying Sharon and her mother lots of presents and taking them to amusement parks, nice restaurants, and museums. But later Ralph began to request strange things, like asking Sharon to sit on his lap. She didn't really know him well enough to sit there. But after persisting for weeks, she gave in because she wanted to make him happy. He meant so much to her mother who had been so depressed since Marlene's death, and even before that from divorcing her father. Sharon desperately wanted her mother to be happy for once. Over the course of the next few months, his demands with Sharon grew bolder, until he reached down her pajama pants one night while they watched television.

Sharon waited for morning when Mom was sober to tell her what had happened. Mom was angry and upset. At first Sharon thought these feelings were directed at herself. But then her mother hugged her and left the bastard that morning. This was the one good thing Mom did that Sharon could look back on with pride.

She was thankful people existed in this world who fought for children.

Creo evidently wasn't one of them.

She looked up at Laif as they crossed the busy street. He was definitely someone special, and she loved that. He appeared deep in thought. She smiled, knowing she was really beginning to fall for him.

"The next stop is the Brewsters," he said with confidence. "If we see Adriana with them, then our problem is solved. We call the police, and the state will remove Cindy after the parents are arrested for kidnapping."

As they reached the parking lot of the convenience store, Sharon noticed a silver pickup truck parked alongside the Mercedes. Inside, a guy and his girlfriend were arguing, cursing, and raising their hands animatedly at each other.

She turned to Laif. He was watching them intently. He asked, "Can I borrow your phone?"

She reached into her purse and handed it to him.

He punched 9-1-1, and after a moment said, "I'd like to report domestic violence." He gave the cross streets of the convenience store and reported the license plate of the pickup and hung up.

"Why did you do that?"

“I’ve seen situations like this before. The energy inside the couple ends in violence.”

How could he presume to know the outcome of an argument between two strangers? “Maybe we should have waited until we knew for sure before calling the police. They have a busy--”

Suddenly the man in the car began punching his girlfriend, socking her in the chest and stomach and trying for the head as she shielded herself with her arms, simultaneously causing Sharon to hold up her own arms in empathetic defense.

But in this moment of violence, the couple seemed paradoxically calmed. The yelling and cursing had abated. No more harsh comments were being spoken. No more arguing or putting each other down. No more threats of violence filled the air. In fact, the air was silent, except for slaps, thumps, and socks, as communication had completely transformed from verbal to physical.

She reached for Laif’s hand and found it. She gripped it tightly. “Come on. Let’s help.”

He took four steps with her, then stopped.

She turned to face him. “What?”

He hesitated. “We can’t.”

“What’re you talking about? Sure we can.”

“We can’t get involved.”

“You sound like Creo. Has he gotten into you somehow?”

“Of course not. This is different.” He looked at the couple in the truck. A glossy emptiness filled his eyes. “There’s a high degree of evil inside the cab from *both* parties.”

“What do you mean? He’s beating her. Clearly, he’s a fucking asshole--”

“True.”

“--and she’s a victim.”

“Yes.”

“So let’s go!”

“This isn’t the first time she’s been beaten. And it won’t be the last. She believes she loves him.”

She looked at the couple. Blood was beginning to fall out their noses as they continued lashing at each other. The woman now began to scream intermittently. Sharon’s heart was hammering against her chest, wanting to leap out and stop the injustice. If Laif was right, this woman should have left her boyfriend the first time he hit her. But what if she just didn’t know enough to leave?

“This man is only one of several who abused her. Her father was the first.”

“So we can’t help because she’s emotionally sick? Sounds like her father’s more twisted than her.”

The couple stopped fighting and started cursing at each other again.

“Yes, he was. But she allowed his sickness to grow inside her by not facing the truth. She believed her father truly loved her. That’s a lie. Even as she grew into an adult, she didn’t face this. So today, this is what she continues to believe love to be.”

She looked at Laif. He was watching the couple with such sadness in his eyes.

“She believes this so deeply that her heart found another man like her father--one primed for aggression.”

Sharon looked back at the truck. The woman yanked at the man’s hair once, he yanked back, and they began arguing loudly. “So what? She couldn’t face the hard truth of an abusive father. Does that mean she deserves this? She’s already *had* an abusive life. Let’s help her stop it.” She felt urgency growing inside her. “Aren’t you the one who fights evil?”

“I still risk my life intervening with battered women. The women I help have hit bottom and are ready to grow. This woman isn’t.”

“Well let’s find out for sure.”

“I’ve tried with others before, Sharon. What do you think happens?”

Two customers of the convenience store came out and pointed at the arguing couple.

“I don’t know. You save the girl?” She looked nervously at the two in the silver truck. She was conscious of time dripping away as she and Laif conversed, wondering when the couple might begin throwing punches again. She stepped closer to them, pulling Laif forward.

“Oh, yes. I save her. For a moment. Then she attacks me for having had to punch her boyfriend to get him off her. Or, she goes back to arguing and fighting with him. It’s a *dual-dynamic*, not a single person that’s creating this. It is two people living their lives to arrive at this.”

“Okay, so she’s made mistakes. She shouldn’t have hooked up with him, she shouldn’t have pushed him over the edge, whatever. But no one’s perfect.”

“Of course. Everyone can make mistakes, but they need to grow from them. She hasn’t. She wishes to remain the same because it’s safer than facing the pain of an unloving father. We cannot save someone who doesn’t want to be saved. She basks in the times when her boyfriend is calm and turns away from when he’s explosive. During violent times, she blames herself so that she can still perceive him as loving.”

She and Laif continued to walk slowly towards the couple’s truck. The yells became louder, and five people had now gathered outside the convenience store. No one was intervening.

“We can’t just sit by and allow this to continue.”

“But it *wants* to continue. The energy of years of training dictates that this must. Even if we were to stop this one incident, she would go back to him or to another abusive man and re-create the violent dance.”

“But she’s a victim,” Sharon said with less conviction, “a victim of violence.”

“And she’s also a victim of herself for continuing to deny the truth. If she embraced it, her heart would lead her to non-violent men. There’re plenty of lonely, *nice* guys out there. Believe me. She has accurately steered clear of these many men, as though they were infected with a disease. If she did ever hook up with one of them, she would be forced to face the truth of having an unloving father.”

Inside the cab, the woman shook her head, the man rolled his, and arms flew emphasizing insults.

“But how can she know all that? She hasn’t known anything different than her father.”

“That is the choice we make. To know or not to know. That *is* the choice branching good and evil directions.”

Sharon didn’t like what he was saying. Something didn’t feel fair about it. And she didn’t like that his logic was eroding hers. “What about your light? Can’t you flash them the truth?”

“Sure, if I want them to go insane or kill themselves.”

Some neighbors across the street had crept out of their front doors, and the cashier joined the five customers standing outside the convenience store, watching but making no attempts to intervene. Sharon could hear one woman saying, “Why do they do that?”

“People always ask that question,” Laif stated, “but few want the answer.”

“I still don’t understand. She’s not evil. She’s hurting no one.”

“Really?”

“Well ... no one but herself.”

She and Laif were ten steps from the Mercedes now.

“Hurting yourself is not evil?” He sighed and stopped walking. “Hurting yourself is enough. But you have no idea what she’s going to put her children through--the abuse, the rage, drugs, chaos, the violent men she will bring into her children’s lives simply because she wasn’t ready to face her father’s abuse. She embraces darkness, just as her father when he turned from the truth of his hurt as a boy and a man, just as her boyfriend continues to do.”

“I don’t know, Laif. This all sounds so strange ... depressing.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” He looked down at asphalt.

Amazingly, the couple stopped yelling and began talking, arms at their sides. She felt relieved.

Laif began to look worried. “Let’s go. Quickly.”

“Leave?”

“Yes. Something’s wrong.”

“It feels more right than ever.”

He grabbed her hand, and not too gently.

Some neighbors had gathered in a clump of bodies on the sidewalk. One yelled that the police were coming. *It's about time*, thought Sharon. *Laif called them before the fight had even begun.*

He and Sharon hurried to their car. As they got closer, the couple stopped talking. The abusive man made eye contact with Sharon.

The passenger door of the Mercedes was next to this man's door. She had to pass right beside him. She averted her eyes and quickly went for the door. Laif was already inside. She felt vulnerable with her back towards the truck.

The Mercedes' electronic lock release clicked. She pulled open the door.

A metallic snap came from behind her, then creaking hinges.

It's the man.

As she bent to get in, her purse strap caught on the corner of her door. She pulled herself out a little to unhook the strap, and the man grabbed her blouse and arm.

"You bitch!" he exclaimed, his hot breath hitting her face. "You make me fight with my girlfriend?" His fingers dug into Sharon's arm, burning.

Laif was already outside the car, circling it as the woman came around the pickup truck, anger contorting her face. She screamed, "Stop messing with my boyfriend, bitch. She ran into Laif with a fist to the gut and pulled his hair back as he reflexively bent forward.

The man spun Sharon around. Hot red scratches and perspiration covered his face, and his messed short black hair jutted every which way. "Why do you like to make me mad?"

Her heart fluttered like a broken winged butterfly. "I don't. I didn't do anything."

"Lying cunt." His fingers dug harder sending sharp pains into her shoulders. "I hate liars."

"Stop it," she said weakly. "Let go of me."

"Why? You didn't stop with me. You just keep pushing, huh? You have to keep pushing and pushing until you know what's gonna happen next? You're gonna get hurt. This is your fault, bitch."

"I didn't do anything. What's wrong with you?"

"I'll show you what's wrong with me." He shook her against the back of the car.

Some customers from the convenience store began to run towards the scene.

Laif had escaped the woman's grasp and was pulling at the man's arm, unhooking fingers that were submerged in Sharon's flesh. The woman sprang from behind and dragged her orange painted fingernails across Laif's face, just missing his eyes. He swung his elbow back and into her gut.

The man pulled Sharon's hair. "Listen, bitch. I'll teach you a lesson so you can mind your business next time." He cocked his arm to punch her, but Laif grabbed it and tumbled with him

to the ground. The woman jump in, and they rolled across the pavement. A blond haired, young man with his three friends intervened. With difficulty they got the couple off Laif.

Sharon took his arm and helped him up, and they moved away from the others. He thanked the young men, told Sharon to get into the car, and entered on the driver's side.

As he struggled with the keys, his tan shirt ripped and dirty, the blond haired young man turned toward her door, his face tomato red, his teeth bared.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She was utterly flabbergasted. This guy was just helping them moments ago. What had gotten into *him*?

Laif turned the key in the ignition, but it wouldn't start.

The man rushed into her door. Crash! His blond hair flung into his face as he smashed his fist into the glass window beside her head. The window held, but a few spider web cracks reflected bright yellow sunlight.

Another guy from the quartet of friends ran to the car. The bloody couple now was able to move around the remaining two young men.

Laif turned the key in the ignition again. This time it started. He threw the shifter in reverse and slammed his foot into the gas pedal. The fuming blond man was joined by his other friend and the couple, all standing in the parking lot, eight fists clenched as the Mercedes sped backwards towards the exit, Laif looking over his shoulder.

"They're crazy," she gasped, chills trickling off her spine.

"A dark mist. I felt it when I fought them. Cindy's parents must have sent it." The car flew into the air for a moment after launching off a speed bump, Sharon's and Laif's heads smacking into the roof. He skidded into a one-hundred-eighty degree spin, and slipped it into drive.

Massaging the top of her head, she asked, "A dark mist?"

"This evil can channel through anyone's resident anger."

"Anyone's?"

Car metal panged against asphalt as they exited the parking lot onto the street. "Anyone who's in denial of it."

"Not many people are in denial, are they?" she asked hopeful.

He released an unpleasant, sharp laugh.

Chapter 25

Adriana flinched as Mary swatted her daughter's bare butt with a stick again.

Cindy screamed from floor.

"This is hurting me more than you," Mary explained. She counted the strikes out loud. "*Three ... four ... five.* You are too willful ... *six.* You need to obey, not question."

With each strike, Adriana felt more and more anxious. She felt responsible. After all, if she hadn't convinced Cindy to open the box, Cindy wouldn't have told her mother about it.

Adriana caused this. If anyone should be beat, it was her.

With such a psycho as Mary, Adriana should have known not to make waves. Everything must be smooth around people like that or else they get out of control, just like her ax-throwing father. Adriana went through years of training to be as a mouse in a corner, hardly making noises, unnoticeable, stuffing away her feelings. She should have known better than to cause commotion around Cindy's parents.

"*Nine ...* I know what's best ... *ten.* When I say give me something, you give, and don't play with niggers ... *eleven.* Damn to hell all those fucking niggers!"

"Please, Mommy," she cried, "stop."

Adriana moved the small box that had been hidden under her leg to her left, then used her knee to slide it behind her. She reached for it and held it in her hands which were still tied behind her back, tracing her fingers over its smooth carved sides, wondering what everyone saw inside to make them crazy.

Mary set down the stick and retrieved a leather whip from the bin under the booth seat. She drew it back and whipped her daughter's apple-red butt, her body shaking from the effort.

A scream of a new level rose from Cindy. This sound equaled the force behind the lash, as though its leather end continued up through her spine and out her mouth.

Adriana had learned from her teacher that a whip makes such a loud *twack* sound because the end actually breaks the sound barrier, traveling faster than the speed of sound, faster than 768 miles-per-hour.

"You will not tell me what to do young lady."

Twack!

"*Two.* You have to learn your place, and because of backtalk, you're getting five of these."

Adriana was surprised to see tears in Mary's eyes.

"I'm a God-loving Christian, and I know that someday you'll thank me for setting boundaries in your life."

Twack!

“*Three* ... and enforcing them with proper discipline. The world would be a happier place if we all did this.”

Twack!

“*Four*. I was disciplined by my parents and have no complaints. In fact, I’m glad they had the courage to do what was necessary.” *Twack!* “*Five*. It made me who I am today.” *Twack!* “*Six*.”

She could no longer watch. She drew her leg up and hid her teary eyes behind her knee. She wanted silence, innocent beautiful silence. But Cindy’s cries and her mother’s words pried deep into Adriana’s ears.

“Shut up,” Mary screeched. “You earned this!”

Cindy put her hands over her mouth to try to quiet herself.

Adriana didn’t know how to stop Mary. She thought about throwing the box at her, but then Mary would have it, and Adriana would lose whatever hope it might offer. Mary would go back to beating her daughter anyway.

Twack!

The leather whip against her friend’s soft skin also marked Adriana’s heart.

Mary was no longer talking but whipping faster. *Twack! Twack! Twack!* No longer keeping count, her eyes entranced on her daughter’s bloody rear, and her body taking on a mechanical horror.

Adriana missed the counting because without it, Mary might never stop. She was already past twelve lashes and was in some kind of hypnotic rage.

Chapter 26

Honk! Honk! Honk!

As Laif drove the Mercedes north on Chapman Avenue, Sharon surveyed the driver of a Jeep beside them. His inner eyebrows curled toward flared nostrils, upper lip stretched tight and cracking, bottom lip protruding to expose canines. He began yelling something behind her closed window, which she thankfully couldn't comprehend.

She asked, "Most people have old anger in them?"

"Hidden."

"But *most* people?" She didn't want it to be true.

"No child can be raised perfectly, so to some degree every child gets hurt. Many parents just expect their child to get over it. But each hurt needs to be mourned, regardless how insignificant it seems to the parent. The hurt can be as innocent as missing your son's baseball games. Or more obvious, such an untimely family death or poverty. It can be as personal as child abuse. It doesn't matter. If people don't mourn it, it stays. Then anger covers hurt as an attempt to protect."

"So why don't we see the anger more often?"

"It can be seen if you know where to look. It has only two directions to take, at others or the host. Anger at others you have seen. Anger at self is insidious."

She looked around and estimated about forty people in nearby cars. She couldn't think--didn't want to think--what would happen if *everyone* were to flip out in a rage at her.

"The difference people can make is to be aware. But this is very hard because of denial. Most people aren't self-aware. But if they can achieve and *maintain* awareness, they can mourn the hurt as it comes in waves."

"Awareness," Sharon repeated, thoughtful.

"*Ever* awareness, not just once or twice. That's what heals. Then the waves grow smaller as you age. Awareness also prevents others from using your hurt to manipulate you."

She agreed, "In therapy, the therapist tries to get the client to become aware."

"With interminable awareness, no dark mist can pry anger loose from its mooring deep within your soul. Otherwise, the mist can make the old anger appear from the present--from the person *right next to you*."

They were gaining on a blond woman's spotless cherry-red Corvette. When the blond caught sight of Sharon, the woman's nose contorted into a wrinkled pig-like snout. She spun her steering wheel hard to the left, almost hitting Laif's car.

Sharon checked that her seat belt was engaged.

The blond's blue eyes glistened with hatred as she continued to swerve her expensive red bullet at them.

"We have to get to a deserted street." He pushed the brakes and moved to the left lane--away from the Corvette--but caught the red light.

Horns blared from at least three other cars as they stopped before the crosswalk.

She felt exposed. She never realized anger was bound inside so many people. Sure, there was the occasional psychopath in LA who would pull out a gun and shoot you if you cut him off, but who would expect a *normal* person to behave crazy?

She worried about encountering one of those psychopath drivers today. Their anger would turn catastrophic. Dealing with all these irrational people made her feel insecure and powerless.

The Mercedes lurched forward causing her head to lash back, then bounce off the headrest. She turned to Laif as if he held an answer. He was looking in the rear view mirror. She spun and saw a gray van behind them reversing then accelerating forward, and Sharon braced herself for the second impact. Tingles tattooed her spine. The van reversed again and drove forward, faster, crashing and drilling sharp pains into Sharon's back, pushing them further into the intersection with opposing traffic speeding in both directions.

"This is ridiculous. We need to get out of here."

Laif looked for an opening, then ran the red light, resulting in a number of murderous screams and blaring horns around them. A Hummer on the opposite side of the street also ran the light to head straight at them, the driver evidently lacking concern for his own life.

She screamed as Laif turned the Mercedes away at the last second, avoiding a head-on impact. The Hummer plowed through a sign in the center divider, then continued down the street.

Moving out of the intersection onto a residential street, Laif sped, where traffic was much lighter. Heading down the street a couple of blocks, making several turns without incident, they ended up in a cul-de-sac. No traffic there. At 3:00 p.m., many people were still working. The only person around was a gardener raking leaves two houses down.

"The mist has probably dissipated by now." He sounded rattled. His breathing was labored, and his eyes shifted around warily.

Narrowly having just escaped death in the Mercedes, she felt claustrophobic inside the car. She rolled down her window half-way to get fresh air. "So how does a person fight dark mists?"

"I've never dealt with them, only heard about them. But my guess is that you can't fight them while they're inside another person. You can only fight them when they're inside you."

"That's great," she said with heavy sarcasm.

"The best way to fight evil is to fight it within yourself. Once you get the upper hand there, you can help others."

Sharon felt confused. “So in order to fight against a mist or dust trap, I have to get in touch with my old hurts.”

“Yes, awareness, even if you’ve already mourned most of it.”

“How do *you* fight against these things, when they try getting inside you?”

“I can see dust traps, so I’ve never stirred them into the air.”

“What if I step on one again?”

“If evil resides in and feeds on lies, what is our greatest weapon against it?”

She shrugged.

“Truth.” He said it like a sword slashing through the air. “Not just truth. A determination for greater truth. For we rarely arrive absolutely, only closer.”

“But how would *you* fight it?”

“Being terribly open and honest most of the time. It makes me bad company.”

“I don’t find you bad company.”

“I’m glad.” He looked out the window. “It made it difficult for me with my father. Because of his schizophrenia, he lived in fantasy. By embracing reality, I was rejected.”

The gardener finished raking leaves in one yard and began in the yard adjacent to the Mercedes, gathering leaves in small piles.

Laif continued, “I’ve dedicated my life to fighting lies. I hate them. I hate the damage they cause.”

“Where does the dark mist and dust come from?”

He looked at the pedals on the floorboard. “From evil people with psychic powers.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Why don’t they just stop? I don’t understand. What’s so attractive about being evil?”

“It’s the easier road, in the short run. It’s easier to pick up a gun and shoot your lover than deal with problems in your relationship. It’s easier to smack your kids than learn and practice love. It’s easier to rob a liquor store than work for money. It’s easier to bury your pain than deal with it.”

She looked at the gardener and found solace and goodness about his work. He stared at her. This man had made a choice, and it was for the better of humanity.

When she turned back to Laif, she saw him smiling. He didn’t smile often and it was beautiful. She smiled back, shyly, for some reason.

Fear suddenly gripped Laif’s face, breaking his smile, blowing his eyes out, twisting his handsome cheeks, enlarging his nostrils. He turned the keys in the ignition. “Roll up your window!”

Sharon turned and saw the gardener sprinting toward the car with the rake posed like an ax, fully extended behind his back.

She began jabbing her finger at the window button but mistakenly rolled it down further. She reversed the direction. The man was only feet from the car. He began pulling the rake over his head to land it onto Sharon's half-closed window. As the glass slowly inched its way up, she could see each brown freckle on the gardener's tan, leathery cheeks.

The car engine fired to life.

The rake descended.

She turned her head and closed her eyes, heard shattering, and felt pieces of glass showering her chest and legs. She tried moving towards Laif, but her seat belt caught her just as the rake pushed inside, metal teeth searching for her eyes. Her fingers reached the seatbelt release button, and she moved so quickly her shoulder slammed into Laif's, and then he put the car into gear, lurching them forward, yanking the rake from the man's hands. Its teeth held onto the remaining inch of jagged glass still fixed in the door, the wooden handle grinding against the pavement outside.

She unhooked the teeth and heard clattering after it fell. She found herself breathing hard. "That was nice," she said sarcastically. She didn't know how else to respond to this insanity. How could Laif live like this for years on end? Wouldn't that scar him permanently?

As Laif accelerated further from the gardener, relief slowly spread through her.

A basketball rolled onto the street about twenty yards in front of them. Following it was a chubby boy in a striped orange shirt with an eager pink face. Laif slammed the brakes. The boy suddenly lost interest in the ball and just stood in the middle of the street scrutinizing the car screeching towards him.

"Watch it!" she cried.

Laif turned the wheel hard to the left, smoking tires, causing the car to slide sideways, her broken window rapidly approaching the boy.

To her shock, the boy ran *towards* the car with a twisted grin. The Mercedes stopped a foot from him and he reached in through the window, scraping his fat arms on the remaining glass, laughing, pulling Sharon's hair, hooting like he was digging through a candy jar.

She slapped his hands but they clung to her.

Laif put the car into gear and drove slowly, evidently not wanting to hurt the possessed boy. He yelled, "Get him out!"

"What do you think I'm trying to do? Play patty-cake with him?" She grabbed her own strands of hair and yanked them out of his tight, thick fingers, leaned her back into Laif and blew hard in the kid's face, surprising him, his long eyelashes fluttering, giving Laif just enough time to jerk the car forward out of the boy's reach.

They sped down the street.

But where could they go? The mist could influence most people to attack. In a city as densely populated as Orange County, there were no safe places.

Chapter 27

As the sun set, coldness slithered into the mobile home.

The fact that Mary behaved as heartless as Adriana's father did nothing to warm the room.

She hadn't thought it was possible to meet someone as uncaring as her father, but she did. She might as well *still* be with him. At least then they would share something in common, genes. It wasn't much, but it was something. This woman was a complete stranger.

It would have been dark inside the mobile home as well as cold, but the fluorescent ceiling lights had been left on.

Adriana wished she could reach the jacket on the chair next to the door. She needed her arms to be free for the jacket though, and for the box as well. If it held something dangerous, she didn't want to open it while tied to a pole.

In the other room, Cindy stopped crying as people began burping, coughing, and sneezing again. It sounded like a group of people. Why didn't they learn manners? Didn't they know not to cough and sneeze on children? Who raised them?

Through the parted curtains of the window, Adriana saw lightening flash in the sky, twice, three times. A series of rumblings overshadowed the ill manners of the adults next door.

But it didn't frighten her. Strangely it calmed her. *These people* frightened her.

A great bolt of light flashed outside with a booming, breaking the darkening sky.

She smiled. If anything, maybe a big storm would stop these idiotic loser parents.

She missed Sharon. Sharon would never burp on kids. She was kind. She had been there when Adriana needed her. She had helped Adriana get along with two different sets of foster parents. Adriana used to resent them, but Sharon helped her recognize it was really anger at her father for abusing her. Sharon had also helped her adapt to having no left leg. She taught Adriana to fill her life with things she loved. Adriana bought more books, became a member of a reading club at the public library, and visited on-line groups of bird watchers. Now she could identify many California bird species.

Rain began beating the metal roof of the motor home.

Adriana remembered the handsome man, Laif, who had followed Sharon. She wished he had followed her to this camp. She hoped Sharon didn't have a romantic interest in him. The way she treated him at the foster home made it seem that she could *never* like him. Adriana thought Sharon was a bright woman, but when it came to men, she evidently wasn't very smart. That was fine though. That just meant he was free for Adriana. He was a little older than her--well maybe a lot older--but he could adopt her first, and then when she became an adult, they could fall in love and get married.

She sighed.

He seemed knowledgeable and strong. He would know what these crazy parents were up to and how to stop them. The way he looked at her was special. He saw past her absent leg and saw her for who she really was inside. His look made her feel warm.

No one liked her at this camp except Cindy. And Cindy wasn't herself. As a foster sister and friend, Adriana saw it as her responsibility to save Cindy.

Behind her back, she lifted the box off the floor a couple of inches. It felt as heavy as a baseball. She shook it. Something inside hit the walls. She turned her ear toward the box and heard a splash. No. More like a slush-mush, if that was even a word.

Deciding to get a closer look, she snapped her wrist forward.

The box landed next to her leg. She scrunched down on her side and used her knee to turn the box on each of its six sides, carefully inspecting each. On the third turn, which showed the lid of the box, she saw two words carved in the center. They were very small so she almost overlooked them. They were also surrounded by decorations, making them harder to spot. She moved the box closer to her head with her knee.

It read: *Inside Out*.

What could that mean?

The burping and crying stopped next door. Adriana froze when she heard footsteps.

They were coming back.

She quickly sat up. She tried pulling her blouse over the box but it was too short. There wasn't any place she could kick the box or push it so that it would be hidden. She moved her leg over it.

The door opened and Cindy stepped inside, alone. She sat at the table with a blank stare.

"Cindy? You okay?"

She appeared somewhere far away.

"Psssst! Wake up!"

Nothing but an unblinking stare at the wall.

She had no choice. Her friend seemed to be getting worse here. She felt bad about using the box again, but it was her only link to her friend in this state. Besides, this time she knew better than to let Cindy open it. "Hey. I know where the box is."

Cindy turned her head to Adriana. "Where?" There was coldness in her voice.

"I hid it. Untie me and let's get out of here."

She screamed, "Mom!"

"Shhhh! What're you doing?"

"Mom!"

Within less than a minute, Mary tramped into the room. She asked in a shrill, perturbed voice, "What is it?"

"She has the box."

Mary glared at Adriana. Those hawk-like gray eyes held unspoken words: *you are stupid, worthless, and ugly*. How could Cindy have endured their glare for so many years? She had eaten breakfast early in the morning with them, been with them all day long, and saw them as the last sight before the lights went out at bedtime. Adriana would've lost her mind only two weeks after being born.

The woman grabbed her by the ankle, threw her leg to the side, and picked up the box.

She inspected it carefully, then read the inscription, "Inside Out."

Mary seemed to age ten years. Worry wrinkled her face. Her hands trembled.

She rushed to the cabinets and began frantically searching through them. After that, she looked behind the couch, underneath the seats and cushions, and in the storage compartment underneath the table.

Then she screamed, "Joooooooooooo!"

Chapter 28

From the sun dropping in the west, orange shafts streamed between chunky bruised clouds, most dashing over the Mercedes and igniting the foothills and gray clouds miles east in the Santa Ana Mountains.

Sharon turned back to Laif.

Fresh air crept in through the broken window, shivering her shoulders. She and Laif pulled the woolen blanket back over their heads. Remaining hidden was their only protection.

He said, "I think the mist is gone."

"How can you tell?"

"I don't know for sure. But it can't last forever."

Sharon stuck her head out again and relished the beauty in the sky. The sun was beginning to nestle underneath a blanket of its own making from condensed water in the atmosphere.

She really had not minded being underneath a blanket with Laif for two full hours. He had explained that the gardener only became belligerent after *seeing* them. She realized the male batterer didn't attack her until he *saw* her, and the woman did not attack Laif until she saw him. The blond guy and his friends didn't switch until they came close to the batterer and saw Laif's face. Together, Sharon and Laif hypothesized that if a person couldn't identify them, they couldn't be targets. So he had taken a blanket out of the trunk for just this purpose.

Though the wool material had offered more than just cover. Under its safety, they were able to talk and laugh freely for a change. They were able to get to know each other.

Sharon felt a sly smile creep up her face. "Maybe we should wait another ten minutes just to be sure." But she quickly regretted saying that. They needed to find the Brewsters.

To her surprise though, he agreed, "That's a good idea. It'll only be safe driving after dark."

They would be no good to anyone if they were killed or incapacitated in a car crash, so she relaxed again. They both pulled the wool back over their heads. A faint, pleasant musky smell resided there.

She asked, "So how come it's been eleven years since you've been in a long-term relationship?"

"Haven't found anyone who wants to understand me."

"Well, you have to be tactful. You can't just spurt truth all the time. That would scare most anyone."

"But I find it very hard to be something I'm not."

"Yes, but you have to go slow when you're just starting out. Let them discover your flaws and strengths. It makes it more interesting that way."

“That makes sense.”

She paused. “I think it’s time you met someone.”

He was quiet under the blanket. She wondered what he was thinking and feeling. She relaxed her legs, and her left one gently pressed against his.

“I know a lot of single women in the social work field.” She tried to think of one who might be a match for him, but no one was coming to mind. In fact--it was the oddest thing--she couldn’t even think of their names right now. She knew at least seven single women at her office, and she talked with them everyday, but she couldn’t recall one.

“It has to be someone patient,” he said. “Someone special. Someone who could accept what I do and who I am.”

“What you do is exceptional moral work. And who you are isn’t that far from the average guy.”

Where their legs touched was hot, despite the material of their jeans in the way.

She cleared her throat. “You just have to find the right woman.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling myself.”

“She’ll come along.” Her throat was suddenly dry. She wondered if any of her female friends or acquaintances really could understand and accept him. They were attracted to the everyday, clean-cut, successful guy who would dote on them, wining, dining, and winning their love with extravagance, and then settling down to make a family with two-point-five children. Laif didn’t quite fit into those dreams. “You *are* a bit odd.”

He laughed. It was fine, clear, yet held bass. And she loved it. It reminded her of Johnny Cash, and it tickled her insides. Although she couldn’t see his face under the blanket, she could picture his cheeks dimpling and the curve of his smile.

“But,” she continued, “one woman is your match. I truly believe we all have a soul-mate somewhere in the world.”

“That sounds like a good thing to believe.”

“Just who are you, Laif?” she asked coyly. “I’m not even sure I know.”

“Just a man. An open man, but otherwise ordinary.”

“I doubt that.” She wondered about all the ill fates he had altered. All the children who would have been abducted, sexually assaulted, tortured or killed, now freed from these terrors because of one courageous man, because of him.

A single pedophile in a community can molest hundreds of children over the span of his demented life. The police and courts are quite imperfect at stopping these predators. Who else was going to help? She sighed and bit her lower lip. And how many women had been delivered from rape and murder because of Laif? It just didn’t seem fair that women haven’t seen *this* side of him.

“And who are you, Sharon?”

“Me?”

“You.”

Her body felt suddenly rubbery and tropical underneath the wool blanket. She was unsure how to reply. Who was she? “You can’t really tell someone who you are in a sentence ... or even a paragraph for that matter.” She hiccupped, and put her hand to her mouth. “I guess you’ll just have to find out yourself.”

“I already know you’re a good person.”

“Oh yeah?” To her embarrassment, she hiccupped louder. “How? What if I’ve been deceiving you, just *playing* good?”

“Not possible. You do have a slight shadow, but that’s not unlike every other good person.”

She felt vulnerable and naked that he could see so much of her. “What is it?” Two hiccups burst from her. She cleared her throat. “Sorry.” She smiled under the blanket. “What do you see?”

He hesitated. “I can’t tell you. You’d hate me for pointing it out. That’s something we must find on our own.”

“No,” she insisted, followed by three hiccups. “Tell me. I *want* to know.”

“It’ll make itself known. Trip you up at a bad moment, but you’ll grow stronger because of it. You’ll know yourself more and become a better person.”

“Would you stop talking and just tell me?”

“I can’t.”

“You won’t.” She felt another series of hiccups about to attack and swallowed to stop them, but instead, she created an odd, bubbly groan deep inside--really embarrassing. She hoped Laif didn’t hear it.

He lifted the blanket off.

He *had* heard it and now wanted to get as far away as possible. “I’m mad at you,” she said halfheartedly, really just trying to cover for the disgusting noise she had just made.

“You’d be madder if I told you.”

The sky had lost its luster. Laif reached into the center console and retrieved two pairs of dark sunglasses. Strangely, he put one on and gave the other to her.

She asked, “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Put it on. It’ll make it harder to recognize you.”

She could see the image of herself reflected in the dark mirror lenses. She put them on. Headlights, taillights, and streetlights were most prominent; everything else was cast in shadows. “You can see?”

“If the dark mist remains, people won’t recognize us as easily with our eyes hidden.”

After he started the car and pulled out from the curb, she noticed his hands trembling on the wheel. It was a bit cold, so she turned up the car's heat. Her hiccups were gone--thank God.

They were about thirty minutes from the Brewsters' house, and they arrived safely, without incident from anyone on the road. They had decided this was the best place to visit next. Even if no one was home, they could at least find clues as to where the girls had been taken.

No lights were on inside the house.

His hands were still shaking. The car was warm enough, despite the broken window on her side. "What's the matter?"

"It feels like rain."

She looked to the storm clouds threatening in the west and billowing towards them. "Laif, why are you still cold?"

"I'm not."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm ... afraid."

"Of what?"

"Rain."

Then she recalled the discussion of Laif's phobia at Creo's house, the sprinkler incident that sent him into a fit, and the splashes from the glass of water at her apartment. But she still didn't understand. "How can someone be afraid of water?"

His eyes widened and twitched. "I wish ... I knew."

"How long have you had this phobia?"

"Since I was a boy. People used to make fun of me at school. Luckily I lived here in Southern California, so it didn't rain often. But when it did, everyone laughed at me, including my dad."

She took his trembling hand in hers. "It's okay. We all have fears."

"But mine is ridiculous."

"Hey! Don't talk like that. It's important to you. You're not afraid of things other people are afraid of, like snakes, rats, and murderers."

"At least those are legitimate fears. What can rain do?"

"It doesn't matter. Something about it hits a cord in your heart, and that's reason enough."

He averted his head from the blackening sky.

"Come on. Let's get inside the house. I'll bet you'll feel better."

It was seven in the evening, almost dark. Only two people were lumbering from their cars from a late day at work or evening errands. Sharon decided it was best to wear the blanket over them as they walked to the front door, appearing strange but at least unrecognizable.

At the front door, she rang the bell and waited. She tried the doorknob and found it locked. She waited for Laif to do something.

He just stood there.

“Aren’t you going to jimmy the lock or something?”

“How would I know how to do that?”

“It was your idea, breaking in. I thought you would know how.”

“Follow me.”

“Do I have a choice? We’re both under one blanket.”

They went around the side of the house and found a door to what looked like a laundry room with a window to the left. Due to trees and bushes obstructing the neighbors’ view, they were safe.

He removed the blanket and positioned it against the window. “Hand me that rock in the planter.” After she gave it to him, he slammed the stone into the blanket, and glass fell inward, shattering noisier than was comfortable.

She asked, “Was the blanket supposed to muffle the sound?”

“That was the intention.” He smiled and pulled back the blanket, shook off the remaining pieces of glass, sending them tinkling to the ground. He reached through the window and fumbled around for the door’s lock, while she turned the doorknob and discovered it already open.

“You’re not very practiced at breaking and entering, I take it.”

He laughed.

They took off their sunglasses and stepped inside.

He warned, “We have to watch for traps, like the one they set at the foster home. If you get caught in one, remember what I told you.”

“Yes, yes. I know. Old pain. Awareness.”

“Stay as close as you can.” She put her hands on his shoulders and followed him through the dark. Their footsteps crunched glass underneath.

“Where’s the light?” she asked.

“Just stay close.”

She heard a door creak open, a click, then saw bright fluorescent light that illuminated a kitchen with scratched, dry cabinets. A shabby refrigerator hummed irregularly in the corner. The smell of decaying meat made Sharon gag. On the wall was a plaque that read: *Home Sweet Home*.

“Look here.” He pointed at the linoleum floor in front of the door.

"I don't see anything."

"Step around it, exactly where I step and you'll be fine."

"Around what?"

"A pile of moldy dust." He carefully stepped over what appeared to be an imaginary object in front of the door. Although she couldn't see the dust, she followed his exact steps. They continued on through the kitchen. In the sink were spaghetti and rotting meat balls, looking more like worms and fat cockroaches. "Dinner from several nights ago."

The kitchen bent left into a dining area. He flicked on the light. Papers and envelopes lay on a soiled lace tablecloth. Most of them looked like bills. She picked up a newsletter. It was titled *Spanking and Beating as Tools of Teaching Discipline*.

"This is nice. They have a social support system to justify what they do to Cindy." She flipped through the newsletter. Inside were articles claiming to cite studies that have concluded whippings and beatings mold children into well behaved boys and girls who achieve excellence in school, predicting success in society.

On the back page were advertisements for paddles, whips, spoons, and spiked wooden instruments shaped to maximize sting during spankings. On the second to last page was an ad for Discipline-Camp. The description read: *a support/educational group in the serene wilderness of the Santa Ana Mountains discussing benefits of spanking, such as sore bottoms for days to remind children of their lessons, the respect children acquire for their parents, the healthy fear of authority that all children need, the wellness of the family unit where everyone knows their roles, and the security and empowerment it offers parents so that they can provide a stable, secure environment for children.*

Sharon threw down the newsletter. "Shit." These ideas went against everything she had learned in graduate school, everything she had learned in years of experiences with children and as a human being. She couldn't believe a society of child abusers organized and were communicating and gaining support from one another.

"What's that?" he asked.

She couldn't answer right away. Children were naturally eager to please their parents if their parents were happy. She had learned unhappy parents raised children who suffered. These children communicated this by acting out. The unhappy parents used physical punishment to discipline because nothing else worked as effectively for them.

People who shine--who have a loving energy, patience, provide appropriate discipline, and are giving people--don't need to go to such extremes. A simple look was often enough to straighten up a child who is truly loved and treasured.

"It's just idiotic trash," she finally answered.

He picked up the newsletter.

"They have a camp to learn how to better beat sense into kids." She pulled the papers in Laif's hands to the second to last page and pointed to the ad.

“Ignorance often breeds evil.” He put the paper down and picked up an envelope addressed to Joe Brewster. She shuffled closer to Laif to read it. Inside was a check from Pastel Securities. “He works.” A phone number was on the check. He wrote it on a corner of the envelope and tore it off. “Come on. Let’s not spend too long here. A neighbor may see the lights and investigate.”

She followed him into the foyer, and he pointed to the front door and warned, “Another pile of dust.”

They walked into the living room. A television and green couches filled the small room--the most well-kept place in the house so far.

A cat meowed from above.

She looked up at a birdcage hanging from a hook on the ceiling. With hardly enough room to move, a brown and white cat sat on cardboard placed on the bottom of the wire cage.

It meowed again.

“What kind of sick bastards are these people?” she asked. She unhooked the cage, placed it on the floor, unlatched the door and opened it, allowing the cat freedom.

It bolted underneath one of the couches.

Laif urged her on. They walked down the hallway and opened the closet. A large metal container was inside, the size of a toy-box, but there were no toys. She wondered what this was used for.

Two bedrooms were left.

Cindy’s room had a single bed and one nightstand, no other furniture, no pictures, no toys, just bare carpeted floor. The four-foot long closet was only half filled with clothing. The poor girl had to live in such a barren room, no dolls or stuffed animals, no pink wallpaper with daisies. The walls were dark brown, carpet was gray and spotted, curtains by the window were white with yellow stains, linen on the bed was dirty blue. She wondered what Cindy endured at this moment, where she slept, if she was allowed toys, if she was allowed friends, and what she was fed.

Although it was the county social worker’s job, Sharon felt guilty for being unaware Cindy would be placed back into this atrocity.

In the master bedroom, soiled underwear were strewn across the floor, and the bed sheets were rumped. A small desk with a laptop computer was positioned in the left corner.

Laif sat in the desk chair and touched a key. The computer screen immediately lit up. He began moving and clicking the mouse and turned his head to tell her, “Pick up a used undergarment and keep it.”

“What did you say?”

“We may need it later.”

“What on earth for?”

“Just do it.”

“You’re joking, right?”

He didn’t laugh.

She walked around the room kicking dirty underwear to clear a path. The stirred air yielded a stench so disgusting that she had to hold her nose. All the garments were streaked with yellow and brown stains. She didn’t want to touch any of them. She opened the bedroom closet and found handcuffs, leather straps, whips, and chains.

“Did you get an undergarment?”

She huffed. If he wanted one so badly, why didn’t he get it? But she didn’t say anything because he was busy at the computer, and she wanted to do something to help out, if this was helpful at all!

She looked for a clean shirt in the closet. Pulling one off a hangar, she wrapped it around her right hand and used it as a protective glove. She closed her eyes, held her breath, and picked up one of the underpants. Quickly pushing it into her right jacket pocket, she allowed herself a breath. Then she buttoned the pocket closed. She walked back to the desk, feeling sick for having the dirty clothing so close to her.

Laif had entered a picture browser on the computer and was calling up pictures the Brewsters had stored on their hard drive.

He gasped. Sharon’s eyes widened.

On the screen, images flashed by of dead children being sexually violated by adult males and females. The adults’ faces were digitally blackened for anonymity. The children’s faces were gray to pale white. Some had dark circles around their eyes. The photography appeared to be real, not doctored. Some children had bloated stomachs, and most had bruised rings around their necks, as though strangled.

Lightning flashed outside--

Laif startled and almost clashed heads with her. He gathered his shaking bones and moved to the Queen sized bed. She sat beside him and held his hand.

“It’s horrible. It’s real. I don’t just see the pictures. I feel the Brewsters squeezing their tiny necks. I ... hear the dying cries. I feel the weight of adults on these children. They were killed expressly for the purpose of necrophilia.”

She could feel bile coming up her throat and swallowed it back down. The pictures, this room, and the stench were all making her ill. The Brewsters were more evil than she had ever imagined. And no one--not even Laif--had to convince her that killing kids and raping their dead bodies was evil. That was a line no one on earth should ever cross.

Lightning flashed brightly outside, startling him again. He was trembling badly now, and she understood it wasn’t simply from the pictures.

Although she accepted his phobia, it still seemed ironic that a muscular, tall man would be afraid of something as simple as rain. She wanted him to be strong, like one of those macho

guys who ski vertically down mountainsides, tumble in huge surf, burst through a line of football players. Adriana and Cindy needed help, and Sharon needed him to be strong.

But she stopped herself. This was no ordinary man. He was a sensitive, compassionate man with feelings, some strong and some weak. This in itself was strength. "It's going to be all right. We're going to get through this together."

Thunder groaned, then stomped through the house, shaking the walls angrily, rattling windows. Laif almost fell over. He was crying silently. He wouldn't meet her eyes. She put her other arm around his shoulder and brought him closer. She became aware of a pitter patter on the roof. It rapidly grew to hundreds of iron nails hammering into the shingles.

He breathed fast. He was looking around the room agitated. He released her hand and began to reach for things--the bed sheets, the mattress, the frame--as he fell to the floor. "We never should have come here. Now we're ... trapped."

"It's okay."

"I can't go out there, Sharon."

"We'll wait it out. I doubt the Brewsters are coming anytime soon."

"We're wasting time though, because of me."

"Because of *you*, many people have been saved. Because of you, we'll save the girls."

A few minutes of silence passed with him in her arms, contentment and peace leaking from her into him. Then he reasoned, "We should turn off the lights. If a neighbor knows the Brewsters are gone, the lights will draw suspicion."

She ran through the house, beginning in the kitchen, flicking off the lights as she went. She was careful to avoid the places where Laif had pointed out traps. As she passed the dinette table, she picked up the newsletter, *Spanking and Beating as Tools of Teaching Discipline*, and folded it into her jeans' front pocket. She wanted to have it for a latter date to report it to the police or the FBI. It had to be illegal. She *hoped* it was illegal.

As she passed Cindy's barren room for the second time, pain in her heart crusted and cracked for the girl.

Just before reaching the master bedroom, as she was about to flick off the hall lights, she noticed a door they hadn't checked before. It was exceptionally small, about two feet high and two feet wide. The doorknob was as big as her thumb. She squatted down, pinched the handle between her fingers and opened it.

It was rather dark inside and had a slight musty draft. She leaned closer. It smelled a little like rotten eggs. Her head felt light. She recalled a similar smell and feeling when she was at Adriana's foster home and got exposed to the dust trap. She decided not to investigate this tiny doorway any further.

She stood, flicked off the lights, and entered the master bedroom.

Laif was sitting on the floor where she had left him. He was holding his knees against his chest. She left the bedroom lights on, not wanting to add to his stress, but drew the shades

closed. "Let's sit up on the bed. It's more comfortable."

She tried helping him up but he just shook his head. His face glistened with sweat. "I can't breathe."

She sat on the floor beside him. "Of course you can. Just breathe slowly."

Out of the corner of her eye, something moved by the doorway. She turned her head. A couple of large tarantulas crawled from the hallway through the bedroom doorway. Each of them was the size of two adult hands. From behind the door frame, five more crawled. It looked like they were coming from the small two-foot door Sharon had opened earlier. She tried to remember if she had closed it or not.

She turned to Laif and shook him. "Get on the bed."

He just looked at her.

"Come on! Laif, this is serious." She crawled up onto the mattress. "Get up here. If you stay on the floor, the spiders will get you." She pulled on his arm.

He turned to her. Something was wrong with his face. It was bent, twisted and blurred, as though someone held an uneven lens over it and was contorting his features. He said, "Thaw rea godin?"

"What?"

The first of the spiders was already at his feet. It hesitated there, but then scuttled lightning quick up his leg. It was too big, thank God, to squeeze underneath his jeans' cuff.

"There's a spider," she cautioned, pointing to it.

He looked down at his legs then at her. "Ahsron, reeth rea on derspis. Moce no wond."

"What're you talking? It sounds gibberish." She scooted back on the bed away from him. His face was scaring her. It wouldn't stop moving and blurring. One moment the right ear would be two inches further out than it should, the next moment it was caved into his skull. One moment his left eye would be sunken back into his forehead, the next moment it would travel down and out, jutting a couple of inches out from his nose. "Laif, what is going on? What's happening?"

He reached out to her, the spider scampering up his thigh to his stomach.

She backed up further. This couldn't be happening. And she thought of the rotten-egg smell again, and considered it being another dust trap, a different kind. Laif had told her to be aware of her old hurt if she was exposed to a dust trap.

He began climbing onto the bed. "Ahsron, veerygingth si noigg ot eb latrigh. Tsuj evig em oyur nahd."

Chills crawled her back. She put her hands up. "Please don't come any closer. Something's very wrong."

As difficult as it was, she closed her eyes and recalled how deeply hurt she had been from her mother's alcoholism, her father's addictions, their subsequent divorce, and her sister.... She

couldn't go there ... not now ... not yet. Something seemed to unhinge inside her, and her chest felt empty. She dared to open her wet eyes.

But it had been enough. Laif's face was back to normal. The spiders had vanished. She touched his cheek. It was soft and warm. He said, "Sorry you had to feel that, but you did good."

"You mean all that wasn't real?"

"Of course not. There weren't any spiders, and I *don't* talk gibberish."

Lightening flashed, making him cringe.

"It felt so real," she said, looking at his pants to make sure no spiders were crawling.

"The lie seeps into your senses, your thought, your sight ...," he explained, pausing to catch his breath, "your intuition, your sense of smell, everything." His lungs were expanding and contracting rapidly. "Where did you go ... that was different ... than we went?"

"A small door in the hall. I opened it and it smelled funny."

"Smelled funny? Must have been ... a dust trap. Don't do that again." He swayed as though faint. She helped support him. Thunder roared through the house, and he dropped to the bed, lying there, shaking badly.

"Don't worry about me," she assured, kneeling beside him. "Did something bad happen to you in the rain once?"

"No. Nothing," he said too quickly. "I'm just afraid."

The rain pummeled the roof, sounding as though it were going to tear it apart, shingle by shingle.

"There's got to be a reason for the fear. Think, Laif. Is there anything it reminds you of?"

"I don't know."

"I wish I had your powers." She put her hand close to his forehead. "Just a flash of pretty light and wham! You're better."

"My gift isn't used ... to help good people. It's used to *fight* evil. It's a dangerous tool ... to use on good people."

She hugged him. "Maybe you should broaden its scope."

He paused and blinked. "I caught a glimpse of the light when Creo shined. I saw something ... something that didn't make sense."

"What was it?"

He sat up. "I should have shielded my eyes."

"What did you see?"

"It was ... my father beating my mother when I was four, but it couldn't be true. She left right after I was born."

"This could mean something."

"It's impossible because my mother--"

"What if she came back?"

"Came back?" Laif turned ghost white.

"Yes."

He sat there; his eyes appeared to sink into his head as he thought. "Came back ... it's possible, but I don't remember. Besides, what does that have to do with water?"

"Was it raining that day?"

"No."

"Can you remember anything that might have been related to water?"

He just sat there shaking like a tired, cold child. What was it about water? Rain was refreshing to Sharon. She always liked the way it cleansed the air, washed the streets, fed the plants, nurtured the earth. Warm or cold, it was welcome. She snuggled in her apartment on stormy days and curled up with a good book, mesmerized by the patter on the roof and puddles. She enjoyed looking out her window in awe of the millions of drops falling all at once, being pulled one way then another by winds. What did he see in water that made it different for him?

Ding dong.

"Who?" he said worriedly. "What if it's the Brewsters? I'm in no condition to fight."

Ding dong.

"They wouldn't ring their own doorbell. I'll check."

"I'm coming with you."

They both walked down the hallway, careful to avoid the small door that was left open. She walked into the hallway bathroom and pulled back the curtain of the window just a crack. Outside by the front door was a man in his forties wearing a gray hat, holding a folded umbrella. "It must be a neighbor. Maybe he'll go away if no one answers."

Laif quietly closed the toilet seat and sat down. They waited.

The man knocked on the door again.

She peeked through the curtain again. She saw the man bending over and sticking something into the lock and a card into the door crack. "He's trying to break in. We have to get out."

She squatted in front of Laif and asked, "Can you make it? What will happen if you go into the rain?"

"I can't. It's ... overwhelming."

She took his hand. "Come with me." They walked back through the house the way they had come in, and she led him through the laundry room and stood at the closed doorway beside the broken window. Cool air drafted through the window, pushing droplets of rain inside.

A small puddle had formed on the floor. Laif froze.

She picked up the blanket, which they had left on the washing machine, and draped it around both of them, leaving a little opening in the front to see.

His grip was tight around her hand.

From somewhere inside the house came a smash as though the intruder were breaking the front door down.

"It's okay. I'll be right here with you." She put her arm around him and brought him close. "We can do this together." His body felt warm. She kissed him on the cheek. "We're going to be fine, but we have to leave now."

As she opened the door, she heard wood splintering from inside the house and footsteps on the tile foyer. "Just keep yourself under the blanket and the rain won't get you."

They went out the door, holding hands, and his grip tightened.

His eyes sealed shut as she led him down the walkway to the driveway, dodging puddles on the ground and the streams of water falling from the eaves of the house. At the car, she began opening the passenger door, but he yelled, "Driver's side! In the back. This window's broken." They circled the Mercedes, and as soon as she opened the door, he fell inside and slammed it closed. When she entered in the front and turned around, he was holding his left arm. "It hurts. Rain hit it when I reached out to shut the door."

"Honey, it's just drops of water. Nothing more."

"It feels ... lethal."

"You drink it everyday. And you shower in it too, right?"

This made him crack half a smile. "I take baths."

Concerned about the man inside the house discovering their escape, Sharon started the car down the street. Although normally she loved it, she hoped now the rain would stop.

Chapter 29

When Joe burst through the door, Mary was already half buried in pots and pans.

She stopped digging through a cupboard underneath the kitchen sink. Her head sprung up, and she fixed him with a glare. "We need to put this somewhere where it won't cause problems."

Between the two of them, they lifted the beanbag, opened drawers, pulled suitcases and clothing from closets, lifted cushions off the booth, searched the bathroom--appearing rather foolish. Adriana was confused. If they really were scared, why didn't they just destroy the box? They could break it into a hundred pieces with a hammer or run over it with their car.

Maybe they couldn't let out what was inside.

She wondered what the inscription on its lid meant. *Inside Out*. Was it instructions to turn your clothing inside out? What good would that do? You would look pretty foolish with your socks, skirt, and shirt inside out. People might even laugh at you.

Maybe it meant that what was on the *inside* should come *out*. Or was the *inside* a passageway to an *outer* dimension? Maybe it was a time warping device where on the inside you could go outside this time to the future or past.

She sighed. Maybe it meant nothing. These people were crazy, after all.

As though the box could not be trusted, Mary held it high with one hand during their search of the mobile home. Her hair became messy from her other hand running through it, nervously throwing her head about, and bending down so many times. "The wood feels hot, Joe," she said with tremors. "I can't hold it any longer."

He backed away from her. "I don't want it. Give it to Cindy."

Cindy just continued with that glazed look, not having moved since after her mother came into the room.

"No, you piece of shit! How could you say that?"

He breathed hard as he looked around.

"There has to be a place. Somewhere safe."

The entire room was becoming a garbage dump, stuff pulled out of cabinets, pulled out of drawers, moved out of storage bins, littering the floor.

"Where can it go?" Mary screamed.

Adriana almost began laughing, but she held it for fear of drawing attention to herself. She found it utterly ridiculous how such a little box could affect these adults.

"Give me it," Joe finally conceded. He took it and put it in a corner of the room and began stacking canned fruit and packaged powdered milk around and on top of it. After the pile became four feet high, he stated, "There," but then he got an anxious look in his face, spun

around several times, and quickly dug it out, spilling cans and cartons as he reached in and retrieved the box. He threw it back to Mary.

Furious, she exclaimed, "Get Hank. He'll know where to put it."

Joe left the room in a hurry, and Mary kept the box as far away from herself as her extended arms would allow.

Chapter 30

Through the Mercedes' rear-view mirror, Sharon kept an eye on Laif. This was difficult because the wool blanket covered his head during the entire trip to her apartment.

He looked like a shivering ghost.

She had the heater on full blast, but that didn't stop water from drenching the right front and back seat from the broken passenger window, some droplets surely getting onto Laif's side.

Luckily the rain stopped before they made the trek from the car to the front door.

He shed his blanket only after entering the apartment and continued to shiver into her living room. She turned on the heater and slung her jacket over the back of the couch, feeling the bulky pocket. "Do we still need that dirty underwear, or can I throw it out now?"

Cuddles ran directly to her jacket pocket, and after reaching it, he vigorously sniffed. Sharon struggled to pull the dog away, concerned for the animal's health. Then Cuddles went to sniff Laif.

"Creo will want it."

"Does he have a fetish for dirty underwear?"

Instead of answering, he began petting Cuddles.

Her fur looked wet. Sharon had a doggy door installed to her fenced back patio so Cuddles could relieve herself at her convenience. But she had forgotten how much Cuddles loved the rain. Usually she locked the doggy door when a storm was predicted because Cuddles sometimes tracked mud inside.

Sharon scanned the apartment--no mud.

Becoming self-conscious about renting a simple apartment, she wondered what Laif thought about her lack of home ownership. Employment as a social worker paid off spiritually but not financially. At least she kept the place clean. But then she spotted yesterday's faded green sweatshirt she had worn after coming home. It remained strewn across a chair. She nonchalantly picked it up before he could notice.

"She's a good dog," he commented. "What's her name?"

"Cuddles." She rolled the sweatshirt into a ball behind her back, and when he wasn't looking, she hurled it down the hallway past the bathroom and towards her bedroom for laundry tomorrow.

"She has a good spirit."

He and the dog both seemed to be enjoying themselves. Cuddles loved the petting and scratching behind the ears. Laif appeared rejuvenated from touching and holding the golden retriever and being occasionally licked on the cheek.

Suddenly, he stood up and looked at his wet hands from her fur. His eyes widened and smile became skewed. He dabbed his hands on his jeans to dry them, but he couldn't because the material was still rather damp. He followed Sharon to the kitchen.

Cuddles padded closely behind.

She noticed two dishes and three glasses in the sink from yesterday. She would've washed them if she had known she was going to have company. "Sorry for the mess." Her voice came out like a meek schoolgirl's. She threw him a dry dish towel.

"What mess?"

"Never mind," she said quickly. She dialed the phone for Chinese takeout.

As he dried his hands, hair, and face, and tried drying his jeans, he urged, "Cindy's soul weakens. I can feel it. Like a fire growing colder. But I can't battle the Brewsters yet."

She finished ordering and sat down beside him at the dinette table. She reached for the towel as he obsessively dragged it up and down his jeans. After setting it on the table, she took his hand. "It's going to be all right, I promise. After a quick bite to eat, we'll be able to form a plan."

He searched her eyes. His were watery.

Her fingers combed his curly hair from his forehead.

He lifted her hand and held it against his tan, buttoned shirt. She could feel his heartbeat thudding hard and fast--as well as a nicely sculpted, firm chest, which made *her* heart beat faster.

"I'm scared," he confessed. "I feel like I'm afraid of everything now. Even though the rain stopped, traces are still on the ground, on leaves, slicking trees, in puddles in the street--"

As he continued speaking, she could feel his strong heartbeat accelerating against her hand. He gulped air as though he were drowning in a storm at sea.

"--on the roofs of houses, dripping down buildings, filling drains, and thickening mud, driving earthworms out, making the sky dreary--"

Because he was hyperventilating, she took the top of his shirt and lifted it over his head and told him to hold it there. She couldn't help looking at his bare washboard stomach and smooth skin.

"--on clothing, fur, hair, it makes me feel like I'm going to die, like my chest is going to explode, like my arms are going to fall off. I ... I ... can't breathe."

Cuddles sat up and looked at him, softly whining.

"Slow down. Just breathe into your shirt. It'll pass."

He did as she instructed.

Her hand accidentally touched his stomach, causing an involuntary warm feeling inside her. "You're hyperventilating and driving yourself into a panic attack."

“After it rains, I don’t feel quite right, quite myself, until the traces of it are dried and all that remains is a cleanly washed world. But what makes it worse this time, what makes it so unbearable, is that Cindy is out there somewhere. Somewhere in this wet danger.”

“I know. We’re going to find her. But for now, let’s stop allowing fear to control us.”

“That’s what I’m doing isn’t it, letting fear control me?” He began to talk and breathe faster underneath his shirt. “That’s evil. I’m consuming my energy in fear. Fear is a good if we don’t let it control us. I could be doing--”

She grabbed him by the shoulders, rather roughly but with love, and yet he barely moved. “Stop it.” She loosened her grip. “What did we learn from the Brewsters’ house?”

“Well ... we’re not very good at breaking and entering.”

She let go of him. “We’re dealing with killers. Cindy was probably raped by her own father, and her mother hit her head with a hammer. The jump to necrophilia wouldn’t be far for these sickos.”

He spoke underneath the shirt, “Maybe the only thing that’s spared Cindy so far is that she’s their own flesh and blood ... but now Adriana is with them.”

“Then we’re running out of time.”

They were silent. Cuddles whined. Then he said, “From that beating newsletter, we learned they have a social support system that rationalizes hurting children.”

She could feel tears squeezing out her eyes. “The girls need us.” A trapdoor seemed to open underneath her and send her into an endless hole. She remembered when her younger sister, Marlene, was alive and how much she needed Sharon for the simplest things. Marlene would ask Sharon to brush her hair, make her breakfast, help pick out clothes to wear. Adriana and Cindy must be needing responsible adults to do things for them as well. “How’re we going to find them?”

He pulled his shirt back down. “Creo can help.”

“He’s so absorbed in his morals he’s not going to help anyone.”

“He has helped people in his lifetime.” Laif picked up her phone from the table and dialed. After ten seconds, he informed, “No answer. He must be out.”

Laif pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. He dialed the phone number on it of Pastel Securities that he had written from the check at the Brewsters’ home. “Tape recording.” He wrote down the last four digits, 5564, and drew a line through it. Then he wrote 5565 and called the number using those last four digits. “Another recording.” He hung up and put a slash through those numbers and wrote 5566. He kept this up while Sharon went to the bathroom. When she got back there were eleven lines through numbers, but a smile on his face.

He said, “I finally got through to someone. It was as I figured; the last four digits were different phone extensions of Pastel Securities. I asked if Joe Brewster was working tonight, and the guy knew Joe. I played it like I was a friend, and he said Joe’s on vacation for a week. Didn’t know where.”

“A vacation? That could be anywhere.”

“We can find out with Creo’s help.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” She held his hand in both hers. “Have you ever lost anyone?” she asked, her voice cracking midway through the sentence.

“Not really.”

“I don’t want to lose these kids, Laif.”

His hand tightened around hers. “We won’t.”

Chapter 31

Brown beard swaying, Hank plodded into the room, shaking his head while looking about. "Where is it?"

Joe followed warily behind.

Mary rushed to them, thrusting the box into Hank's chest causing him to draw back, palms out, hands high, eyes wide. "Be careful with that damn thing, woman! I don't want it. I have to find a place first."

Adriana began to smile, but then forced it away. The box was so small, and it was latched shut. What did they fear? What could such a box hold that was so dangerous?

Inside Out. Was it the name of a ghost? The spirit of a powerful woman who could rip them apart? Could it hold an evil Genie or fairy?

Mary's arm hung in the air as though still expecting Hank to take it.

He walked around her and into the kitchen, opening all the drawers and cabinets, digging through spoons, forks, trash, food, clothing, linen, videotapes, magazines and books, cans of beer, cameras, walkie-talkies, radios, plates, pots, pans, clattering everything together and leaving half of what he dug through on the floor and counters. Now the entire kitchen area looked as if a tornado had whipped through it.

Adriana studied Cindy. She was still glossy eyed, not paying attention to the ruckus. Adriana felt worried for her friend, but at least the girl didn't have to see this insanity.

Joe paced rapidly in the dinette area, rubbing his chin with one hand. Like a bird, Mary's head jerked about, from watching Hank to Joe to spots in the mobile home to Joe and back to Hank to more spots to Hank to Joe, and kept going like that. Her right arm remained fully extended, the box on the edge of her fingertips.

Their strange behavior was making Adriana nervous. If they could get this crazy over a box, what would they do with her and Cindy?

This chaos reminded her of how she used to feel just before her father blew up. Those were terrifying times. She had been able to sense his anger building every passing minute, thickening the air, turning her father into a red-faced, trembling monster.

A Mockingbird chirped night songs outside the mobile home, but no one else seemed to hear. Only the mockingbird took pleasure in the washed mountains after the rainfall.

Adriana couldn't see Hank now. Hidden by piles of books, trash, and other clutter, he sounded as though he were still searching through cabinets. Mary sobbed without tears. Joe's hands animatedly shook and slapped against his pants as he paced the five-foot confinement of the dining area.

"Here! Here!" Hank screamed with glee, head rising above the clutter.

"Where?" asked Joe, hopping over piles of trash and bottles to get to him.

"In *this* corner, beside the bathroom door."

"I already thought about that. It's too exposed. Where I had it before was better, by the closet door."

"Not a chance," Hank disagreed. "It needs to be sheltered more than that."

"My spot is a well protected place. How is your spot more sheltered?"

"If your place was so good, why did you call me?"

"I thought you would know of a *better* place."

"And I'm telling you this is the best!"

Joe pointed both his index fingers at the closet door and slanted both his eyebrows in that direction. "What about that? It's got two walls on both sides, it's got the strongest part of the ceiling above it, it's got reinforced--"

--but it's not concealed enough."

"Just find somewhere, dammit!" Mary was shaking hard. "It feels like it's burning through to my bones."

The Mockingbird outside was joined by a mate. They sang and chirped in harmony together. Adriana would have loved to go outside and watch them instead of watching these crazy people.

"Quick." Hank stood, feverishly licking his cracked upper lip. "Bring it."

Mary walked unsteadily over piles of books and magazines and appeared quite relieved to hand the box to Hank. He took it carefully, then disappeared underneath a stack of toilet paper rolls and paper towels. "There. It should be safe."

"Over a little to the left," directed Joe. "It needs to go a little more to the left ... no ... too far. Go back more to the right, just a little past that crack ... that's it ... not *too* far. Back a little. A little more. Now go--"

"Stop hassling me! I know where it belongs."

"Just bury the damn thing," hissed Mary.

"Hold onto it for a moment." Hank extended it to Mary.

She took a step backwards. "Why? You found the spot, didn't you?"

"Take it!"

She reluctantly accepted it. "It feels like it's going to leak."

Joe kicked the stacks of paper towels and tissues out of the way and began handing cans, books, and water bottles to Hank.

Mary found Saran wrap from the mess on the floor and began wrapping the little wooden box, layer upon layer, like a mummy. When she finished the whole roll, she taped the ends down.

Then she put it into a garbage bag and tied the top into a knot. She dropped this bag into a high prison which Hank had made with stacks of bottles and cans.

He laid several twenty-four packs of bottled water on top of the hole. Mary got another roll of Saran wrap from the floor and went around the walls and top of the cell, layering them as though fearing something might slip between the cracks.

The Mockingbirds outside continued to chirp. Adriana focused on them. It made her feel better. Their songs were sweet and varied, never seeming to repeat.

The adults continued building this prison thicker for twenty minutes. They stopped when it stood five feet high and six feet wide, now blocking the entrance to the bathroom, which made her think how badly she needed to go. Would *anyone* be able to use the restroom now? Had the adults even thought about that?

Hank, Joe, and Mary all seemed very satisfied with themselves, smiling, patting one another on the back, and breathing sighs of relief. Cindy still sat zoned-out in the dining booth seat. The adults began walking toward the door.

When Hank passed Cindy, he belched.

The Mockingbirds became silent.

Adriana could swear that a dark shape leaped out of his mouth and shot into her friend.

Cindy fell back onto the bench, still as wood.

Adriana held her breath. After the adults left, she called, "Hey."

Her friend didn't answer.

Chapter 32

Laif needed to overcome his crippling fears. This was the next step to save the girls.

Sharon had always believed that intimate conversation healed. Talking about losses could help him deal with his own to overcome the fear. Psychotherapists used this tool.

She looked into his beautiful, brown eyes.

They held each other on the couch. Cuddles curled onto the floor. A wind outside began to push on the windows, and Sharon could hear them creak against its pressure. He ran his hands through her hair, sending hot electric chills into her.

“I guess I have lost someone before,” he answered.

“Who?” she encouraged.

He was silent for a moment. “My mother, although now I’m not sure when. I can’t remember anything before age five, but I know she wasn’t with us after I turned five.”

She squeezed him tighter. She wanted to do whatever she could to help him grow stronger.

Three scented candles burned on the dining table, scattering puddles of light, shadow, and sweet vanilla odor around the room.

“My father’s schizophrenia hadn’t been diagnosed until I was nine, but even before then he was paranoid. He would wake up ten times a night, armed with a loaded pistol, checking all the locks. After that, he would go into the garage to make sure no one was there, then he would circle the outside of the house for hours.”

“What did he say happened to your mother?”

“That she was a whore. That she had slept around with every guy in the neighborhood, so he kicked her out. He was paranoid though. I’m guessing he was the one who slept around, and he had to blame her to take the heat off himself. So in his own sick and twisted way he made her the villain.”

“But it’s unusual for a mother to give up her child. Why didn’t she take you?”

He looked down at her legs. “I wish I knew. I would have loved to have gone with her. My father was hell to live with. As he got worse, he would run throughout the house yelling that the devil was chasing him, throwing plates behind him. Luckily or unluckily he had a large inheritance so he didn’t have to function at a job.” Laif laughed. “Although he went through many jobs anyway. Being separated from my mother, I always wondered if I had younger half-brothers or half-sisters. I dreamed of having one, someone to relate to, someone who could relate to me.” He paused. “It was lonely with my father.”

No wonder Laif pursues the truth with such intensity, Sharon thought. He comes from a home where it was not only scarce, but his only companion. “Have you ever tried to find your mother?”

“He would never tell me her name. Can you believe that? My entire life and never spoke her name. I looked around his desk drawers and address books. Found some old girlfriends’ numbers, but never anything that led to my mother. There were no pictures of her around the house either.”

Cuddles stood up and licked Laif’s knee.

“I’m sorry ... I wish I could have been there ... with you. I know it’s impossible. I would have been only a child as well,” she laughed, “but I guess it’s my social worker instincts.” She stroked his cheeks and felt smooth skin until she reached beard stubble around his sculpted jaw and chin.

Butterflies swooned in her stomach. She curled her legs underneath her.

Cuddles rose, rested her head on Sharon’s lap, and chuffed.

Sharon just kept staring at him, soaking him up. She was also slowly gaining the courage she needed to talk. She decided it was time. It might help Laif somehow. She looked past him at the candle flames on the dining table.

“I had a sister, Marlene, three years younger than me. Such a little pest.” She giggled and felt tears marching out her eyes. “She would come up to my bed in the morning and jump on it while screaming, ‘Earthquake!’ She would sneak up behind me while I was putting on makeup and wrap her arms around mine and say, ‘Don’t. You’re turning into a turkey-monster. Ugly eye shadow, big red lips, clown cheeks, eekkk!’”

He smiled. “I think I would have hated *and* loved that.”

She felt a shaky smile forming on her face. “Yes.” And she looked deep in his eyes. “She never lived old enough to put on makeup herself.” Insistent words traveled from her heart: “She was ten, playing on the front lawn on a hot summer day, not a cloud in the sky. The grass was sharp green, with a freshly mowed scent. She was somersaulting with Karen, a neighbor girl, and I was watering our rose bushes.” She swallowed hard. “I heard a screech of tires. A car came around the corner, fast. It swerved toward one side of the road, then the other.” She paused, unsure if she could go on.

His warm touch on her neck was comforting.

“When it got closer, it began to turn towards the girls. My sister was too busy somersaulting to see it jump over the curb, cross the sidewalk, and quietly travel the grass, then ...” Sharon was shuddering in his arms. She felt them tighten, holding her together. “... I screamed ... I screamed with all my might ... but she ...”

“It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault.”

Cuddles nuzzled Sharon’s leg.

“She probably thought I was screaming with excitement,” Sharon continued in a weak, watery voice, “as she was flipping over, again and again. The girls were both having so much fun, Laif. The car ... I can *still* see the bumper. Rusty and scrapped, like this wasn’t the first time it had hit something.” She had to pause. “It was so cold in that summer light, like it wasn’t just metal but a possessed animal. The hood was dark brown and dented into a horn shape.”

He wiped the tears off her cheeks. She buried her face in his warm chest.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen, Laif. It was a beautiful day. Home was supposed to be safe.”

She felt his strong hands rub her back.

“It was a drunk driver. My mom had been drunk that afternoon too. I was the only one left to watch Marlene, keep her safe.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he repeated earnestly. “Your mom should have been sober and so should’ve the driver.”

“I couldn’t stop him.”

“You tried your best. You couldn’t have done more.”

Cuddles whined and licked Sharon’s leg.

Sharon stayed in Laif’s arms for a few minutes. When she lifted her head from his chest, their lips met. It was so natural that it was a wonder why it hadn’t happened sooner. Soft, gentle kisses at first, their breath mingling, growing faster, her body burning, then hard and forceful kisses--

A sharp knock on the door broke them apart.

“It’s probably the Chinese food,” she said, out of breath. It was difficult, but she got up.

“Wait.” He offered her sunglasses. “Put these on.” He was looking around the room. “Do you have a hat, a wig, something to help disguise yourself?” His eyes met hers. “The Brewsters might have sent another dark mist.”

She flicked on the lights and retrieved a beanie cap and scarf from the closet. She put them on with the sunglasses, the scarf wrapping around her mouth as well as her neck. She also pulled on her jacket and began buttoning it up.

Laif fitted his sunglasses over his eyes. “Never mind that. You’re fine.”

She opened the front door, Laif hidden to the side.

Illuminated in the porch light was an Asian man with a silly looking orange cap in the shape of a dragon. He held a white plastic bag, bulging with two square Styrofoam containers. He smiled. It was chilly outside, but she was comically overdressed for indoors.

Wind blew his straight black hair into his eyes. Brown braces covered his wrists that people with carpal tunnel syndrome wear. Perhaps he did too much hand manipulation working the register. He lifted the plastic bag. “Com pow chicken with sesame sauce, white rice, and white chicken with snow peas.”

She had forgotten money. Wind flew in from the open door, through her open jacket, and crawled down her blouse, chilling her chest. It was hard to believe this man could turn on her in an instant, enough anger within to give birth to murderous rage.

Laif dug in his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, waving it at her.

She took it and paid the man, leaving a healthy tip. She just wanted the interaction to end quickly to reduce the chance of violence.

“No tip necessary. We at Dragon Rice like to keep simple. Like to have just one price and customer pay only one price.” He extended his hand with the ten extra dollars she had given him. “Keep customer happy is priority.”

Her scarf began to slip, exposing her upper lip. She quickly pulled it back across and around her neck but bumped her sunglasses in the process, skewing them and revealing one of her eyes. After quickly fitting them back on, she said, “It’s okay. You keep it.” She wanted him as happy as possible. “You deserve it.”

He frowned.

“You came here in the cold, through the wet streets.”

“No.” He began to appear agitated. “It our policy. You must keep.” He waved the ten dollars for her to take.

But she felt odd taking back the money. Tipping delivery men was expected. It felt wrong to give him nothing. “It’s okay. I want you to have it.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Laif shaking his head and moving his arms like scissors.

Wind whipped the Asian man’s black hair away from his eyes, revealing flashes of anger. “You insult me.” As his hands fisted, the wrist braces looked more like boxers’ wraps. “I tell you, keep. But you do not.”

“I’m sorry,” she finally conceded. “Here, I’ll take it.”

“First you don’t take, then you take. What you doing?” His voice switched to a high squeal. “You play with me? You think I stupid Asian?”

She backed up a step and closed the door further. “No, no. Of course not. I was just trying to be nice. But it’s okay. I just need to go now.” She almost closed the door all the way, but his hand held it. He crumpled the money and threw it inside. “You keep. I tell you, keep, but you try closing door on me. What wrong with you?”

Anxiety pummeled her. The man’s dark eyebrows curled in anger. Although he was skinny and only as tall as her, he looked formidable.

“Nothing is wrong. Thank you. I have to go.” She tried pushing the door closed, but his hand still held it. Her scarf fell again, revealing her entire mouth this time. She threw it back and around her neck, but that allowed him to push the door wide open, and he began stepping inside.

“You bitch. You think I stupid Asian, huh? I not stupid Asian. You think color of skin or shape of eye make you smart? You not smart. You stupid whitey.”

Cuddles barked behind Sharon. Laif motioned for her to close the door.

The deliveryman’s ears reddened and his arms trembled. “Just because you have apartment and I live with parents, you think you better than me. You think I poor and need money. I don’t need your money. You not that richer than me. You *not* better than me. You worse.”

He was completely inside now, and as soon as he saw Laif, he swung and hit Laif in the jaw, dislodging his sunglasses. Laif went down.

Cuddles flew past Sharon, jumped into the air and hit the deliveryman's midsection. Com pow chicken, white rice, and chicken with snow peas flew into the air in slow motion.

The Asian man fell onto Laif and began wildly throwing punches as Cuddles snarled and bit, and they all rolled into the living room. The Asian man screamed, flipped around and threw the dog, then broke a wooden leg off the coffee table, and as Cuddles jumped at him again, he swung the wood, smashing it against her head.

Cuddles yelped, dropped to the carpet, tried to get up on all fours, but was met with blow after blow from the Asian man. Sharon was behind him pulling at his arms, but he was too fast in a frenzy, and he swung the stick backwards and smacked her in the forehead, making her see only white dots and hear buzzing for several seconds, and then as her senses returned, dull pain throbbled through her head, and she became aware Cuddles was silent, but the Asian man kept hitting the dog on the head, which was all bloody now, and she couldn't understand why he wouldn't stop, why he kept throwing the stick into her dog's head, her lovable, dear Cuddles.

Sharon leapt at him again, but he pushed her down.

Laif rose from the floor and grabbed the man's arm as it swung the stick towards Cuddles' head once more.

But it was no use. The dog was dead.

Laif pulled the stick out of the Asian man's hand, throwing it across the room, and landed a punch squarely into his jaw. This time the deliveryman was the one to fall.

Laif rushed to Sharon. "We need to get out of here. I don't want to hurt him." He grabbed her arm, pulled her up, and led her to the doorway as she stumbled to follow. "He's mostly a good man. His old anger was being used against us."

Her knees felt like buckling as a terrible emptiness inside seemed to devour her. An image of Marlene lying bloody on the freshly mowed grass was conjured from her past. She tried to look at her dog again, just to make sure life wasn't still fighting inside, but couldn't. Instead she froze.

Laif said softly, "She's gone."

Sharon called, "Cuddles ..."

Chapter 33

Joe threw three more logs onto the bonfire, which was encircled by a two foot high brick border.

Flames slipped up into the air.

Thirty faces around it lit orange, eyes glistening. Mary quivered with delight as Joe sat beside her. He propped his legs up on a pile of poles and canopies they had brought just in case of rain.

Hank rose from his seat. This was one of few times he wore a shirt with a collar, and he looked dignified. "Welcome members. We have gathered here tonight to gain support in a world which looks down upon beating children for disciplinary measures. Society has turned its head from the ways of old, hard-won truths."

The crowd murmured in agreement.

Mary absolutely adored these meetings. They validated everything she believed that made her feel like an outsider in the rest of society. Rejected as a parent by the Department of Children and Family Services, she had been depressed and angry for months.

"... spare the rod and spoil the child ..."

This was her twelfth meeting, and she had heard Hank's introduction many times before, so she tuned him out. She liked the interactive part with other parents the most. She wished her daughter could attend, but they were only for the adults. If Cindy were here, perhaps that would help her understand ...

Her eyes drifted to the crackling fire.

She was afraid for her daughter. In the past, Cindy had acted lascivious and lured Joe into sex. Mary was not blind. She had known what was happening. But when Cindy accused her own father of raping her, Mary had to bang sense into Cindy's damn brain with a hammer. It wasn't Joe's fault. Any warm-blooded man would have acted the same way to Cindy's coy, seductive manners. Cindy *had* to learn discipline. She could not give in to weaknesses.

Mary was a good mother. She just wanted her daughter to turn out right. Had Cindy whored herself out to anyone else's man, she would have been beaten worse.

Cindy's friendship with the cripple had to be undone. It was dangerous to believe weakness had value. The cripple was an abomination. She would bring Cindy down, perhaps causing her to seduce Joe again.

"... and now I'd like to open the group up to experiences anyone would like to share." Hank pointed to a raised orange hand in the firelight. "Yes."

"I have a two year old," said a plump woman as she slowly rose, many beaded necklaces clinking together, "and she can be so feisty. Well, just yesterday, me and my husband, Danny," Danny waved his hand to everyone, "we were at the fair, and she kept insisting on getting

cotton candy. Well, we were in a crowd, and it would have been awkward to beat her there, but I wanted to make a point that it was not okay to be so demanding.”

“Good,” Hank said. The crowd murmured agreement.

“So what can I do in public situations?”

“Excellent example,” Hank said. “It is difficult. So many people don’t know the sacrifice required to train a child. Your girl has to learn early on that she must respect authority.” Hank was shaking his head. “I would say best thing is to take her back to the car where you can do what you need.”

The plump woman complained, “But that wrecks our romantic time. Me and my husband don’t get out often and--”

“We must teach the correct path!” Hank slammed his fist down on the pile of logs between him and Joe. “This behavior cannot be tolerated, and she must know it. Otherwise, when she’s a teen, you’ll have a mess on your hands.” He cleared his throat and straightened his collar. “After the beating, you all could go back to the fair.”

“But we don’t want to interrupt our date because of her. We have a life too, and she spoils it.”

God, this was so life-affirming, thought Mary. After having just peeked through a crack in the wooden box, she felt lost. This meeting helped her find herself again. She didn’t see what was in the box, but she felt it and that was enough.

Hank responded, “A disobedient child spoils your life. That’s why it is so important to start early. Discipline now so your life won’t be ruined later.”

A few people in the crowd murmured, “Amen.”

“I know it can be difficult, but the thing about beatings is they *do* work, not like sissy time-outs where you expend time and energy to monitor a child, rewarding them with attention ...”

Mary breathed deeply. The parenting classes she was forced to take by the county talked about these acceptable, weaker substitutes for beatings. It irritated her that the county believed they knew best for Cindy. They were a bureaucratic mass of fools. They weren’t there when her daughter was fucking her husband. They didn’t have to endure that disgrace.

She wrapped her afghan around herself tighter.

“... another parenting tip is not to hold back on beatings when the crying starts. A part of yourself might want to ease up, but don’t. Being consistent is far more important ...”

Mary felt more committed to do right by Cindy. Cindy had been increasingly disobedient and needed training. Mary had been too lenient in the past, and now endured the consequences of those mistakes.

After the meeting, she would teach Cindy to choose *strong* friends. She would teach Cindy that weak friends like Adriana were worthless and harmful.

A man with long blond hair under a straw hat rose and said, “Burnin’ works. I’ve tried it on my kids. Just the threat gets respect now.”

Hank picked up his coffee mug. "These techniques are used by nature, and so why as parents should we be deprived of them?"

Mary thought to herself that most people here didn't have the courage to take a child close to death to teach them invaluable lessons. She didn't understand such cowardice for the good of their offspring.

She looked around the group.

Many of these parents wouldn't take it as far as killing a reckless child. But Mary, Joe, and Hank knew better. Some children didn't deserve life. They were freaks of nature, outcasts, like that damn, mistake of God, one-legged bitch in the camper with Cindy right now.

"Another question?" Hank asked.

A woman with tight, black braids raised a flickering orange hand. "I have a teenage daughter. She is skipping school, going out with a boy I don't approve of. She's lying--"

Mary suddenly got fevered chills crawling throughout her body--the memory of the box still too fresh. Somehow, even in the strength of this support group, those terrible feelings came back.

--I used to give her bare butt spankings as a child, but now, is she too old for them?"

Mary stood up, rubbing her legs, her stomach, and her arms, trying to get out the eerie feelings inside.

Hank and Joe looked at her like *what the hell was she doing?* Other people in the group began turning their heads toward her, evidently thinking she had something to say.

"I'm sorry." Mary sat back down, embarrassed, straightening her black skirt.

Hank reclaimed the focus of the group: "If she lives under your roof, she needs to follow your rules. Bare butt spankings are fine. In fact, they add humiliation to the offense for older girls ..."

The fire was getting low, so Joe picked up a log and threw it in. It banged other logs and red embers danced into the air, twirling up and out. He leaned close to Mary and whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Just jitters." She didn't want to worry him with the box again. Really, they had found a good place for it where it would remain safe. They needn't think about it anymore. Nothing bad would happen. It was safe. She could forget about it. An intense itch broke out on her neck, and she began clawing it with her fingernails.

From the middle-left of the crowd, an orange hand rose.

Hank pointed to it, and the woman began. "I have a seven-year-old daughter who spends six hours a day painting. It makes her so happy that sometimes she cries after she finishes--"

Joe whispered, "Your neck is bleeding."

Mary held out her hand and saw crimson stains under her fingernails. She put her hand on her neck to apply pressure to the wound.

“--but her painting has grown into an obsession. It gets in the way of her schedule for eating, schoolwork, and chores. And it’s such a messy, expensive hobby. My husband and I have paid carpet cleaners to come into her room over seven times last year. None of her classmates have this problem. How can we get her to be more normal?”

Hank sighed deeply. “It sounds like she’s self-centered. Her focus is all about herself and what *she* can do. She needs to realize other people are living in the household besides her ...”

Mary looked at her hand. The blood seemed to be drying. She grinned as a creative idea for the cripple came to mind.

“... children *need* limits. It gives them a sense of security, an understanding of what they can and cannot do.”

The husband shifted in his seat next to his wife and raised his head. “But what if she keeps trying to paint, even after the beatings. You see, we’ve done what you’ve said before, but she just sneaks around us to do it.”

“You have to be consistent, continuing to discipline. You ought to throw away all her brushes, paints, and old paintings to show her you’re serious. You can’t let her self-centeredness run your household. You and your wife are the authorities.”

Mary noticed the husband and wife nodding their heads in agreement. Throughout the crowd, other members also nodded. It was nice when people got it. Cindy would get it too. Mary would make sure. She would do everything in her power to the one-legged friend.

Chapter 34

After retrieving his jacket from the trunk of the Mercedes and getting into Sharon's dry car, Laif drove south on the slick Orange freeway at a safe sixty miles-per-hour.

She cried next to him.

He felt bad for her and tried consoling her. "I'm so sorry." He didn't know what else to say. He couldn't take the pain away. He wasn't supposed to take it away. It was part of her love that she had for the dog. It was supposed to hurt.

He wanted to hug her again, but driving on the wet freeway made that dangerous. The last thing he wanted was to bring more tragedy into her life. He offered, "Don't take the delivery man's actions personally. He wouldn't have done it without the Brewsters' influence."

"Can we talk about this later?" She said between sniffles.

"I'm sorry." Sad feelings remained with him. His life held frequent battles with evil, exposing himself to danger while using truth as his primary weapon. He couldn't ensure protection to people around him. He was falling in love with her, and yet doing so exposed her to these dangers.

"It's not just Cuddles. It's Marlene, my sister. It's Cindy, Adriana. They were all too young to die. Too full of life."

"Cindy and Adriana aren't dead."

"We don't know that."

"I know Cindy's not."

"Even if they're alive, *where* are they? All we know is the Brewsters might be on vacation somewhere. How on earth are we going to find them? Two beautiful girls are going to end up on the six o'clock news as victims of necrophilia."

The Honda plowed through a flooded part of the freeway, squishing water to the sides, freezing Laif's heart as the tires hydroplaned across, finally gripping the pavement beyond. Sharon didn't appear to notice.

The remnants of rain were *still* everywhere, torturously sluggish in diminishing. Dangerous. He moved to the slow lane and reduced the Honda's speed to fifty-five. He swallowed hard.

"We're going to see Creo."

"He's not going to help. We're wasting time."

"You still have the Brewsters' dirty underwear?"

"Yeah. Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"We'll use it to locate them."

Her mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

“Our psychic powers might be strong enough if Creo and I work together.”

While steering with his left hand, he punched Creo’s home number into her cell phone. After twenty seconds, he pushed the off button. Creo didn’t like answering machines. He thought they were too unnatural for communication. Laif looked at his watch; it was 9:23 p.m., too early for Creo to be in bed, too late for him to be sitting around at home. Laif knew that Creo religiously hung out at a rave nightclub called *Club Gel* in Santa Ana.

“Creo,” she said with a sour expression. “I don’t like him, and it’s not just because he forced me to see the truth earlier.” To Laif’s horror, she grabbed a bottled water from a six-pack in the backseat, screwed off the cap, and took a swig. He felt itchy with sweat.

What if she spills it? What if the car hits a pothole in the road and the bottle jumps from her hands into my lap, gurgling out water?

She stuck the bottle--uncapped--between her thighs and took out a newsletter from her jeans. “Maybe there’s a clue in here.”

Ashamed, he hesitantly requested. “Could you cap the water?”

“Oh. Yeah, sorry.” She screwed the cap on. After five minutes of flipping through the pages, she said, “Remember that spanking camp advertisement?”

“Yeah.”

“The dates are from April 13 through April 17.”

“Today is April 13.”

“It’s the only vacation spot advertised in this paper.”

He said, “That does sound like a vacation the Brewsters would enjoy.”

“We could be chasing smoke.”

Several moments of silence slipped between them.

He decided, “We’ll know for sure when we meet with Creo.”

She folded the newsletter back into her pocket.

He exited Lincoln Avenue, made a right on Sunkist, went down a few blocks and turned into the driveway of a three-story building with reflective glass on the outside. They went around to the back of the building to a warehouse with no windows.

A pink neon-light tube encircled a double-door entrance where a line of about twenty people waited, half wearing costumes--some skimpily clad bunnies with soft furry tails, some football players with headgear and pads, some schoolgirls with plaid skirts with white blouses, the bottoms tied high so their belly buttons were exposed.

“We are definitely not dressed for this,” stated Sharon.

“It’s okay. You don’t need a costume.” He didn’t want to put her in any more danger than necessary. He didn’t even want to think of her being hurt. “It’d be safer if I went in alone.”

“I’m going with you.”

“If we both go,” he rationalized, “the dark mist might recognize us. It’s already seen us together.”

She pointed to a van with a canopy extended from the roof out to two poles. “What’s that?”

Underneath the canopy were a large steel canister on a table and a man in a black mask inflating balloons of all colors. Five balloons were already knotted and affixed to the ends of sticks that were half-way placed inside a jar on the table. An open box was also on the table, full of black and blue masks with white elastic bands. Five people stood in line.

After a purchase, a man and woman in their mid-20s walked away. They had blue masks over their eyes. The balloon they shared went from one set of lips to the other, draining the gas inside. As they neared the line in the front of the building, they began laughing so hard they hunched over as if hairballs tickled the inside of their lungs.

“Looks like nitrous oxide.” Legal use of this drug, otherwise known as laughing gas, is used for patients in small quantities by dentists. Laif detested abuse of this or any drug.

“Is this club safe?”

“You stay here. I should be fine if I wear your wig, my sunglasses, and a mask.”

“What makes you think I’ll be safe *here*? I’m going with you.”

She didn’t look as if she could be persuaded to stay. Her eyes held slight fear tempered with courage and determination. He hated and admired that because although they were good qualities, they could get her into trouble.

“At least let me get the masks while you wait here.” He put on the wig and sunglasses, and opened the car door.

Moist night air hit his lungs, halting him. He looked up warily at the clouds in the night sky. It hadn’t rained for three hours, but what if it began? Southern California was an excellent place to stay if you didn’t like rain, but on a day like today, rain could sneak up on you.

“What are you waiting for?” she questioned from behind.

He stepped out onto the wet pavement. It was unpleasant, to say the least. As he ran towards the canopy, his shoes felt heavy with water, sticking to the pavement like rubber suckers. When he reached the cover of the canopy, he felt safer.

The people in line were rather quiet and stiff compared to those walking away inhaling the gas. When he reached the salesman, he thought it odd that the man seriously asked, “How can I help you today, sir?” Besides pushing illegal use of a substance, the man’s voice contrasted with his silly appearance: pink earmuffs, a blue mask over his eyes, a purple polka-dotted green sweater, violet jeans, and brown Birkenstock sandals with striped black and purple socks.

“Two masks.”

After completing the purchase, Laif paused at the edge of the canopy, fear anchoring him.

The vastness of the sky and its potential contents literally took his breath away. If gravity stopped working, he would fall up into the moist clouds. This thought made him dizzy.

An old man with a cane in line reached out to Laif's shoulder to steady him. He had long grey hair, perhaps a leftover hippie from the sixties. "You alright, buddy?"

Laif gulped in air, as though it were as precious as diamonds. He nodded to the old guy.

"You don't look so good."

He sprinted to the car, jumped inside, and slammed the door closed, still gulping in breaths.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he lied. "Put this on." He handed her the mask.

She put it around her head, and he took off his sunglasses and put his mask on as well. As he handed her back the wig, she said, "You keep it. We'll be better disguised if you wear it." She pulled out a hair-band from her purse and tied her hair into a bun behind her head. "I'll be better disguised with short hair."

He couldn't help staring at her. The sight of her was soothing. Her scent had filled the car, somehow calming him and allowing him to breathe easily.

"What's wrong?" she asked, not knowing how right everything was about her.

She was beautiful before with her hair down, and now she was beautiful in a different way. He could see the back of her neck, tender, smooth, and he wanted to kiss it as he had kissed her lips earlier. He had never felt so strongly about a woman before.

She laughed shyly and looked away. "You're staring at me, Laif."

The memory of her lips lingered. He shook his head and tried to focus, but her soft lips wouldn't relent. He could still feel their gentle fullness.

"Sorry."

As they walked to the line by the entrance, she whispered, "What if we have a whole room of raving, lunatic dancers angry at us?"

"The dark mist can't affect so many people, maybe up to five or eight."

"But we won't have an escape."

"We don't have a choice. We're strained for time. Besides we won't spend long in there."

"I'm getting sick of other people's old anger. Why don't they take responsibility to get rid of it?"

"Tell me about it." Laif had been thinking that for years. Having the ability to feel other people's anger was stressful. He figured it was at least as bad for his health as smoking one cigarette a month. He worked out daily at the gym with weights and in aerobics classes just to cope with the stress he endured from other people's negative emotions.

The line crept forward as two security men checked drivers' licenses and stamped hands at the front.

“I haven’t been to a nightclub in years. Isn’t thirty too old for this?”

“Nonsense.” He noticed most people in line were in their early twenties, but the old hippy with the cane was walking up to the back of the line now. “We won’t be out of place. Creo is forty-six.”

“Yeah, but Creo is crazy. Why does he come here? Doesn’t he have better things to do than hang out at a rave club?”

He smirked. “Good question.”

The line moved forward.

Sharon seemed antsy. She kept rolling onto the balls of her feet in her sandals, flexing her calves – her wonderful, tight calves. “How will I know when a lie controls me again? I could be infected right now, and this club isn’t even real.”

“A good clue is illogic, like my face contorting in odd ways and huge spiders in the suburbs of Pomona attacking you. You did well at the Brewsters’ house. Remember that.”

The line moved forward, and three-hundred pounds of muscle bulged through the first bouncer’s tight, black t-shirt and gray trousers as he held his palm out, stopping people, speaking behind his shoulder to another security man. He moved an orange cone in front of the line to hold people back for a while. Evidently the place was packed.

“So if something isn’t logical?”

“That’s a good clue. Also use intuition. We use it as children, but as we grow older we tend to disregard it for what appears to be fact. But unspoiled intuition is more powerful than cognition. It uses *everything* inside you--your mind, heart, and whatever psychic sense you may possess.”

Ahead in the line, a woman turned around and offered blue pills to the couple behind her. “Take these, man. They’re top quality X.” Laif understood them to be speaking of the popular rave drug called ecstasy. The couple threw the blue pills into their mouths and gulped down the bottled water they held. “It’ll start coming on in about twenty minutes.”

Sharon whispered, “What about their intuition? Where is it now? Why isn’t it stopping them?”

“Some people bend it away. When a child is being abused, his intuition says, ‘*This is wrong.*’ He cries, screams, yells, makes whatever fuss he can, but as his actions have no effect, he learns helplessness and bends the intuition. It’s too painful to live in that dysfunctional household with good intuition telling him things nobody wants to hear.”

Sharon’s eyebrows creased as though she were struggling to take this in.

“These children use defenses to bend intuition. This way they live with their family in relative peace. The hurt becomes buried, but its influence doesn’t. It creates more hurt in their lives until it’s heard, until it’s accepted.” He felt angry coals burn brighter in his heart, making his stomach hot and his head heavy. “That’s all the hurt wants--to be heard!”

People in front of him looked back in irritated, worried, sour expressions, like they just bit into rotten fruit.

Laif turned to Sharon. "Sorry. It's just I don't have all the answers. It's frustrating."

"You don't have to explain." She got closer. Her heat and smell intertwined around him, calming him. Did she know her effect on him? She touched his ear with her lips as she spoke quietly, sending waves of pleasant tingles throughout his body. "So these people's bent intuition steers them to more hurt?"

He had difficulty answering. She had made him too calm or excited – he couldn't tell which. "Yes ... and you couldn't tell them this. If you tried ... they would laugh and continue hurting themselves, not connecting with it, just as they did with their original hurt."

"That's sad." She moved slightly away. He felt it. It shouldn't have made such a marked difference, but it did.

"Once you turn away, you *are* turned away." He could feel anger growing inside him again, speeding his heartbeat and speech. "It's not just about them. They hurt others by hurting themselves. They have a role to play that others depend on; they were given life for a reason. Some could have saved another, but instead were getting high in their apartments. Some could have invented a cure for cancer. Some could have been there for their kids. They don't know how important they are, how important it is to be aware!"

People around him cocked their heads in his direction.

Sharon hugged him, her body melting into his. After a moment that seemed as an hour, she spoke softly, "It's okay."

"It's not, Sharon. I want to hit them. I want to beat it into their brains. I know this is wrong, but they're infuriating."

"It makes me mad too. I had an alcoholic mother and addict father. Sometimes I wish the state would have taken me and my sister away. Maybe Marlene would have been alive today then."

He hugged her back.

"When my parents were still together, they brought scum into the house, men who leered at me and Marlene. I was afraid for her, the way they looked at her. I would be flirtatious just to get their attention off her."

Laif felt a thorn stick deep within his heart.

"They tried to do stuff to me. I couldn't sleep on those nights. I had to be vigilant because my parents weren't. Their minds were too far gone."

"I'm sorry." His response seemed pathetic, weak. He wanted to do more. He wanted to be inside her to dig out the sorrow, if that were possible.

She stroked her soft hand on his neck.

"I wish I could ..."

"You're there for me now, and for others. That's what makes it all worth it. There *are* good people in this world. There are people who stay true to their hearts and help others."

Laif was amazed at her attitude. With some people, evil stained and weakened them, but with her, she had become stronger.

The line started moving again. The muscular bouncer checked identification cards and stamped hands, inching them closer to the door. The other bouncer padded people down. Within minutes, they were paying the twenty-dollar entrance fee.

Inside, people undressed further at the jacket check-in, leaving some women in bare underwear. Men walked away shirtless. Women wore shoes with six inch heels and three inch soles, lifting them into supermodel status, exposing lean legs, flat stomachs, and shapely cleavage. Most people had on blue masks or some sort of headgear--cowboy hats, Indian feather headdresses, bunny ears, construction hard hats, hockey masks, Christmas caps--matching their costumes.

The theme tonight was "The Best of Club Gel," which meant you could wear anything you wanted from past themes or just regular street clothes.

The hallway they walked led to a giant auditorium, which sloped down onto a stage where three go-go dancers in loin cloths, leopard skin bras, and black platform shoes with six-inch soles gyrated to music in a jungle scene. The music was Trance, and it had a hypnotic beat, repetitive yet elevating.

The crowd clotted around the stage, dancing with arms extending upwards, shaking and swaying to the music as a field of grains sways in the wind.

There must have been over five-hundred people in the auditorium.

Laif checked to make sure Sharon's upper face was properly covered. He ran his hands over his own mask.

She had been right. Being spotted here would be deadly. There were simply too many people. Any exit would be blocked with bodies. The eight people that the dark mist infected would be the closest, surrounding Laif and Sharon and beating them into two purple pulps. Bouncers would get to them too late, and it wouldn't matter anyway because the mist would just infect the bouncers.

He held her hand as they walked down a ramp leading toward the stage. They would have difficulty hearing each other talk now. Hopefully, Creo was somewhere in this mass of bodies. They squeezed through clusters of people who had already staked out territories.

As he reached the stage, the go-go dancers swung their heads, their long hair spearing the air, elbows and knees jabbing, stomachs flexing, rears and shoulders jutting. Since they wore loin cloths and were up high on blocks on stage, the audience closest could easily see their g-string underwear. This would've been a single man's dream, but Laif found more satisfaction holding Sharon's warm hand.

He turned back to the path they had taken.

The floor rose incrementally like a movie theater. He could see everybody's faces in flashes, for powerful strobe lights above the stage shot out at them. Creo's red hair would make him stand out. But Laif couldn't spot him.

As they shuffled closer to the stage, his chest tickled from the intense bass. They were getting closer to a speaker system which literally shook his heart inside the chest cavity. His ears hurt.

He pulled at Sharon's hand to walk further along.

The music seeped into them, making them bounce and jiggle through the throng. It was packed, and other dancers were only inches away, occasionally bumping them. A woman pushed him into Sharon and he held her for a moment. She turned around and smiled, abashed. With all her clothes on, she looked sexier than any girl here.

A dancer next to him suddenly threw her arm out and smacked his mask askew.

Five hundred people were watching. If just one recognized him....

His heart raced and he could hardly breathe.

He lowered his head and quickly squatted to the ground so no one would see as he adjusted his mask. Down there watching heavy boots, pointed high-heeled shoes, and other dangerous footwear, he prayed none would fly into his head fueled by rage borne long ago.

He felt Sharon's hand on his shoulder. He stood up, and with their hands guarding their masks, they began wedging through the dancers again.

They made it to the other side of the stage and started walking up a stairway toward a bar, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw Creo sitting just below a stage dancer. His red hair was moussed into spikes. He had one leg propped up on the speaker box on which he sat and held a pad in his lap, writing furiously.

After reaching the spot, Laif was relieved to find it quieter here, being behind most of the speakers.

Green laser beams shooting from the ceiling caressed the top of Creo's spiked red hair. He wore a bright pink sweatshirt with black dashed lines running down.

Next to him on another box, Laif sat and received a musical massage, vibrating with the bass beat from the speaker underneath. A cup of beer jumped along on the box as though alive.

He was relieved it was beer and not water.

Liquids like beer, milk, juice, root beer, coffee, and cola were not anxiety provoking. Clear liquids were. Laif usually added blue food coloring to water before drinking.

Sharon decided to stand next to them.

Creo raised one of his hands and dabbled his fingers in the green laser beams above his head. "Light is energy."

Chapter 35

Adriana couldn't believe they blocked the bathroom with cans, bottles, boxes, and cellophane wrap. Didn't they have human needs? Weren't they concerned about bodily functions? Evidently they were not concerned enough to keep their gas to themselves.

Cindy was still passed out on the couch.

Adriana felt desperate. Her bladder was completely full. It crowded all the other insides of her. She felt like she couldn't even move without risking an accident.

Besides that, she was cold, hungry, and altogether neglected in this messy mobile home. Just who were these adults? Where did they get the idea that they knew how to care for children? They could barely care for themselves.

Adriana pulled on her binds, but the rope was still tight around her wrists.

She used to have a problem wetting her bed at night when she was first placed in foster care. She had felt so out of control: separated from her father and her school, in an unfamiliar house with strangers, feeling constant pain from her leg stump healing, struggling to learn to get around on crutches, feeling helpless and in need of others.

The bladder thing had become an embarrassment. Other foster children laughed in the morning when they saw her stained sheets. They called her a baby, saying she needed diapers, pointing at her, making comments like, "Eeuw! You stink." They would hold their noses as they walked by her and called her a one-legged freak.

The foster mother at that time, Mrs. McGill, wasn't very nice either. At first she was tolerant, but after a few weeks she laughed with the other five children and told Adriana she brought it on herself for not getting up and using the bathroom. Her husband backed her up. She told Adriana that the children's comments were a natural consequence for bad behavior.

As an additional consequence, each morning, Adriana had to pull off her sheets, take them to the laundry room, start the washing machine, and stand in the corner for 20 minutes until the sheets were done. Then she would transfer them into the dryer and start it. The foster mother would avoid Adriana for the rest of the morning. It made her feel so dirty and ashamed. She really *did* want to control her bladder; her life was just so chaotic.

Looking back, she saw that the bedwetting was a sign of how she felt inside.

Now she knew how to control her bladder and would not pee in her underpants, getting her skirt all wet with that sickening smell. She would hold it in.

But she did hope somebody would come along to help. Maybe Cindy would wake up and untie her so she could go to the bathroom, somewhere. Maybe they had another one in a different part of the mobile home. She would even go outside in the bushes if she had to.

Cindy murmured. It sounded tormented, with occasional high whines.

Adriana wished she had opened the box. She didn't care anymore what happened to her if she opened it. She just wanted to see the bad adults suffer. Something was in the box that

they couldn't stand. If they couldn't stand it, it was good enough for Adriana.

But now, the box was surrounded by much of the contents of the room. Cupboards, drawers, storage cabinets were all open from the storm of arms that had frantically collected things to stack around the box.

The place was really a mess.

Her father had also kept a messy house. She was held responsible to clean up, and sometimes it made her gag because of the stench from growths in the kitchen sink after a week of piled dishes and the rotting food in the refrigerator. Kitchen floors with old chunks of steak, peas, spilled soup, bathrooms with spiders, ants, dirty toilet bowls, showers with moldy tubs, soap scum on the walls. Her father wanted her to keep all these things clean, just as he had wanted mother to keep them clean before she fled from his abuse.

As anger rose inside her, Adriana felt hot and the room seemed to turn red. She was so mad at him that she felt *like* him--his rage rising inside her now.

How could he have been so stupid? How could he have expected so much from a little girl? Now that she was older, she knew more about her personal rights and how he had violated them, how his expectations of her were so wrong. She wasn't supposed to have bruises and red marks on her body from his fists. She had personal boundaries, she had feelings, and these were supposed to be respected.

She learned this from her social workers, her therapist, and her foster parent, Jenny. But she had never known this with her father. Back then, she believed his anger was normal, that it was supposed to be unleashed on her, and that she deserved it because she wasn't a good girl. She thought her mother left because she was a bad four-year-old girl. She knew different now. It was her father who was a bad man, and she hated him.

This rage didn't help her bladder. There wasn't room for both inside her tummy, so she quieted the rage by focusing on a beautiful place: the green field behind her house with the boy next door, Johnny Daggermouth. They used to run--she had two legs then--through the high grass and leap over logs, spilling into bushes, batting dandelions, watching the white seeds floating through the air.

When thoughts of her idiotic father crept back in, she drove them away by recalling times with her mother reading Dr. Seuss books. Those times were special because she was alone with her mother, without father's craziness around, and her mother was always so calm.

Cindy tossed and turned in the booth, slapping the seats with her hands, kicking at the air.

Adriana wondered what demons her friend fought.

And where were the adults? She didn't really want them back, but she needed them to ask if she could use the bathroom. She seemed to be getting fuller and fuller, if that were possible.

She moved onto her side to try to lessen the heaviness inside her, but that made it only worse. She pulled on the elastic band of her skirt, trying to loosen it. She wouldn't let her bladder go all over herself. Adriana was determined to hold it in, no matter how terrible these adults were at caring for children.

She closed her eyes. She concentrated on making a lock around her bladder. She turned the key so nothing could escape and pictured the key being placed in her skirt pocket.

Adriana heard the door and opened her eyes.

Cindy's mother entered cautiously, eyes fixed on the prison that held the box. Her step livened after seeing that all was intact. She carried a paper bag.

She went over to shake Cindy awake. There was a gleam in the mother's eyes that Adriana hadn't seen before. She sensed it was the wrong time to ask if she could please use the bathroom.

It appeared as though Mary were almost happy. Out of the paper bag, she pulled four spray-paint cans: blue, pink, red, and purple.

Purple was Adriana's favorite color, purple like the flowers in the field she used to run through with Johnny Daggermouth, like the purple blackness of the sky shortly after sunset, like the color her feet used to turn when they walked in the pond by the school.

Cindy was groggy. "What is it, Mom? I'm so tired."

"Come on, sweetie. We have an art project."

Adriana loved art. She wondered what this woman could create.

Cindy yawned. "Art?"

"Well ... sort of. Come on, let's sit beside your friend."

"Okay. What are we going to make?"

"Come." She led Cindy to sit beside Adriana, and handed Cindy the red and pink spray cans. "Take off the caps, like this. Shake them up a bit." Cindy followed her example.

"Where are Adriana's cans?"

"She *is* the canvas."

"I don't understand."

Adriana's breath stopped.

"Here, I'll show you." Mary took the purple paint and sprayed it on Adriana's bare leg, making two stripes.

Adriana quickly recoiled her leg. She felt a cool feeling where the paint was drying.

"Now you try."

With her leg drawn up into her stomach, Adriana's bladder seemed to be filling into her chest.

"I don't know, Mom. This doesn't seem right."

"Is that what your bitch foster mother taught you? You're back with me now, and you need to trust me. The state isn't going to care for you anymore. They gave up."

“But Adriana is my friend.”

“*I am your mother,*” she said, stressing each word. “I love you more than anyone else.”

“I know. But Adriana doesn’t look like she likes this.”

“It’s okay. She doesn’t matter. She’s a freak of nature. Look at her.” Mary chuckled. “One leg, weak, pathetic. We can’t have weakness like this around, not inside us or outside. We need to get *rid* of it.” She took the blue can, pulled down the top of Adriana’s blouse, and sprayed a spot on her bare chest.

Adriana kept her eyes open too long and some vapor stung them. She closed them tightly, squeezing tears out.

“Look at her. Doesn’t she look funny? See how she squirms and cries. Such a wimp. You don’t need her as a friend.”

Adriana blinked her eyes open.

The mother took Cindy’s hand in hers and positioned it so that the sprayer was directed at Adriana’s belly where her bladder was screaming and hissing and boiling. “Go ahead. I’ll help you start.”

“It doesn’t feel right.” Cindy’s forehead was worried with wrinkles. “Please, let’s just paint the wall or a paper.”

“Sometimes we have to do things that don’t feel right. We just have to do them anyhow. Life is tough, and we have to learn to do what’s necessary.”

The mother pushed down Cindy’s index finger on the spray button. A shot of pink colored Adriana’s white blouse over her stomach. Adriana felt embarrassed and humiliated. The worst thing about it was this was happening right in front of her best friend.

“No, Mom. She doesn’t like this.”

“Some people aren’t going to like what you do. That’s tough shit. You have to do it anyway. Show Mother you love her.” Mary’s smile cracked open her mouth, exposing bent, yellow teeth inside. “Do it.”

“It’s not right.”

Cindy’s mother leaned down and burped into Cindy’s face. Adriana could swear a dark shadow passed from Mary’s mouth into Cindy’s.

The girl’s worried forehead smoothed. She looked different, colder.

Mary said, “Go ahead. It’s all right. It’s for the best.”

Cindy hesitantly brought the can back over Adriana’s belly and gave it a pink blast. She frowned and quickly set it on the floor. The mother burped into Cindy’s face again. “She’s worthless, Cindy. It’s okay to do this to her.”

Cindy brought the can over Adriana’s belly again and gave another pink shot, longer this time. She let out a scary laugh, part nervous and part delight.

Adriana's leg shook. The pressure inside her bladder became too much to bear but she held it anyways. It was as good as sealed and locked.

The mother and Cindy both sprayed. Adriana closed her eyes tightly. They went all over on her hair, arms, chest, and leg, laughing. It was cold and made Adriana shiver. The binds dug painfully into her skin as she resisted them. A horrible emptiness rose within her. All at once, she felt the scorn of her old foster mother's eyes, the foster children laughing at her bladder problem, the bullies at school teasing her about her missing leg, her teachers' pity for her, her father putting her down--she was a freak, an outcast. She didn't belong. She didn't fit in anywhere.

She felt like dying.

Warmth spread in her underpants, the only warmth in the hurricane of cold paint, and she knew what it was. It puddled on the carpet underneath her. She wouldn't open her eyes now, even if Mary and Cindy stopped.

"Look, honey," the mother giggled. "She peed her pants! What a loser!"

Adriana heard Cindy laughing, a terribly tormented laugh, then breaking into crying.

"What's wrong?" the mother accused.

"We hurt her."

"You just made her true nature come out. She's a pathetic weakling."

"That's a lie," Cindy cried. "You're lying."

Mary's scream burrowed into Adriana's spine.

Mockingbirds took flight outside the mobile home.

Adriana tried to get away too, tried to be somewhere else, but the scream wouldn't release its hooked claws from her bones.

After it silenced, she tried to drift deep into herself, away from the horror of the scene, but she heard her friend being dragged on the floor, whimpering, and the door slamming. From another room, she heard Cindy yell, "No. I don't like the dark. Please not there. Please."

Adriana needed to get away from all this, so amidst her shivering, skinny, deformed body, she managed to go into a deep place inside herself where she couldn't hear, couldn't feel, couldn't see, where the horrors around her couldn't reach.

Chapter 36

“We all need light,” Creo informed, his eyes sparkling. His fingers continued to mingle with the green laser beams above his head. “Besides it allowing life to exist, it reminds us of love, truth, happiness. Darkness cues death, coldness, hate.”

As a social worker trained to be sensitive to racial groups, Sharon took offense to Creo’s words. “Isn’t that symbolism a bit insensitive coming from a Black man?”

“This has nothing to do with skin color. Believe me, there are people out there much blacker than me on the inside.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about much deeper things than skin. Besides, no Black person is truly black. Skin color comes from reflection of light. If we can see anything then light is being reflected.”

“What’re you doing here?” Sharon didn’t trust him. She didn’t assume so faithfully like Laif that Creo was good. “Why does such a philosophical man come to a rave party? For God’s sake, drugs are outside!”

“Inside as well,” he assured. “You just have to look closely at people’s eyes. Hallucinogens are most common. But really look around you.” His arms waved as though to display the theater. “Look at all the contrasts of light and dark.”

She scanned the auditorium. Laser beams drilled through smoke and shadow; strobe lights chased away darkness for only milliseconds.

“This place is like a temple for me. It’s a study. People here are a microcosm of society. Some live lives with masks, while others show their true colors. Some live life altering reality with hallucinogens, some choose to stay sober. In society, people use defenses to alter reality. Amongst all of us, both good and bad, there is a uniting beat. A powerful music that goes on and on, touching each of us.”

She looked at him with his pad and pen resting on his right leg, excitement glittering his black eyes, his flaming red hair erect. It was impossible to see how big his pupils were. “You aren’t high, are you?”

“Like I told you, this place is of great learning and inspiration for me. It clarifies the outside world. It’s the lens that sharpens thought.” He pointed to the stage. “Look at the go-go dancers. They are symbols of sexuality, and look at all the men and women who watch them, some lusting, others learning, others admiring.”

“Okay, enough. Let’s leave.”

“Sharon and I are in danger here,” Laif urged, looking around warily. “Dark mists.”

“Is that why you’re wearing that wig and silly mask?”

She felt annoyed. “You’re the one with spiked red hair.”

“It blends well with the crowd, don’t you think?”

Suddenly the entire room became silent.

Instead of trance music, colors of the rainbow cascaded from the speakers, splashing the people dancing directly in front, creating ripples in the light as it flowed past their bodies to others, streaming hair back behind heads as blue wind, pulling their clothes with sharp orange and red tints, violet waves crashing into the backs of other people and surging back toward the stage.

It was the most beautiful and terrifying thing she ever saw.

She felt dizzy and swayed.

Laif caught her. His lips moved but only purple light smoked from them, slowly evaporating in the darkness.

She looked at Creo. He was smiling. Was he the cause of this? She still felt dizzy in Laif’s arms. Did Creo slip her a drug? How? She didn’t drink anything.

As people jumped and stepped to the nonexistent trance music, their shoes splashed yellow light. When people clapped and snapped, yellow dust fell from their hands.

It slowly dawned on Sharon what was happening. Sound had turned into a completely visual experience. Somehow it mixed with her sense of sight, leaving her hearing blank. Was this what Laif saw? Was this what he was talking about when one of his senses melts into another, when he said he could taste a sunrise?

With a numbing flash, sound shot back into her ears and her vision dulled back to normal, despite the desperate arousing attempts of lasers, strobe lights, and colored lamps throughout the auditorium.

Creo informed, “Imagine if your sixth sense, however much you possess, was melded with another, say sight. When you sensed evil, it would most likely appear in your vision as darkness. You might develop a fear of the dark. Children, having higher access to the sixth sense, often have this sensory confusion. During the day, they see suggestions of darkness in people. At bedtime, they fear all the darkness experienced from the day, imaging the worst.”

“Did you make that happen to me, with the sound and light?”

“Imagine if your sixth sense crossed into your sense of sound. What kind of noises would evil make? It would probably come as growls and voices of exceptional hatred, furious swears.”

“So what?”

“Imagine if you didn’t understand this. What would you think was happening?”

“You’d think you were going crazy.”

Creo looked down. His shoulders slumped, and a cloak of sadness seemed to surround him. He scribbled something on his pad. “Perhaps we should go now.”

Chapter 37

Hollow banging came from another room.

Adriana slowly opened her eyes to the harsh ceiling lights.

From another room, Cindy's strangled cry grew into raw wailing, then a barely audible whimper. "The darkness. Please let me out."

Adriana wondered how long she had been out before slipping back into painful consciousness.

The skin on her arms and legs felt hard from dried paint. Her shivering body tried to break free of this brittle hold, her stomach ached for food, her mouth was cotton dry, her panties and skirt were soaked, and she was tired.

Cindy screamed hoarsely, "It's dark!"

Mary was trying to turn her daughter. Adriana gritted her teeth, and if her wrists weren't so sore, she would have tried slipping out of her binds again. She didn't have many friends, and the few she had, she valued. Cindy wasn't like most other kids. She had never teased Adriana before. In fact, Cindy never made fun of anyone. The spray-paint incident wasn't like her at all.

Why did her mother need to turn her against Adriana of all people? Mary had custody of Cindy again. Why couldn't Cindy and Adriana still be friends?

Despite aching and stinging wrists, she yanked on her binds.

"Things are crawling on me," Cindy shrieked like a chicken being plucked. "I can *feel* them."

Adriana was so upset that she screamed. She kept it short though because she didn't want Mary to return and lock her away where she would be good to no one.

She looked around the room, searching for something that could free her. The knives were ten feet away on the kitchen counter. Her binds were rope. But the only way she could reach a knife was if there were an earthquake and one slid or bounced over to her.

To her left was the side of a cabinet. She couldn't see the top. She got her leg under her and pushed herself up, sliding up the poll against her back. On the countertop were crumpled papers, bread crumbs, and a line of black ants.

She wished she were an ant. Then she could crawl right out of her binds.

Several feet in front of her, the cushiony booth seat almost circled a small tabletop. Nothing there could cut through rope.

How was she going to free herself? She had to, not just for her sake but for Cindy's as well. Cindy's parents were crazy. No wonder the girl ran away after she was returned to them.

Adriana didn't understand the difficulty some parents had of treating their children nicely. What was so hard about being kind? Parents were supposed to love because children needed that. Parents *should* know better. She wished the government made people pass exams and classes and get licensed before becoming a parent.

She let herself slide back down the pole to the carpeted floor, which made a squishing noise as she sat in her pee. It made her disgusted with herself.

Cindy's whimpers and cries rose, and it was too much.

If Adriana could plug her ears, she would have. But she was forced to hear, as though this were Mary and Joe's master plan of torture.

It wasn't just that they didn't know how to love. It was that they actively tried to *destroy* love, going out of their way to damage and break people. Who spends the energy to do that? Why would somebody want that? If they didn't know how to love, wouldn't they rather just sit on the couch and watch TV, or play videogames, or ride roller coasters all day, or lay on a beautiful beach soaking up the sun? Why would they have a child, and then think of ways to make her and her friend suffer?

"Please, Mommy. I won't be bad anymore," Cindy cried with defeat drowning her voice.

Adriana thought it strange that of all people, Cindy wanted her mother now, but Adriana found herself wanting Mary too. She needed Mary to come back, feed her, give her water, dry herself, give her a jacket, and take these damn ropes off.

She shouted to her friend, "Hang in there, girl!"

A whimper was all that answered.

She tilted her head back. Maybe smarter thoughts would come with her head this way. The pole rose into the ceiling of the mobile home. Behind and above her, a picture hung on the wall of a dead cow in a green pasture with black flies crawling on it. The picture was in a wooden frame and protected by glass. What kind of sick people would want to look at a dead cow with flies eating it?

She hated being tied. It reminded her of being handicapped. In a sense she was tied in her life, not free to do things other children could. She pulled on the rope with all her might, but it was no use.

Her friend was quiet now.

This scared her more than anything else. Cindy may have given in, her spirit crushed by her parents again. How many times could a spirit be crushed before dying?

Chapter 38

Inside Creo's Mitsubishi Montero, Sharon's eardrums felt numb. Everyone's voices sounded muffled.

She stuck her fingers inside her ears to try getting them to work right. The impairment must be just temporary damage to the fine sensory hairs inside her inner ear canal. Or was it long term?

Creo directed, "Give me something they have touched before. Something intimate."

Laif looked at her.

At first she didn't know why he was looking at her. When she figured it out, she felt nauseated.

He kept staring.

Her stomach turned, but she unbuttoned her jacket pocket and reached inside. Something cold and wet touched her fingers as she pulled out the forgotten, atrocious underwear. The smell of urine and feces rose.

Everyone's noses crinkled in retaliation. The fumes permeated the limited air inside the SUV. The briefs were of a man. This was definitely something intimate from Joe Brewster.

"You want them, you got them." Holding the underwear with only the tips of two fingers, Sharon dropped them onto Creo's open hands and quickly wiped her fingers on the carpeted floor of his car. She would have preferred antibacterial soap.

Eyes wide, Creo exclaimed, "My God, Laif. Couldn't you have picked up an undershirt, sock, towel, brush, strand of hair, or *anything* besides this?"

"I didn't want to fail. This is a strong essence of the man."

"Yes, but my God." He threw the underwear to the floor on the other side of the car by a screwdriver, opened his window, coughed, and spat outside.

The rhythmic bass of Trance music could be heard through the warehouse walls.

To her relief, Laif cracked his window. A draft of fresh air now traveled through the SUV. She tried the windows in the back, but they were shut off.

She wished they were inside her car rather than Creo's Montero. Sitting in the back, combined with the stench and the heavily tinted windows made her feel claustrophobic. "Let's just get this over with."

Creo spat outside again, pulled his fiery head back inside, and Laif picked up the underwear, grimacing. Creo tentatively reached for briefs with his left hand. When both of them were touching the material, they held each other's free hands and closed their eyes.

Now *this* looked weird--two grown men, one forty-six and the other thirty, holding hands and touching a man's dirty briefs.

Despite the heavily tinted windows, Sharon was glad Creo had parked far from the club entrance.

Creo and Laif started to hum lowly. Or was that the damage from the rave music in Sharon's ears? She couldn't tell. It rose slowly in tone and began to sound like part of the bass music from the warehouse, rising one moment, lowering the next. If it was them, they somehow matched each other's pitch perfectly, as if they had been singing their whole lives.

It was a song, but like none Sharon had heard before, part Gregorian chant and part completely foreign. She gently banged on her ears to make sure she wasn't hearing things because the sound seemed to emanate from the very structure of the car. It reverberated with itself, escalating in volume, competing with the muffled bass from the warehouse, then the bass joined in again, as though they were one and the same.

The sound came from everywhere, the pavement outside, the warehouse building, the car, the trees. She poked her fingers in her ears. She swore that she would never go into another rave again without earplugs.

Suddenly it stopped, leaving only the bass from the warehouse thudding in the distance. Both of the men opened their eyes.

"Do you have it?" asked Creo, shivering, eyes full of anxiety.

"I think so."

"What do you mean, *you think so*? We shouldn't have stopped if you aren't certain."

"I believe so."

"Don't just believe, be certain, man! I don't want to have to go through that again."

Laif turned to Sharon. He looked funny, like something was coming to him as he spoke. "The answer ... it's ... in your pants."

She asked, "What?"

"In your pants ..."

"Okay, look, let's not get perverted here. Focus on the goal, not me."

"I am ... it's ... in your pants." He became increasingly excited, alarming her but also giving her a warm feeling of embarrassed pleasure.

"No one is going in my pants right here." She scooted back in her seat.

"Empty your pockets, Sharon," Creo said, irritated. "He means inside your pockets."

"Oh," she chuffed. "Yes, I can do that." She chuckled softly and pulled out her keys and the newsletter she had taken from the Brewsters' house. Laif was still looking at her pants in that trance-excitement like stare. She felt embarrassed for what she had assumed he was thinking.

Laif's eyebrows rose. "Open to the second to last page."

She did as he instructed.

His finger shot out from the front seat and landed on it. "Yes. Right here. Here." He was pointing at the advertisement for the spanking camp in the Santa Ana Mountains.

"You're sure?"

Laif was out of his trance state now. He looked exhausted and spent, as though the psychic connection had been draining. "I believe so."

"It's about an hour and a half drive from here." Creo paused and then said, "I felt something else in the connection. Terribly evil and powerful." He shivered. "There hasn't been such energy for a long time."

"You're only forty-six, right?" she countered.

"It's as though the scales that balance good and evil have dipped toward evil."

"What does that mean?" asked Laif.

"I don't know." Creo threw the dirty underwear out the window and rolled it all the way up.

"Will you come with us?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he sat with his back bowed, looking at the entrance to the rave, watching some partiers trickling out. It was just as Sharon figured. He wasn't going to help.

"If what you saw is true," Laif pressed, "I can't fight this alone."

Creo kept watching the entrance to the rave, his temple, his sanctuary.

"I know you're good, Creo."

Chapter 39

Adriana looked up at the dead cow print again. There was something about it.

Something ...

She hummed *Mary had a Little Lamb* to herself.

A wooden frame, glass covering, picture with flies buzzing around the carcass in a green pasture--what drew her to this? *Disgusting dead cow, grass, flies. Glass covering. Wood. Glass. Sharp glass?*

Yes!

She moved around the pole so that she was facing the picture. She leaned back and lifted her foot above her head and kicked at the frame. It swayed. She kicked again. It swayed more. With another kick, it came loose. Closing her eyes tightly, she heard a crash and tinkling of fragments.

She opened her eyes. Hundreds of diamond like cuts of glass glistened on the floor, and for her, they were as valuable as diamonds.

A few pieces were inches long, sharp on the sides. She reached for the closest with her bare foot--careful not to cut it--and dragged the shard to the pole. There, she picked it up with her hand and began working on the rope binds with its edge.

Cindy was still uncomfortably quiet in the other room.

Adriana worked faster, cutting her fingers in the process, but not caring. She had to get to her friend. If they couldn't be there for each other, who else would? It wouldn't be their parents, their foster parents, or the state. The state had tried, but it wasn't a very good parent.

Maybe Sharon's friend, Laif. Yes, I wish he was here. He would be perfect to save us. Maybe he had a big house somewhere, and we could go live there forever. Her heart ached just thinking about that. A permanent family. A good home. Somewhere where I wouldn't have to switch schools every two months.

Every time she switched schools, a brand new group of kids delighted in tormenting her. Their energy went down slowly as they got used to her being different. But when she had to go to a new school, it started all over again with renewed intensity. And it made her wonder if most people in the world were bad. These thoughts made her feel depressed.

She could feel the rope tearing and becoming looser. She worked harder.

Thinking how both she and Cindy experienced horrible abuse, how they both survived, how they were now both trapped, Adriana didn't want their good fortune of survival to end. She needed to save her friend. Saving Cindy was like saving herself.

When she had lived with her demented father and passive mother, she loved them without knowing just how badly they treated her. If she could save Cindy, maybe--in a roundabout way--that would make up for the part of herself that wasn't saved before.

Adriana's mother had always pretended everything was all right. Even after Dad beat them both in the same night, Mom would come to Adriana's bedside and say that Dad loved them and that they just needed to try harder to please him. Then she abandoned Adriana, leaving her alone with her father. Adriana didn't want to be like her mother. She had read stories in books where children grew up and turned out like their parents.

She wouldn't abandon Cindy.

She worked her bleeding fingers harder. The binds loosened more. Her hands felt numb. She tried to pull them free, but the rope still held.

As she continued moving the glass knife up and down, despite the numbness, cuts on her fingers stung, but she kept on.

After a couple of minutes, the rope snapped free, and she wiggled her hands out.

She wiped her bloody fingers on the inside of her blouse, where the paint hadn't reached. Feeling slowly returned to them, along with painful tingles and bad stinging where the skin had been split.

With an old newspaper, she brushed aside a path through the sharp glass fragments. She stood, wished she had crutches, and began to hop to the door.

A month ago, Sharon told her that a prosthetic leg for her had been delayed because the state hadn't approved it. The government was calling it "cosmetic" and not a necessity, which was holding back the procedure. But that was okay by Adriana. She didn't want some plastic, imitation leg anyway. She told Sharon she would rather just keep her single real leg rather than have two with one being fake. She thought the kids at school would tease her worse for having a plastic leg, perhaps earning her new nicknames such as plastic girl, robot, doll girl, statue, and others. And they would have an actual part of her they could steal. She imagined that they would toss her leg amongst themselves, playing *keep-away* from her, and they might not even give it back. They might throw it somewhere she couldn't get to, like in a tree or the roof. She wouldn't be able to handle that. Then they would make fun of her for trying to pretend she was normal, pretending to have two legs. They would push her over easily with her single leg, like they already do now, and make fun of her lying on the ground.

Sometimes the kids would take her crutches away from her during lunchtime, but they weren't a real part of her. She wasn't pretending to be normal. If she ever got approved for a plastic leg, she knew she would eventually begin to think of it like a part of herself. She would risk feeling almost normal. And when it would be taken and played with by the mean kids at school, it would hurt too much.

But she sure could use a spare leg now.

She saw the kitchen sink out of the corner of her eye and almost hopped to it to quench her dry throat. But she could get plenty of water later. The most important thing now was to free Cindy.

A few more hops and Adriana was at the door. She stood there and listened, making sure Mary wasn't close by. Then she creaked it open.

The hallway was long, with five doors--two to the left, two to the right, and one at the end. Cindy's cries had sounded from the left, probably from the closest room. She hopped to it on her toes, trying to do so as quietly as possible, little springs at a time.

She leaned against this door and pressed her ear to it. She thought she heard whispers.

Slowly she opened it.

A weak lamp on a small table against the wall dribbled light onto the floor. A crate was in the middle of the room. She guessed at once this was Cindy's prison. It was small, only about two feet high. The rest of the room was bare.

A shadow caressed the side of her leg. She thought Mary might be standing behind her.

As she supported herself with her left hand against the door frame, she spun around, her heart leaping out of her chest.

But the hallway was empty, and the shadow was gone. The ceiling light from the plastic panel above flickered a bit, then shone steadily. Her scare had probably been just a flicker of the hall light playing tricks on her eyes.

She took a deep breath and turned back to the room.

The crate was painted black, and putty filled all the cracks between the wood, sealing out light. When she reached it, she suddenly was afraid to touch it.

She felt hairs on the back of her neck prickling. She twisted her head around to catch anyone who might be behind her.

The hallway was brighter than this room, and she could clearly see that no one was there.

Why was she so jumpy? The parents were such rotten people that they probably had planned to leave their child imprisoned for at least a few hours longer.

"Cindy," she whispered so quietly she could barely hear herself.

Something was stirring inside. Whatever it was, it couldn't stir much because there wasn't much space. Even small Adriana--absent one leg--would be cramped in that tight cell. She put her ear closer to the lid, trying to hear.

Whispering, murmuring from inside.

Did she really want to open this? Was Cindy inside for sure? Maybe she was somewhere else, and something terrible had been locked inside here. She remembered a cartoon she saw last weekend that had a crate holding a Tasmanian devil. When the rabbit opened it, the devil whirled around so fast you couldn't see it.

"Are you in there?"

Muffled whispers.

With one hand supporting herself on the crate, she used her other to knock on the top.

The whispering stopped. Cold silence remained.

She swore she saw another shadow darting inside the room from the hall, stealing away into a corner. She turned so quickly around, she lost her balance, causing more noise and commotion as she fell onto the floor.

Like a metal spring, she jolted upright to look to the hall.

A moth was fluttering by the top of the door frame.

It's just a moth, she told herself, attracted to the light, making shadows. Her heart shook her chest. *Just a moth.* She consciously breathed slower now, forcing herself to take deep breaths. *A moth. Nothing more, just a moth.*

She pushed herself up. She knocked on the crate again.

This time the whispering was clear. "Daddy, please stop. You're hurting me."

She recognized Cindy's voice. She slipped off the two open locks that were in the latches and pulled open the lid. At first, it was dark inside, then a little bit of light sprinkled in, and Adriana saw Cindy: a crumple of arms, legs, and body at the bottom.

"You're heavy, Daddy. Please stop."

"It's okay," Adriana assured. "It's just me."

With the speed of a snake, Cindy's arms untangled, her neck straightened, and she popped out of the box.

Adriana fell backward with Cindy on top, mouth eagerly searching for flesh, then a sharp pain on Adriana's left shoulder where teeth submerged. But she pushed the head away. Then the gapping mouth struck Adriana's neck, but as she struggled, the teeth just grazed the skin. Quickly, they found her arm though.

"Stop, Cindy!" She slapped her friend on the face, but the crazed girl wouldn't loosen her jaws until Adriana's hand tried prying it off. Then the jaws closed on her hand, and Adriana screamed.

She hated doing this, but she punched Cindy in the mouth and pushed her to the side, then quickly scooted for the door.

Behind her, there was scraping, shoes slapping the floor, but she didn't turn around. She was focused on getting back to the messy room where the small box was--the box that everyone here feared, the box that perhaps held the answer.

She wished she had taken the time to get it before, but she had been too consumed with freeing Cindy.

Hearing nothing behind her, she found herself wishing she could somehow move faster, and then a heavy weight slammed into her back, driving her chest into the ground and pushing out her breath, arms pulling to turn her over. She threw an elbow behind her and connected and heard a grunt. She threw another, heard a cry, tilted her body, slid the girl off her back, and kept scooting with two arms and one leg toward the door.

As soon as she got into the hall, she closed the door.

She stood up and hopped back to the other room with the pole.

This room, which had previously been her prison, was now sanctuary.

She looked for a lock, but there was none. Hopping to the pile of bottles, cans, and books that covered the little wooden box, her hopes rose. She didn't know what was in it. She didn't care. She just knew she needed it for the power it held over her friend. She didn't want to hurt Cindy, but if Adriana didn't get that box, she would have to punch Cindy again just to survive.

She hurtled cans and bottles and books behind her, pushing over boxes of powdered mashed potatoes, tearing plastic wrap away. That was when something terrible entered.

She just felt it.

A cold feeling in the room. The feeling of uncaring.

She threw one last can behind her and looked over her shoulder. The can quietly thudded on the beanbag. No one was there. The door was still closed. But it felt like a presence haunted the room, something that hated her.

Chapter 40

“Tell us you’re not evil,” Sharon demanded, realizing she still had her mask on. She pulled it off and took down her hair.

Creo watched the front doors of the rave. Gorgeous women strolled out with long coats concealing skin that had been laid bare inside. “It’s not that simple.”

“Bullshit.” She looked away in frustration. “For one concerned with truth, you never talk straight.” Pressure built inside her head and behind her eyes. It felt like all the garbage inside Creo was being stuffed inside her skull.

“Easy, Sharon. Creo is a friend.”

How could Laif stick up for him? Creo does everything in his power to avoid helping Cindy. The *most* he does is give her a tiny box. “What’s in that stupid box you gave her anyways!”

Creo simply shook his head.

“If it was something to help, why not take it a step further and join us?”

He started the engine of the SUV and turned on the heater. Streams of warm air caressed her stomach and face, driving out the chill. But he didn’t begin driving. “You don’t understand. You’re blind to the bigger picture, of which if I spoke, you wouldn’t believe.”

“Enlighten me, oh Jedi master.”

“I wish I could.”

“Try.”

He waited. “Do you ever wonder why sometimes the warmest people come from abusive childhoods?”

“Yes.” She had not expected that question. “Sometimes evil, despite all its attempts, can’t squash goodness.”

“My parents ... they were extremely religious. When I strayed from the righteous path in their eyes, they flogged me. I remember when I was ten, and I ate an apple between meals, my parents freaked. They told me I had disobeyed house rules and was sinning, and they beat the evil out of me.”

Sharon had a soft spot in her heart for abused children. She answered with less irritation, “Just because you’re religious, doesn’t mean you’re good.”

“Yes. But that difficult environment, that abusive environment, helped me grow where my parents wouldn’t. Out of a bad place, I made good.”

“Maybe you didn’t grow enough.”

“Perhaps. But there are many examples in history where goodness springs from evil. The two are not mutually exclusive. They need one another to exist.”

Laif argued, "But there're also many examples of evil coming from abusive environments, evil breeding evil. And of good coming from healthy environments."

"Apparently so. But where do all the *great* artists come from, people at the cutting-edge of what society needs, of what society is most tantalized to hear, see, and feel? Do they come from good, normal homes?"

She wasn't sure of the answer.

"What kind of childhoods did Beethoven and Mozart have?" He smiled. "Or Johnny Cash?"

She glared at him. *How did he know I like Johnny Cash? Did he break into my apartment? Or did he psychically get into my mind?*

"Or Frans Schubert? Don't forget, poverty hurts just as a slap does. Where does one get the motivation to fight so passionately against evil, dysfunction, or ignorance? One must have been hurt by these to fight them with such passion." He hesitated before asking, "What about your own past, Laif?"

He looked away.

"You fight evil, and does it not come from having been exposed to it, knowing its impact on innocence, desiring it to be stopped?"

Laif's hands began to tremble on the seat. His eyes quickened in their sockets. His reactions seemed excessive to Creo's words.

Creo said nothing more.

She inferred, "So you're not going to help the girls because that would be against the greater good?"

Creo turned the car's heat up a few notches.

She could feel anger clotting and concentrating inside her. "That's a crock of shit. Why don't you get out of your mind and into your heart? You sit there and theorize, when children's lives are at stake, but you don't act."

Three women walked by the idling SUV. They looked hard through the windows, and fear shot through Sharon's heart, fear of being recognized by the dark mist, but the women couldn't see past the tint in the dark of night. They giggled away.

Gathering himself, Laif said to Creo, "This great evil you spoke of earlier, I felt it at the Brewsters' house. What is it?"

Creo's face turned grave. He pulled out of the parking space.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "If you aren't coming with us, you better not leave because we'll need our own car."

"The mountains." He laughed hard. "What a place for a congregation of evil, huh? Like clouds clumping around the foothills, waiting for strength and density so they can move into the flatlands, raining down, drenching the environment with their essence."

Laif appeared nervous at the mention of rain, shifting in his seat, and blinking rapidly.

Creo drove around the glass building and pulled out the driveway, passing a stretch limo, and made a left onto Lincoln Avenue.

“What’re you talking about?” she asked. “Does this mean you’re helping?”

Creo didn’t respond. Sharon wasn’t used to being ignored, not as an adult anyways. It made her feel less important. It made her feel like a child again.

He continued east on Lincoln, past the Orange freeway, toward the Santa Ana Mountains. They remained silent for several miles. Just what would they find there? Why was he being so enigmatic?

Creo finally broke the silence. “The scales of good and evil tilt sometimes, one side gaining on the other. We are like a ship, humanity. We are supposed to be headed in a straight direction to evolutionary greatness. If the scales of one side tip too far, then the ship sways in the wrong direction. Too much goodness one century leads to great evil the next. There has to be a balance to steer humanity toward greater good. This time it is evil that has tilted the ship. If it was goodness, I would be inclined to help evil.”

“You’re not good at all,” she said too meekly.

Laif interjected, “He is this time.”

“What do you mean *this time*? What if things were different?”

“Things are the way they are. Creo is good.”

She said more strongly, “He’s an intellectual bastard is what he is.”

They stopped at Joey’s Fast Burgers in Orange at midnight, and ate greasy fries and cheese burgers on the road to the mountains, everyone pretty much focused on the food. Sharon didn’t like Creo, and now she knew why. He was an inconsistent, uncaring, backstabbing bastard who could be your friend one day and turn on you the next, with no fixed morals. Why did Laif treat him with such respect and consider him a friend?

She wanted to talk alone with Laif about this, but that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. She would have to bear Creo’s presence, just as long as he was willing to help the girls.

Chapter 41

Adriana looked around the room. Books, cans, bottles, newspapers, garbage, cups, cardboard boxes, clothes, cartons of dried noodles, and cereal boxes were scattered everywhere. The sharp smell of urine--from her earlier accident--mingled with scents of bitter paint and rotting garbage. But there was something different now.

It was not the same room that it was ten minutes ago.

The hairs on her arms stood straight up. Her scalp felt loose and her neck tingled. Something was with her, watching, waiting.

"Hello?" she barely whispered.

Why hadn't Cindy followed Adriana? It sure looked like she wanted to a minute ago.

Where was she? Was she afraid of something in this room? Did she know something Adriana didn't? Maybe something escaped from the box. Maybe it was here now and dangerous.

She felt something behind her and quickly twisted around.

Nothing was there but the fortress of stuff covering the ornamental wooden box.

No creature could escape it through the plastic wrap and prison the adults had built. Could it? The adults seemed confident enough.

She had to help Cindy. If she found the box and it was empty, then she could assume something already escaped. She would have wasted time, but at least she would know for sure.

She knew she couldn't abandon her friend. Adriana wasn't like that. She would never do what her mother did. She didn't abandon people.

She continued to pull cartons, books, cans, and bottles out of the prison walls, but much more quietly now, wanting to hear anything sneaking up behind her. With trembling arms, she moved jars of jelly and peanut butter. The contents of little box--if they were still inside--had the power to snap Cindy out of her trance. And she was sinking deeper under the influence of her awful parents.

But what if she was already beyond saving? Or if nothing was inside the box, how would Adriana save herself? Cindy would scream to her parents, and then Adriana would be tied back to the pole.

But she couldn't, just couldn't, leave her friend in need. She would never do that, even if that friend would turn on her.

Adriana started to cry.

She would have died if no one had saved her after her father chopped off her leg. Luckily, a neighbor heard her screams and called the police. They broke down the front door and saw blood everywhere--Adriana had been crawling around the house, pleading with and begging

her father to take her to the hospital. The police searched the house and found her unconscious in her bedroom, where she lay in a pool of blood on the floor.

Just sitting by and letting evil have its way was wrong. It was simply wrong. If Adriana had learned anything in life, it was that. You had to fight. Just sitting by was bad because it allowed bad things to continue. More people would be hurt. Evil would keep winning. It would keep getting rewarded.

Adriana didn't have any siblings, but if she did, she would have never wanted them to go through what she had.

She would not let her friend down.

She worked faster, feeling more desperate. The hairs prickling on the back of her neck were driving her insane. She kept seeing shadows floating by just out of sight, but when she turned her head, only the ugly gray walls stared back.

Did that moth come into this room? Was it fluttering around by the ceiling light? She looked for it, but it wasn't up there.

Feeling something fluttering beside her, she whipped her head back. Nothing. She looked back to the beanbag and door. Nothing. Her heart pumped so hard that with each beat, the arteries in her neck felt like thick ropes.

She couldn't get rid of the cold feeling crawling her spine, so she just kept working, pulling cans of peas and bottles of Coke from the pile, pulling another layer of plastic wrap from the next wall of stacked items.

Why did Mary use plastic wrap? What did she think was in that wooden box?

Adriana heard a bang and crash behind her and jumped forward into a stack of cans, spilling them. A dark shadow moved away as she turned. Two bottles of Coke had fallen to the floor, and brown bubbles fizzled out from underneath the cap of one.

Something was after Adriana.

She could feel it as sure as a mouse stalked by a cat. It was in this room. She didn't know how, but it was.

As she began pulling items out and piling them behind her again, she felt weak in the knee.

She found herself missing her friend, even if the girl was a bit crazed right now.

Close to the bathroom door, picking up cartons of macaroni and cheese and cans of refried beans, she worked faster. Coming to three layers of plastic wrap, having difficulty tearing them, and ...

There it was.

On the floor, wedged against the wall, wrapped tightly in a dark green garbage bag, was the box. She ripped open the bag and found the box mummified in more plastic wrap. Nothing could have escaped that. Right? She spent a good two minutes wrestling with the layers of wrapping, finally tearing away the last layer.

She felt the smoothly carved surfaces. It felt good on her fingers. The small inscription on the top read: *Inside Out*.

Looking behind her at the mounds of stuff she had discarded, she wondered how on earth she was going to get out of here. She would have to make a little path through the litter of cans, bottles, cartons, magazines, and books.

She set the box down beside her foot and began working on clearing a path.

Thunder shook the mobile home.

The ceiling light began to flicker. When it blinked off, shadows ran from the corners of the room eating up all the light. When it flashed on, they scampered back underneath chairs and into corners. It was quite frightful.

Adriana had enough of this room.

Crawling ahead, throwing aside several pots and pushing over a stack of National Geographic magazines, she forced a passage to the door. At that point, the light clicked off again. She waited there in the dark for a few moments. It wasn't clicking back on.

Turn on!

She could hear herself breathing faster.

Great, Adriana thought, stuck here in the dark, not sure where the box is, and God knows what else is here with me.

Feeling her way on the floor, extending her fingers for the touch of that smooth wood, she crawled. She felt her knee dip into cold, fizzling Coke. This reminded her how thirsty she was. She swallowed several times, trying to wet her dry throat, and promised herself she would get a drink as soon as she could.

Something whispered to her left, to her right, then behind her.

Adriana trembled and began to sweat. She continued to crawl forward, still feeling for the box.

"Adriana," they whispered.

Turn on lights! Click on!

Shuddering so violently, her hand slipped on a can and she smacked her head against the floor.

"We sssee you ... Adriana. Come with usss."

Click on! Then she thought that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to be able to see the owners of these voices.

She wasn't even aware she passed the box until she kicked it with her bare foot. Spinning around, sitting on her leg, reaching for the box, finding bottles and cans instead, throwing them aside, she finally touched the smooth yet textured wooden surface.

"Come with usss. Join usss ... Adriana. Come with usss."

Adriana huddled there, holding the wooden cube close to her stomach, terrified of moving and accidentally running into one of the voices.

She put her thumb in one ear and bent the other side of her head into her shoulder, covering her other ear, but she could still hear them. Her body shook so badly she worried the cube might slip from her grasp.

Chapter 42

The night sky flashed like a strobe light for several seconds, revealing on either side of the road bony trees with arthritic branches, brittle grass and weeds browned long ago, and barbed tumble weeds rolling across the Santa Ana foothills.

Creo bit his cigar and took in the sky with interest, his head bent forward while driving.

Sharon thought he might be reflecting on how the firmament appeared similar to his prized rave temple.

Laif shielded both his eyes with his right hand.

She was still in the back seat. It was just as well. She didn't want to sit anywhere near Creo. She did wish Laif were in the back with her though. He could use her comforting.

Thunder boomed.

He flinched.

She reached over the seat and placed her hand on his shoulder. He put his free hand over hers. She kissed it.

Creo shook his head.

"What?" she asked, irritated.

He kept shaking his head.

She squeezed Laif's hand.

Creo blurted, "When will you face the truth, truth-teller?"

He didn't answer.

She felt he didn't need to. He didn't have to justify his fears to anyone. "When are you going to stop bugging him about weaknesses?" she retorted.

Creo sucked his cigar, burning the end bright red, and belched out white smoke which hit the front window, bounced down toward the air vents, and then was propelled back into her face by the current.

She coughed and waved her hand in front of her face to dissipate the cloud. "And why do you have such a disgusting habit? Don't you know smoking is bad?"

He cracked his window open more.

His silence angered her. It was smug, as though he knew it all and didn't need to respond. He probably believed he was above everyone else, not needing to grow from other people's knowledge and experience.

"It's a Cuban." He waved it in the air. "It's got this sweet taste on the tip. Smoking it is like nothing else."

“It’s disgusting. It’s got polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in it.”

Creo kept shaking his head.

“How do you like it? Someone confronting *you* on *your* weaknesses.”

“I always enjoy a chance to grow.” He sucked deeply on the cigar again, more careful to blow out the window this time.

“All right, then.” This was an opportunity he was giving her that she wasn’t going to pass. “You’re more like your parents than you’d like to admit. You believe you’re doing the right things, being moral, yet really are off-track.”

“This isn’t the best time to grow,” said Laif weakly, right hand still covering his eyes.

Creo took another drag. He looked as calm and placid as a lazy lake on a quiet morning. “Maybe.”

“You want Laif to face his weaknesses because you’re too afraid to face yours, and by pushing him, you feel that compensates for your cowardice.”

He pulled the cigar out of his mouth, letting the tip linger by his lips, then pushed it out the crack above the window for a moment so the ashes would blow off behind the Montero. He brought it back inside, drawing squares in the air with the fresh red end. “You’ve quite a head on your shoulders, young woman. Have you thought that you’re focusing on my faults so that *you* don’t have to face yours?”

She liked it better when he was silent. Him and his damn red hair sticking straight up, looking like his damn Cuban cigar with the kindling end, turned her blood hot. She held her tongue, not wanting to let out what was just underneath.

“You feel you have failed your clients.” He kept making infuriating squares with the burning end. “You want to control the situation because you feel out of control. You believe controlling *me* gives you some power.”

“That’s ridiculous! I’m not controlling you.”

She could see the corner of his mouth creep into a smile.

Lightning flashed through the sky.

Laif peeked through his fingers and suggested, “Maybe we should be focused on the road rather than discussing such deep topics.”

She squeezed his other hand and asked Creo, “How am I controlling? And how did this all become about me? I thought we were talking about your weaknesses.”

“We all share weaknesses.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He sucked his cigar. He watched the road unblinkingly.

Now he was back to being silent. It seemed he knew just how to respond to get Sharon angrier, as though he strategically planned his responses. Of course, she knew this couldn’t

be true. No one could be that quick on his feet, even if he were psychic. Could he?

She released Laif's hand. She felt words boiling inside her. She could no longer contain them. "I do not share your weaknesses. I would never fight against good! It makes me sick the hypocrisy inside you."

"Can we drop this?" Laif interjected.

Ignoring him, Creo asked, "How can you be so sure? We're all human. We all have the capacity for every human weakness. Every sin. Surely as a student of human behavior, you understand this?"

"Oh, I understand, all right," she responded. "I understand that some people's weaknesses are sicker than others'. The fact that you can't even see you're wrong, that you're similar to your parents, shows how sick yours are."

He stuffed his cigar into the ashtray. She thought she detected worry in his eyes, slight shakiness in his movement. "You're not following the flow of conversation, young lady."

"So now who is controlling?"

Her bubbling anger seemed to have splashed onto him. He bit at his upper lip, then quickly stopped as though self-conscious and picked up his Cuban again, jabbing it into his mouth.

Laif pleaded, "Look, we're all together now, working toward the same goal. Let's keep that in mind."

"I'm not controlling." Creo pulled on his erect red hair. "I was merely stating an observation."

It began to rain lightly, ticking against the roof like a clock on a time bomb. Laif moaned and brought his jacket over his head to cover himself. Creo looked at his friend and appeared as if he might shout, but looked back to the road instead. They drove in silence through a valley with a river flowing alongside in the opposite direction they traveled.

Finally he mumbled to Laif, "You look pathetic."

She defended, "Hey, shut-up."

"How're we going to battle great evil with a scared boy?"

She felt bad for Laif and gave him a hug through the seat that separated them. She could feel his heart beating fast in her arms. She scorned Creo, "Why don't you just focus on yourself, Mr. bad-man?"

"Please," Laif implored through the jacket material, "let's not fight."

"We're not fighting. We're growing, like Creo said. And Creo needs to grow *a lot*."

"Speaking of growth, what about yourself, missy?" His cigar was shaking in his mouth as he spoke, ashes spilling onto his legs. "You keep trying to save children because of your failure to save your sister. When will you mature and recognize your neurosis?" Smoke curled around his ears. "They'll play on this, you know. Evil roots in weakness."

She never told Creo about her sister. Laif couldn't have told him either. She had been with Laif the entire time he was with Creo. Maybe when they connected hands and hummed, they shared thoughts psychically. She didn't like Creo knowing about Marlene. That was private and personal information. He wasn't on the lawn that day. He didn't live in her family. He didn't understand. He could never understand.

She found herself unable to speak at the moment, submerged in feelings of hurt and emptiness. Her sister had been too young for death. She wished with all her heart she could have traded places with Marlene.

Finally, she managed to say, "How can saving children be wrong?"

"It can when it's neurotic."

"I'm not being neurotic. I'm being human. It's kind and good. If you knew anything about that, you'd understand. But I guess since you're coming from a cold heart, you wouldn't know, would you?"

"Don't project your feeling of badness onto me, young lady. That's your fear, not mine."

"And why don't you talk straight and follow *my* questions? Why do you need me to follow your questions all the time? Can't you face yourself?"

"I've faced myself for a millennium. You have no idea what I've been through and what I've seen. You should speak with more knowledge before you let loose careless words."

"And why is that? Can't you handle wisdom from a babe? Age doesn't claim wisdom in everyone it takes."

"Let's stop this nonsense!" Laif yelled through the jacket material.

"Stop what?" Creo protested. "Stop growing? You of all people should treasure growth, but you hide, fear digging into your spine, trying to stop *our* growth because of your fear. Well, you stop it. You just stop!"

He braked the car hard, and almost went into a skid on the wet road. He pulled over to the muddy shoulder beside the river, which carried small rocks, sticks, and leaves in its liquid embrace.

Despite Laif's head still covered by his jacket, he turned to Creo. "You guys aren't growing. You're just trying to hurt each other."

"Is that how you see it?" Creo's arms swung animatedly in the air, knocking the cigar out of his mouth onto his leg, quickly picking it up. "Evil will be indulging in our weaknesses tonight. This is just a playground compared to what we'll face in less than thirty minutes. And you don't have the slightest desire to work out your rain-phobia." Creo rolled down his window and stuck his head out. "Well, I've news for you. It doesn't look like the weather is getting any better. It actually looks like it's developing into a downpour."

"I'll deal with that when the time comes," he said, turning away from Creo.

"Pathetic."

She didn't defend Laif this time. She was beginning to see some sense in Creo's twisted logic. She didn't like seeing his side, but she was. How was Laif going to protect himself, let alone two children? They might have to watch like a child, the extra burden threatening their goal. It might have been easier if he had stayed back at her apartment and waited.

They sat in the parked car, cold air drafting through Creo's window, rain spotting his pink sweatshirt sleeve, Laif hiding under his jacket with his arms folded across his chest, Creo looking dead ahead at the road, Sharon turning to the river that flowed in the direction they had traversed, nonstop like time, quickly passing.

She wished she could travel back into the past, when things were simpler, just dealing with biological parents and foster children, rather than the fate of good and evil and the many lives that would be affected by the outcome.

Did Creo have a point? Were they ready for this, or were they traveling to their deaths?

Chapter 43

“Come away with usss,” the voices hissed.

In the dark, Adriana could feel their breath on her neck, making her cringe and hug her leg tighter into her chest.

“Leave all the children who tease you. Leave all the adults who won’t adopt you. Leave your parents who don’t care about you.”

She tried ignoring them, but couldn’t.

“We love you. We will take care of you.” The voices became shaky with need, frightening her. “You are ssspecial ... beautiful ... very beautiful. We like you. We want you to be happy. We want you to be your best. Come with usss and we can make it happen. Be with usss.”

She felt dizzy. She wanted to be loved, so much. For as long as she could remember, she had hoped her father would care about her. After being taken from him, she had hoped with all her heart that other parents might love her, would at least try to love her, or if they couldn’t then at least pretend to love her. Someone had to. Anyone.

Now Adriana could feel tiny hands touching her arms and leg. They pulled and pinched her dry, painted skin, cracking it. “Come with usss ... leave them ... and be beautiful. You are sssso intelligent.” Reaching underneath the paint, their fingers felt like tiny icicles.

She stood up feeling unbalanced. Black forms, darker than the unlit room, shifted and swayed around her.

Light rain ticked on the roof.

“You’re sssmart ... you’re ssstrong ... and we like that. We like you.”

It wasn’t fair what the voices were doing. She needed to be loved, and she couldn’t help but to fall for their promises, whether they were true or not. Since placed in foster care a year ago, she had been on the adoption list, but no family wanted a crippled, emotionally scarred girl. No one even came to see her for a trial visit, just to see if she would be a good fit for them. Nobody gave her a chance.

She thought she was at least worth a chance. Just one chance. But no one else thought so. She became teary just thinking about it.

Foster care wasn’t a replacement for a real home, no matter how much they tried. The first two foster homes she stayed in, she stayed less than a month. They must have seen the burden she was and given up. Nobody wanted to commit to her. Nobody wanted their long walks at the mall, bicycle rides at the beach, trips to the carnival and amusement parks, to be cut short by her single leg. Nobody wanted her.

She cried as she squeezed her leg harder into her, never wanting it to be taken like her other had been, forever staining her life, forever making her unlovable and rejected by others, forever crippling her more than she already was.

Maybe these creatures were the goodness that had escaped from the box. They believed she was smart, loving, and worth something. Maybe she should let them take her.

“We like you. Come with usss. Don’t be afraid.” Their tiny little hands climbed up her arms and leg to her body and pulled on her stomach and chest, digging fingers into her, hurting her. “Come ... we love you. You are the best. We like the best ... and we want you. Come ...”

Her breaths rasped. “Where? Where do you want to take me?”

“With usss ... it’s okay. It’s good.”

“Where are you?”

“Here ... not far. It will only hurt for a moment ... come ...” Their fingers submerged into her now, pulling on her guts, bones, and reaching for her heart. “Come ... it’s not far. We are right here. It will only hurt for a moment ... then it will be all better ... all over. You are the best. We like the besst.”

Adriana asked, her speech slurring, “It’ll-only hurt for-a-moment?” She was really dizzy now. But it was a pleasant kind of feeling, like everything painful, the loneliness, the emptiness, all disappearing. Her uncaring father, her absent mother, her lack of a consistent home, rules, and way of life, her stress from having been around violence for years--it was all getting better, it was going away, slowly, nicely.

“Yesss ... hurt only a moment.”

She swayed and caught herself on a stack in the dark. “Where?”

“You are making it. Just a little further ... a little further.” She felt one of their fingers reach her heart. It was terrible. The iciest, emptiest feeling ever. It was everything bad she knew in her life coming at her at once. She shook herself, but they were inside her now and wouldn’t leave.

“It’s okay ... it only hurts for a moment.” Their whispers grew faster, rising with intense joy. “You are almost there. It’s all right. You’re doing fine.”

“Who are you? Get out of me!” she screamed. “I don’t like you. This isn’t good.”

“It isss ... don’t worry. It’ll be all right. You’re the besst. We love you ... and we need you.”

She threw herself on the floor, and the box fell from her hand. It didn’t matter since these creatures probably came from it anyway. Cindy was right. It was bad.

Her body trembled violently, trying to get the little creatures out of her. They were crawling around inside. She couldn’t believe she had let them get this far. It was terrifying now, and they wouldn’t leave, their fingers holding tight to her heart, pulling, pinching, tearing.

“It’s okay ... don’t fight.”

A deep blackness soaked her like she was falling asleep, but deeper. Lying on her back, she kicked her leg and tried to keep awake, keep life in her, but it was draining fast, not just her bad memories but everything she loved as well. The field behind her backyard, playing trucks

and climbing trees with Johnny Daggermouth, the special times with Cindy--all were being dragged out of her and destroyed, one by one, faster and faster.

Her kicking became weaker, but just before she felt like passing out, her foot connected with the box and smacked it into something, then it crashed onto the floor, cracking the lid open--just a sliver of a crack.

But that was enough.

A white light showered from it, so bright in the dark.

Tiny fingers released her insides, wiggling back out her, screaming and desperately pulling their way to the surface of her skin, and then shadows in the room ran, flying fast in the air.

“Ssstop the light! Get it closed. It isss bad. We love you.”

But she was glad for the light.

It bathed her skin and felt healing as more fingers popped out of her and flew back into corners of the room and under chairs, boxes, and tables.

The ceiling light began to flicker back on.

She looked to that mysterious little wooden box. What was inside? It must be wonderful. She crawled closer to it.

Its lid was being pushed open by something inside, more wholesome light spilling out than the bland fluorescent bulbs above her. But where was Cindy? She *had* to be here when it opened, otherwise she might not snap out of her daze. Quickly Adriana grabbed the box and closed the lid, fitting the latch back onto it.

The ceiling light immediately began to flicker again, and shadows in the corners of the room and under tables and cartons began to stir, but they held their ground, evidently wary for the moment.

If the spooky creatures didn't come from the box, where did they come from?

Feeling the need for speed, she stood up and hopped to the door.

Chapter 44

“We need to keep moving,” Sharon urged.

Creo protested, “We aren’t ready. How can we expect to battle successfully until we deal with evil inside ourselves?”

“We don’t have time!”

“She’s right.” Laif turned toward them, with his jacket *still* covering his head. “I can sense it.”

Rain beat on the car’s roof.

“Then we go to our deaths,” Creo said despondently.

“You don’t have to be so negative.” Although she was considering Creo’s statement only minutes ago herself, she knew better now. They had to act for the sake of the girls. They didn’t know what the future had in store for them. No one did. Although it looked bleak, something could turn their way. “There’s power in positive thinking.”

He chuckled. “That’s a bunch of New Age, liberal crap.” He slowly pulled the car back onto the road and accelerated. He rolled up his window, except for a half-inch crack for the Cuban cigar he puffed.

They drove in silence, the wind pushing on the side of the SUV every so often, forcing Creo to compensate his steering. Silence seemed to be the only place now where conflict didn’t exist, and even there, tension smoked between them.

He bit down so hard on his cigar it appeared as though it split.

The rain grew louder on the hood and roof, and Laif shivered under his jacket.

Sharon felt uncomfortable no matter what position she shifted to in the back seat. She wished she could tell Creo that if he was such a coward, he didn’t have to come. But they did need him.

Laif had refused to carry a gun, declaring he would only carry the truth. They definitely needed Creo. She had to get past her conflict with him.

She hated being dependent on someone so opposite her beliefs. It made her feel powerless. She detested this. It reminded her of the weekends when her father was drugged up and out of control. He brought his crack-friends home with him, and they would make noise all night while she tried to sleep, praying none of his buddies would come into her and Marlene’s room.

Hills rose around them as they drove further.

Her feeling of powerlessness deepened. Creo had closed his window too far and the smoke wasn’t emptying out of the car like it should, lingering and growing in the back and choking her. It probably wasn’t bothering Laif so much because he was filtering the air through the material of his jacket.

She coughed several times, but Creo did nothing. She coughed louder with still no response. She could no longer stand the sickening silence and smoke. "Will you put out that disgusting cigar?"

He glared back.

"It's like I'm trapped in a fire back here." She fanned her hand in front of her face.

Something crept up her leg.

She stiffened and curled her arms around her body. It was too dark to see what was doing the crawling. She could only feel tiny claws poking through her jeans into her skin, moving toward her crotch. She screamed so loud she couldn't hear what Creo and Laif said. She just saw them both turning around, Laif peeking out underneath his jacket, Creo rolling his eyes and turning back to the road.

"Sharon, what's wrong?" she finally heard Laif say.

"There's something on me! Something's back here."

"What're you talking about?"

It was advancing quickly. She shouted, "Somebody turn on the lights!"

"Would you keep it down back there?" Creo ordered. "It's probably just Fred."

"Fred! What the hell is Fred?"

Laif flicked on the dome light, and she hesitantly looked down at this scaly, green and pink gecko that had parked on her thigh. She couldn't breathe. "Why do you have a gecko in your car?"

"Fred. He travels with me, keeps me company." Creo sounded almost jovial. He opened his mouth and allowed a column of smoke to leak out, crawling up his cheek past his nose to his forehead. "He loves car rides. In fact, when we're at home, he mostly just stares at the air. But in the car, he's active. Don't worry though, he's perfectly harmless."

The gecko began doing push-ups on her leg, raising and lowering his little fluorescent green chest, sticking out his brown tongue on each thrust.

She wondered the reason Creo chose such an ugly pet. Why not a dog or cat, something closer to human in the genetic pool? Maybe he didn't feel close to people. He was an outsider, more so than Laif. He had no morals, no respect for the goodness of mankind. This creature on her leg symbolized that and made Sharon want it off her leg all the more.

Creo's hand swung into the back, holding something. "Here, give him these." She moved her hand underneath his, and he let several breadcrumbs fall into it. "He hasn't snacked in a couple hours."

She pressed her other index finger onto the breadcrumbs to stick them to her finger. Then she pointed her finger near the gecko's mouth, ready to retract it at the first sign of danger. The lizard raised one of its scaly claws to hold her finger still, as it nibbled two crumbs off. "Eww. It's disgusting."

“Fred takes a bit of getting used to. That’s all.”

“Why? Why back here?”

“Like I said, he likes to move around. He was under my seat a while ago.”

She wanted to put him on Creo’s shoulder since he liked the lizard so much. But she didn’t want to hold it, to feel its scaly body squirming in her hand. She just wanted it off.

Laif evidently saw her discomfort and reached down to the gecko, but before he could get it, it scampered onto the seat and down onto the floor--all while she screamed.

“Will you stop that?” Creo complained. “It’s just Fred.”

“I don’t care who it is! I don’t like it. And now I don’t know where it is.”

“The unknown is always scarier. Knowledge is not only power but safety.” Creo paused for a moment with his finger resting on his chin. “Why do you think you care about Adriana and Cindy so much?”

“I don’t feel like answering that just now, thank you. First get rid of this gecko. Or at least hold onto him.”

Laif bent down in the front, looking under his seat for the reptile.

Creo continued, “Your weakness of needing to help children so dearly will cause you to *hurt* children. Do you know that?”

“What the hell do you know? How long have you been helping children?”

“I’ve been being.” He released another column of smoke which rose and clouded his face. “We will fail. Our weaknesses will turn against us. Our desire to not face them will be our folly. Evil will laugh.”

“There you go with the negativity again.”

“I think I got it,” Laif said with excitement. “No. No, it slipped.”

She continued, “You know, people might listen to you more if you made sense.”

“It only sounds like nonsense,” Creo replied, “to people who cannot hear.”

“Again, try making sense.” She lifted her feet out of her sandals, off the floor, and placed them onto the seat where she could see them. “Laif, did you find it?”

“The only thing down here is a screwdriver.”

Creo explained, “That would be from the toilet I installed last Thursday in a Newport Beach mansion. A very fancy toilet, I might add, with a bidet.”

“You’re a plumber?” she asked, dumbfounded.

Laif informed, “I think Fred went underneath Creo.” He straightened and repositioned the jacket securely over his head.

“Stop this car and find your lizard, Creo.”

“You fear the wrong thing. You should be afraid of what’s inside you.”

Thunder roared and trembled her chest.

“Inside out,” he barely whispered.

Chapter 45

Adriana slammed the door of the messy room behind her and leaned with all her weight against it.

She didn't want it to fly open and release the creatures with tiny fingers.

She stayed there in the hall for several seconds, but then got the creepy feeling that they were coming through the wood.

She hopped to the other room with the crate. If Cindy had gone to find her parents, Adriana was in trouble. She definitely didn't want to be tied up with those finger-creatures wandering around. And this time the Brewsters would make sure she couldn't get loose. Neither she nor Cindy would ever escape.

Leaning against the wall, she put her hand on the doorknob. It was cold.

She was tired, thirsty, and it was *way* past her bedtime. She turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The crate's lid was closed again. The locks weren't in the latches though. She wondered if Cindy had actually decided to go back inside on her own. Would she actually *prefer* the dark?

As Adriana hopped closer, the noisy slap of her bare foot on the linoleum floor made her uncomfortable. So she kneeled down and crawled the rest of the way, holding the box in her left hand. As she drew close, she touched the latch of it with her index finger, ready to flick it open at the first sign of her friend.

That music from Jack-in-the-box toys played in her head: *Da dum, da dum, da didilly dum. Da dum, da dum, da duum dum. Da dum, da dum, da didilly dum. Pop goes the weasel.* She couldn't get rid of the tune. Any second now she imagined her friend popping out of the crate and jumping onto her again.

Adriana took a deep breath and lifted the crate's lid, metal hinges squeaking.

"Please, Daddy, not tonight," a girl's voice came from the growing crack. "It still hurts from last time. Please don't touch--"

"It's just me," Adriana assured. "Your rotten father isn't around, and he won't touch you again." She lifted the lid faster.

Cindy's voice sounded young and was high and crackling. "I don't want ... please don't. I can't breathe, Daddy."

It was creepy the way she talked as if her father were in the room. Adriana had to look around just to make sure Joe wasn't standing behind her. She saw shadows crawling through the crack underneath the closed door. The creatures *were* coming ...

Not allowing her eyes to stray from the door, she spoke nervously, "You're okay. I'm going to get us out of here." Cindy began mewling, and with considerable effort, Adriana was able to turn her head back to her friend. "He's never going to hurt you again. I promise."

The lid was open high enough to see Cindy inside, crammed in with her arms over her head and her knees drawn into her chest. The hard wooden confinement had nails sticking her in some places, drawing blood.

"It hurts bad, Daddy. Stop. I love you. Please ..."

"You're going to be fine." Adriana shook the small ornamented box in her hand. That same liquid sound came from inside. Through her fear, excitement blossomed.

Inside Out.

She had wanted to know what was in this box for the longest time. She undid the latch.

Inside Out.

But she had to force herself not to turn around and be distracted by the hissing whispers growing behind her.

Inside Out.

She lowered the box upside down into the open crate so nothing inside would miss her friend. And she let the lid fall open.

"Stop the car." Sharon scrutinized the dark floorboards where the lizard might be lurking. She felt itchy all over knowing it was down there somewhere. Her bare feet curled. "Find Fred, Creo."

"You were just saying how pressed for time we are."

Laif was flipping through a map underneath his jacket. A warm yellow glow came through the material from his flashlight. "Maybe we should stop. It appears that we needed to make a right on the last road."

Creo put his cigar out in the ashtray, pressing it down until it bent. "Our weaknesses are already hindering us." He slowed the car and made a u-turn in the middle of the deserted street.

"We're almost stopped," she said. "Just let me out while you look."

"Sharon," Laif implored, "we're running out of time."

"I can't stand reptiles!" She turned to Creo. "Of all the animals to keep, why did you have to pick a gecko?"

"I didn't pick it to purposely annoy you."

"Enough of this already." Laif's head moved back and forth as he talked under the jacket. "Children's lives are at stake, people. A child with great potential. Let's focus."

"Talk about focusing," Creo griped, "why didn't you see the turn-off we missed? Let's see ... could it be that you have something draped over your head?"

Laif clicked off the flashlight under his jacket. "You're not helping the situation. In your righteous pursuit to help everyone fight their weaknesses, you go about it in an unproductive manner. Now let's move!"

The car grinded into gear, lurching forward, kicking up gravel against the floorboards as consistently as the rain against the roof, then the swishing of water once the tires returned to the asphalt. Within a minute they were at the intersection they had passed earlier. Creo made a left onto the small single-lane road and sped down it quite dangerously.

No one said anything.

In the silence, Sharon realized her fear of the lizard was selfish. Although she still kept her bare feet on the seat, out of the dark cavities where the lizard could lurk. She reconnected with her desire to find the girls as fast as possible.

Within five minutes, they encountered a gate made of a thick steel pipe, painted yellow, appearing impenetrable.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Laif.

Creo answered with the question, "Nobody brought chain cutters did they?"

"We're almost there."

"Well, what do you suggest we do?"

"We could walk," Sharon suggested, slipping back into her sandals. "That way, no one would hear us coming."

"Don't forget, we got a rain-chicken in the car."

"I can make it." Laif began breathing harder and faster. Each exhale ballooned the material of the jacket.

She and Creo exited the car, he pulling on his long, black overcoat. The rain wasn't hard. Soft, gentle caresses of cool water stroked her face and hands and tickled her feet. Droplets padded and darkened her brown suede jacket. Creo went to the gate to inspect it. Laif had his door a crack open and was struggling to get it further. Every inch it progressed, it also regressed three quarters of an inch. She went to him. "Are you sure you can do this?"

"Yes," he replied, irritated, "I have to." His foot stuck out and touched the ground, then quickly retracted.

"We should have stopped at my car to get the blanket. Maybe Creo has something in the back we could use."

Creo walked to them. "How's it going?"

"We need something to cover him," she stated. "Do you have an extra jacket or umbrella?"

"He's already got one jacket over his head. How many does it take?"

"Just something to cover his body."

"He's got clothes for that."

“It soaks through the clothes,” Laif explained.

“Well, of course it does, silly. That’s what rain does.” Creo rested his hands on his hips, watching them for a moment. Then he turned his back to them. “The gate has a chain on it. It’s a strong gate, but the chain can be broken with a solid hit. Let’s make a little noise and pray no one hears.”

Since the box was upside-down and below her eyes, Adriana couldn’t see inside it. And she didn’t see anything fall from it onto her friend who was whimpering. She began to worry that whatever had been inside was now gone.

Maybe the box had always been empty and everyone had been crazy about it for nothing. But it did make a liquid sound only seconds ago. She supposed that the wood could be hollow and filled with water. But she remembered the light too.

Then light shined down from it. She shook it a few times. Still, nothing fell.

Inside Out.

Adriana felt a terrible feeling of emptiness and loneliness growing behind her, lapping at her back. Shadows danced along the edges of her vision. She pressed closer to the crate, and shook the box harder.

Come out. Come out.

Finally, a glowing blob fell.

It landed in the corner by Cindy’s left foot.

The girl screamed. Her hands grabbed the rim of the crate, pulling herself upward.

This was no good at all. Cindy would just run away. Adriana wished she had seen exactly what she had dumped into the crate, but it was too late now. Her foster sister would have to deal with her fears of it. Adriana let the crate’s lid drop, but it stopped on her foster sister’s fingers. She didn’t mean to hurt Cindy, but she had to keep the girl in there long enough, otherwise there would be no chance of Cindy being back to normal.

Cindy yelped and her fingers disappeared into the crate. The lid fell flush. Adriana quickly pulled the latches down so the lid couldn’t open.

Something brushed against her shirt.

Her heart stopped, then accelerated too fast for her breaths to catch up. She didn’t want to turn around to see what was there. She just stood, leaning against the crate.

Cindy banged on the lid, mewling like a cat being pulled by the tail.

This frightened Adriana even more than whatever was behind her. She was afraid she had done something terrible. What kind of a person was she to make a friend scream like this? Warm fear blasted her from the front and cold fear seeped into her from behind. Her heart felt like it was being ripped apart.

Cindy sounded so pathetic and wretched. Her mewling rose to a shivering, shrill cry.

Adriana stood there.

It was all she could do at the moment because she didn't know what *e*/se to do. But her friend's cries were driving her mad. Maybe it had been long enough already. Maybe too much exposure to the shining blob was harmful. Perhaps Cindy was now back to normal, and Adriana was unnecessarily holding her prisoner.

She stood there, confused.

Still in the car, Laif slammed his door shut.

Creo and Sharon got back inside the SUV. She buckled her seatbelt, concerned about the impact with the gate.

Creo accelerated forward at the part where the chain was. The gate creaked and wiggled, but didn't swing open. He backed up further than before and tried again, getting more speed, but with the same results, except for more noise. He backed up even further and tried again. This time it broke the chain and shook it off the gate.

She got out and pushed the gate all the way open. Then he drove through onto the one-lane dirt road, and she jumped back inside.

They didn't bother to close the gate since it was an hour past midnight and unlikely anyone would be leaving the camp so late. Besides, even if they closed the gate, the broken chain would alert anyone passing through.

She wondered what they would do when they finally encountered this beating-camp for disturbed parents. She wished they had brought a gun, but Laif said they don't kill people. That is not the way they worked. They aren't murderers. They only allow people to choose to hurt themselves.

She didn't understand this entirely and would feel more comfortable with a gun, despite never having owned or operated one before. How many people would they have to fight to get the girls out? The kidnappers weren't going to voluntarily hand the children over.

Creo continued down the dirt road. Big knotty oaks grew on either side and stretched their limbs across, changing the patter of rain on the roof.

"We should be getting close," warned Laif.

Creo shut off the engine, killed the lights, and let the car quietly coast.

As they went around the next bend, they saw several soggy campfires surrounded by canopies where adults sat. *Fires in the rain*. These campers were determined to learn to beat kids better.

She said, "We can't drive up there. Let's park and walk."

"We can't be seen," Laif countered. "The Brewsters will recognize us from the park."

“If we walk in, we might not have to deal with the parents at all. We might be able to sneak the kids out.”

Creo pulled under a great oak tree and used the emergency brake to stop the car so the brake lights wouldn't go on. He took the keys out of the ignition and put them into his jacket pocket. He and Sharon turned to Laif. The rain hardly hit the car's roof underneath the protection of the great oak.

Laif was the first to exit the car this time. He swayed in place and shivered.

Creo conceded, “Okay, I'll give you my jacket.”

“And I'll give you mine to help cover you,” offered Sharon.

“I just need one more. Creo's will be fine.” Laif put on his own jacket as his friend took off the black overcoat and handed it to him. Creo's bright pink sweatshirt with black dashed lines would get soaked. It would also stand out if any light hit it.

Sharon offered him her jacket, but he refused as though it were an insult to his dignity.

Laif looked funny--Creo's overcoat covered his head and splayed arms looking like an umbrella. He continued to shiver despite being dry and wearing his own jacket, sleeves pulled down past his fingertips.

They began walking down the road together, one person on each side of Laif, arms around his waist as support. The trees were still thick here, and rain only dribbled down, but in large droplets. She felt his arms shaking and his steps wobbling. He breathed so quickly that she told him to slow it down or else he could hyperventilate and panic or faint. But her words seemed to have no effect.

“I'm already in a panic attack,” he mumbled.

“I would offer you one of my cigars,” Creo said. “They're quite calming.”

“No thanks.”

Once they left the protective branches of the oaks, Laif's whole body tensed. It was like Sharon walked with Pinocchio, but a wooden doll that was six feet, two inches tall and roughly 190 pounds. He also walked as slow as a wooden doll. Creo and Sharon both pulled him to keep the pace, otherwise he might have frozen in place.

Three dying campfires crackled ahead and to the left of the road, with twenty to thirty adults sitting around each. Speakers stood close to the fires. To Sharon's right were a line of motor homes, tents, and cars. Three big mobile homes were parked furthest from the fires.

No moonlight was able to shine through the clouds above, so it was dark enough to remain unseen.

“Will there be any of those traps?” she asked worriedly. “You know, the dust ones that were at the Brewsters' house?”

Laif was breathing too hard to speak. Creo answered, “I don't think so. The other campers would stumble into them too easily. But try staying hidden because the mist may still be

lurking.”

“Great. So where exactly are we headed?”

“Well, it doesn’t look like they brought children to the camp meetings. The girls must be in some central babysitting location. Probably in one of the larger mobile homes.”

“Good. Let’s head that way.” She didn’t want to get close enough to even overhear what was being spoken at these sick discussions. She knew they had to be filled with justifications for hurtful actions to children. There could be no other way to continue damaging your child.

And these were dedicated idiots. It was already past 1:00 a.m., and they still had energy to support one another in torturing, abusing, and breaking children. They must have needed a *lot* of support. She wished they had just as much drive for self-analysis and self-growth; then maybe they wouldn’t need to beat children.

Sharon avoided looking at the campfires as they headed down the road. She left it to Creo to be on guard for possible stragglers coming their way. She just concentrated on getting Laif to take each step closer to the mobile homes without falling.

Adriana couldn’t bear to hear her friend’s cries any longer. She couldn’t let Cindy continue to suffer. She undid the latches, and the lid flew open, loudly clapping against the back.

Cindy rose out, pale and frightening--anger, panic, and desperation carved into her frozen face. Light shined from the bottom of the crate. She climbed over the edge. Adriana extended a hand to help her, but Cindy banged it away with her fist and ran into a corner of the room, the darkest corner.

Although terror pumped through Adriana’s veins, curiosity pushed through as well. She had to find out what had been hurting her friend. She leaned in closer to the crate, both hands holding the rim, craning her head down in disbelief.

At the bottom ... bubbled ... liquid light.

As she watched, it grew brighter.

It began climbing the side of the crate, gurgling into a body the size of a baseball but having the appearance of shining liquid mirror, reflecting everything around it and more, deeper reflections that could not normally be seen.

In its body, besides her own reflection, Adriana saw fears, weaknesses, and failures inside herself. These images drove down her spirit. She pushed back from the crate, hopping, becoming off-balance and falling backwards onto her butt, not wanting to turn her eyes away from the top of the box, realizing the liquid creature would be popping its mirror-head out any second.

What had she done? What had she unleashed? Poor Cindy was huddling in a corner, sobbing, because of this monster.

Adriana shivered. She was afraid to stand, feeling her rubbery leg wouldn’t support her.

She began scooting back, toward the wall with the lamp, when the mirror head rose out of the crate.

Once again, her eyes were drawn to its polished surface.

She was a horrible friend. She couldn't believe she trapped her best friend in a crate with this little monster. What had its shiny surface reflected to Cindy as she banged and screamed with all her might?

The creature threw one dime-sized leg over the wooden edge, then the other. Its eyeless face watched Adriana. Once again she felt her fears and weaknesses magnify, driving her self-esteem down, making her feel worthless.

I fear being unlovable. Even though I feel better about my leg, some part of me still hasn't accepted the loss. I still blame my mother for leaving me alone with Dad. I haven't forgiven him or her. I don't feel like I could ever forgive them. This makes me bad, unloving like them.

She wanted to turn away from the creature yet was unable. Its glistening surface entranced her.

The little monster jumped off the crate and splashed onto the floor into a liquid-light puddle, fluid arms and shoulders building back from the shrinking puddle into the shape of a doll again.

Its surface brightened and Adriana saw more reflections, deeper. Behind all her weaknesses and fears glistened courage, love, determination, and strength.

Although I fear being unlovable, I have began the difficult road of loving myself. I have taken courage in the face of kids teasing me at school and in foster homes. I am determined to get through life with only one leg. I see my strength to eventually forgive my parents and accept them as deeply flawed.

This pumped her self-esteem up, made her feel stronger, good, yet her weaknesses and fears were still reflected, keeping her self-esteem from jumping through the roof.

It was wonderful, terrifying, and humbling.

She remained afraid of moving closer to the mirror doll, yet was unwilling to move further back. She watched as it walked to her leg and touched her calf. Through the paint-crusts surface covering her skin, she could feel its warm doughy texture.

It bent down and seemed to kiss her leg once, then looked up at her, letting a tiny silvery drop bulge where its right eye should be and slip down its face and onto her skin.

It was warm and filled her with wonder, love, and caring. She wanted to scoop up the little doll and hug it forever. But before she could reach it, it turned away to face Cindy.

Somehow the corner where Cindy hunched had grown darker, as though shadows from the other three corners had crept over and *built* around her.

The doll began to walk toward her, squishy little sounds coming from its shiny feet.

The corner grew darker still. Adriana could see shadows crawling along the walls. They crept into the room from under the door, from under the roof outside the window, and from the other three corners. Although Cindy didn't turn away from the doll, shadows thickened *in front* of her. They were condensing, moving into one another, making a thick blackness around her.

Adriana felt one of the shadows cross her belly as it slithered toward her friend. A cold chill rose inside where it touched, driving down the good feelings the mirror doll had left.

The doll kept walking to Cindy, unaware of the shadows on either side rushing to the girl, building around her, clouding and shielding against the light. Adriana could see just enough of Cindy to see her body straighten in confidence.

As the shadows continued to blend, they formed a large tar-like blob.

The doll was now five feet from her. It kept walking its tiny squishy steps, undaunted by the fierce substance curled like a Cobra above.

Then the darkness struck.

It engulfed the doll. Adriana could no longer see the doll's intense but beautiful surface. She could see only a gray figure, and it appeared to be coughing. The darkness squeezed tighter around, condensing, making the doll dimmer.

Visible now, Cindy looked relieved in the background. She stepped closer.

The doll had fallen on the floor and was rolling around, trying to shake off the black shroud.

But the darkness shrank even further, becoming denser, until Adriana couldn't see the doll at all. It was just a black mass.

Suddenly a small bright fist punched through for a second, but the tar quickly reformed around the hole. Another few punches came, as the struggles became slower and seemed to tire.

The tar tightened so much that it was almost as small as the doll. In fact, it began to take shape of the doll as it squeezed further, so that what she now saw was a *black* doll, struggling on its back, barely able to shake its legs and arms as the blackness hardened.

Within seconds, the doll stopped moving.

Smirking, Cindy drew closer.

When she was above it, she raised her right foot and smashed it down. To Adriana's horror, she heard a cracking and crumbling. Darkness oozed off as Cindy twisted and grinded her foot against the mirror creature.

Adriana stood up and hopped over to save it. But before she could, Cindy stepped back, and as the remaining shadows scattered and collected behind Cindy, Adriana could see hundreds of tiny broken pieces on the floor, sharp and glistening, but each too small to see a true reflection of anything.

Her foster sister clasped her hands together. The darkness behind her billowed up and Adriana heard a whispering hissing from it.

The small pieces of the doll on the floor began to tremble, but they could not reconnect. They didn't have the flexibility they once had to melt into one another.

When Adriana looked back to her foster sister, the darkness behind the girl broke into a haunting of shadows rushing forward. They surrounded Adriana so that she couldn't squeeze through them. They drew closer. She didn't want to touch any of them but they were getting too close to avoid.

This time they didn't whisper they loved her, thought she was beautiful, smart, or valuable. They just pressed ice-cold against her and began to dig their tiny black fingers through her skin.

Chapter 46

As they passed tents and campers, Sharon looked inside the lighted ones.

Most of the children were sleeping. Some were night owls though. She saw a few toddlers unsupervised in play pens, small children tied to posts with leashes allowing them to roam in limited circles. Teenagers were trusted to move about on their own, firmly brainwashed after years of coercion through violence. She didn't see Adriana or Cindy.

When they reached the first mobile home, they found all the windows covered with blinds. They went to the second, and Sharon gasped. This room was in complete shambles--papers, cans, trash, bottles, cartons, books, food scattered everywhere.

When she got to the next window, she had to press her face close because it was so dim inside. This room was completely bare except for a crate in the middle and a lamp on a small table beside one wall. Two children were inside, one lying on the floor, the other sitting beside her.

The one on the floor seemed to be covered in shadows, but it looked like it could be Adriana. The hair was the right length, and she had only one leg. There couldn't be many children in this camp with a missing left leg. The other girl's face was turned, but she had blond hair.

Laif risked looking through one of the sleeves in the overcoat. He looked like an elephant sticking its trunk out to smell something.

"Let's go in here," she suggested. "It's got to be them."

They went to the door, but it was locked. Laif put part of the overcoat on the window to the left, while still managing to keep his head covered, and elbowed the glass. It cracked and Creo pulled pieces out until a hole was large enough to reach in and undo the lock.

The door opened to a hallway. They walked to the end, where it looked like the room with the crate was located, and opened the door on the right.

Laif had Creo's overcoat off his head now. They were going to make it. This was too easy.

It couldn't be *this* easy. She kept expecting something bad to happen.

Something bad had happened.

Her heart dropped as she rushed to the girls, saying, "No, no, no."

Adriana lay with closed eyes. Cindy sat beside her, a glazed look covering her face.

Creo worriedly looked around the room. Laif tried talking to Cindy and snapped his fingers in front of her eyes, but she wouldn't even blink.

Sharon knelt beside Adriana. She felt the girl's shallow breaths on her hands. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Purple, pink, yellow, and red paint covered the girl's clothes, face, arms, leg, and hair. Her fingers and hands were cut and stained with dried blood.

A whisper barely escaped Sharon, "What happened?" She smelled the bitter smell of old urine. The exposed parts of Adriana's face were pale. "What the hell did they do to her?" Hot tears fell from Sharon's eyes. She picked up the limp body of the precious girl and hugged her fiercely, crying softly and wishing she could take back whatever pain Adriana had endured.

"It's not safe here," Creo said hushed.

"Yes," Laif agreed. "Let's get the girls and leave."

She lifted Adriana and began walking to the door as Creo picked up Cindy. Luckily Adriana only weighed forty-five pounds, partly because she was missing the weight of an entire leg, but also because she was a small girl for her age. Still, Sharon wasn't used to carrying a nine-year-old girl. Laif would be unable to carry her through the rain though.

Sharon looked back to make sure the others were following. Creo wasn't. He stood in the middle of the room, looking down.

"Sunny ..." Sadness choked off his words. A small wooden box rested on the floor. Five feet from it was a mound of broken mirror.

She asked, "What is it?"

To her dismay, he put down Cindy and kneeled before the broken pieces. "Truth, love, and courage, concentrated--so much that it had formed a bright, beautiful, little creature."

"Come on," Laif urged, "we have to get out of here."

He hesitated, touching the brittle pieces. "This nemesis must be powerful. Sunny has been through much in his lifetime."

Laif gave him a few moments, then said, "Let's move." He positioned the overcoat over his head and put his hand on Sharon's shoulder to guide him.

She thought she heard something--a whispering from a corner of the room. The ceiling light in the hall flickered and shadows danced on the walls.

They all stopped for a moment, their breath locked in their chests.

Then they headed for the door. As they traversed down the hall, the fluorescent ceiling lights flicked off, and Laif's hand gripped her shoulder painfully. When she walked out into the rain with Adriana in her arms, he released her. She turned and saw him cowering at the doorway.

Rain banged the roof, splashed puddles on the ground, and slapped leaves in trees.

Creo pushed Laif from behind. "Move it. There's something back here. Something following." A wispy urgency tainted his voice she hadn't heard before.

But Laif just stood at the open doorway, unable to see with the overcoat over his head. Sharon reached for his hand. "It's okay. I've got you."

"The sound," he said in a dusty, strangled tone. "I can hear it ... everywhere. It's drowning out everything. It feels like death."

"I'll drown you in one of those puddles if you don't move," threatened Creo.

His legs trembled hard. "But water is everywhere. It's cold."

Just waiting for him, Adriana felt heavier in Sharon's arms. She urged him forward by gently pulling his hand, but he didn't budge.

"You're freaking yourself out under this." With one motion, Creo ripped the overcoat off Laif's head and draped it around Cindy. "Just look. It's only water."

Laif's whole body quaked. His eyes widened, frantically twitching about. His mouth gaped. Steam pumped out with each breath.

She felt bad for him and scolded Creo, "Why did you do that? You didn't have to take the coat off."

He pushed Laif aside and walked down the steps, pausing briefly beside Sharon. "He needs to fight rather than cower from it. Same from the earliest times in history till now." He turned to Laif. "Courage. Tap it."

But Laif didn't seem to hear anything except for rain. His eyes moved so erratically, it appeared as though he were trying to capture every single drop with his vision before it hit the ground.

"Snap out of it!" Creo shouted too loudly. "If you can't be strong now, when?"

"Would you keep it down?" she seethed. She pulled Laif's hand into the rain, and he retracted it. "Look into my eyes." But it was no use. He was in another place, literally obsessed with the noise and vision of rain.

Yet even through all that, something made him spin around.

She wondered what could turn him from his greatest fear.

A groan escaped his lips. He stepped backwards down the steps, *into* the rain, getting wet without any jacket over his head, now unable to remove his eyes from the dark hall of the mobile home. Sharon held him from behind so he wouldn't trip down the steps.

Both she and Creo took his arms, but because he fought, they had difficulty turning him forwards. Head twisted back to the mobile home, he could not stop watching it as they guided him along the muddy road.

"It's coming ... it's coming ... it's coming," he kept repeating.

What's coming? thought Sharon. *What could be worse than Cindy's parents?* The Brewsters were at the campfires, spilling their guts about violence to control their lovely child.

As they continued down the road, she had the uneasy sensation that they were being pursued. She wanted to tell Laif to shut up. His words were creating paranoia.

But he persisted, "It's coming ... it's coming ... it's coming."

Her sandals got stuck in the mud several times, almost causing her to trip. Yet they increased their pace, pulling Laif along.

Her arms burned. Adriana was getting heavier with every step. She wished Laif could carry the girl. He head was still twisted around behind him, and he stumbled on depressions in the road.

They were half-way to the car when Sharon had to take a break. Laif had stopped ranting and looking backwards. However, he walked slowly, and she felt she could easily catch up with them, so she didn't bother to call for them to stop. Since there was no cover underneath trees, she just sat down in the mud and held Adriana in her lap so the girl wouldn't get dirty in addition to being wet, painted, and cut.

Sharon's butt became bitter cold as it soaked in water. She held the unconscious girl closer and bent over to protect her from the rain and cold.

She spotted the fires to her right, the campers appearing as clusters of black ants around honey flames, eagerly taking in bits of sugar-coated lies.

She felt vulnerable just sitting on the road, but not from being spotted. She didn't know exactly where this feeling came from. It was as though a diesel truck were barreling toward her at full speed.

Laif turned around. She waved to them indicating she was all right.

He and Creo began walking back to her, and she decided she could make it to the car now. While waiting for her to catch up, Laif pulled his own jacket over his head.

Sharon spun back--not knowing why--it just felt she were being watched.

As they continued trudging down the road, their feet sank deeper into the mud, and she lost her left sandal. She didn't bother to turn around and retrieve it.

The ground had soaked up more water since first leaving the Montero. Her legs moved slower and felt weak.

Laif breathed so loudly she could hear him through the pattering rain. He wheezed like his throat was closing up. His steps slowed as well.

As they neared the car, with the protection of the trees, the ground wasn't as muddy. She felt some relief. They were almost out of this hell-hole. The kidnapping of Adriana, the horrible treatment and neglect of her causing unconsciousness, the trauma that had sent Cindy into a daze, and the attendance to a beating-camp were certain to cause the State to reconsider their decision of placing Cindy back with her family.

Creo fumbled with the door handle to the backseat. He took his overcoat off the girl and set her down in the seat, reached over and opened the door on the other side, and buckled the girl up while Sharon buckled in Adriana.

With his jacket still pulled over his head, Laif had been standing in the rain, appearing as a tall headless man, and as soon as Sharon moved out of the way, he quickly climbed over Adriana to get to the middle seat.

Creo threw his overcoat over his shoulder, and they closed the back doors.

Though Sharon could barely see them through the tinted glass, two figures rose in the front seats--

--a woman and man.

She saw that the front doors were already locked and heard the back doors being electronically locked. Although she wasn't sure where the couple planned to go without keys.

"You have the keys, don't you?" she yelled at Creo. But she couldn't see what Creo was doing on the other side of the car. "Laif, open the door!"

Laif appeared to still have his jacket over his head and was hunched over, rocking back and forth.

"Laif!"

"Where the hell are the keys?" Creo asked aloud.

Adriana was still unconscious. Cindy was in her own world, far away from all of them.

Sharon banged on the back window. "Open up, Laif. Open the door!" She heard the car start. "Creo, did you leave them in the car?"

"I keep a spare under the seat."

The car moved forward and she could see Creo now, turning the overcoat upside down and shaking it, worry straining his face. She heard a jingle, and he ran forward, keys scraping the door.

She said, "Hurry!"

The car engine accelerated, but the vehicle slowed, spinning the rear tires in mud, slapping some onto Sharon. Creo got the door open almost at the same time the car lurched forward, he running alongside it, throwing his arm inside, pulling the driver out with a grunt. Sharon ran over to the man, and as he tried to get up, and she kicked him in the stomach, losing her other sandal.

Creo was already climbing into the coasting car, his arms flailing probably at the woman. The brakes squeaked as the car stopped, and a white light shone from inside around him. It was exceptionally bright. Sharon heard a woman scream, the door opening on the other side, and saw the woman--Mary Brewster--fly out, a crazed look misshaping her face with tangled, wet, black hair stringing down, screaming, "Joe! Joe!"

Sharon looked behind her, and Joe was right there. She saw a blur of his arm swinging forward, heard a smack of his fist against her right cheek and eye, and then felt numbing pain where it made contact, as her vision completely disappeared while falling backwards.

"They have a powerful teller with them!" Mary screeched closer to Sharon.

She moved from her back onto her side in the mud, rubbing her numb face, then curling her body as she felt stings in her stomach and legs, evidently kicks from Joe.

She opened her eyes but had no sight. Her arms went defensively over her head and she folded up into a fetal position, trying to protect herself as more blows stung her shins and arms. They were coming like rain. Both Joe and Mary must have surrounded her.

Through her closed eyes light penetrated. And she no longer felt the blows landing on her, but felt sharp pains burning in spots that had already been hit.

She rolled away.

When she tried opening her eyes again, her left one stuck partially closed, feeling as big as a tomato.

White light enshrouded Creo.

Mary and Joe gripped each other's hands. Darkness clung to their bodies like a hundred leeches, not emanating anything but sucking all other light. Joe's and Mary's bodies arched backwards as sprays of Creo's light touched their skin in places where the darkness was not so strong, but as they continued holding hands, the gloom grew on their skin, thickening, straightening their backs as it bred around them. Then like a great whip, a strap of it flung off, lashing through the air at Creo and struck him on the left shoulder.

He reeled back, gathering his balance, shouting "Laif! I need you."

Sharon looked to the car but saw no one exiting and caught sight of another man making his way toward them. He looked like a homeless man with a flowing brown beard, yet running as though well fed, and then Creo was on the ground, the black whip encircled around his neck, tightening, white light flowing from his hands to his neck, trying to slip underneath the noose.

She cried, "Laif!"

Laif sat in the back seat of the car, literally stunned by the soggy clothing clinging to his skin, rain water that *would not leave*.

Here in the safety of the vehicle, it should have felt better. It should have been dry. But it was just the opposite. Droplets thumping on the seat from his wet jacket, rain amplified by the metallic roof, squishy noises from his feet in his shoes--all bubbled his anxiety, and his head felt exploding with pressure.

Then his mind just shut off. Everything around him was too much to bear, and a biological safety valve had turned.

After an unknown passage of time, he saw bright white light penetrating through his jacket, and he knew it had to be Creo. Some of its warmth touched Laif on the back of his exposed hands, and he lifted the jacket to peek out.

He was taken back to that day his father beat his mother, when he was just four years old.

I'm so small in my blue pajamas spotted with purple turtles that I feel like I might fall over as Daddy rushes past me to Mommy.

I stop pushing my yellow truck on the kitchen floor to see what's going on.

He pulls Mommy by the hair and pins her across the breakfast table on her stomach, spilling salt and pepper shakers. A full bottle of water with a funnel rests on a chair just below

Mommy's head. He pulls her hair back hard. Several tears squeeze out her eyes, down her chin, and then fall into the funnel.

I freeze, coldness suddenly all around me.

Daddy laughs and pulls harder on her hair, causing more tears to drip into the bottle. "Com'on, empty bitch. If you don't give, I'll get Laif to."

She turns her glossy eyes to me.

"How do I know he's even mine?" Daddy says. "I'll squeeze him like a lemon."

More tears spill faster from her eyes into the funnel and down into the bottle.

After a while, she is no longer able to cry, and he begins pounding on her back. "I'll milk you dry, whore! Payback for all your slutting around."

Although I'm only four, I understand this is not a bottle of water. This is a collection of tears. My dad has beat my mom not only one night. It has been going on for as long as I can remember.

My heart aches. I run to my mom's rescue and tell him to stop, but he slaps me down and drags me to my room.

"You come out, boy, you die."

I lie in my bed, listening to Daddy's grunts and Mommy's screams until they become quiet moans, and I fall asleep.

When I wake later that night, it's very quiet. I decide it's safe to come out now, so I creep down the hall to look into my parents' bedroom. Mommy is lying on her stomach on the floor. Daddy is sleeping in his clothes on the covers of the bed. The bottle of Mommy's tears rests on the nightstand.

I go to Mommy and whisper if she's okay. She doesn't reply. I shake her, but she doesn't wake up. I turn her over and see her face is scary gray. Blood drips from the corner of her mouth. I hear the thumping of my heart in my ears. "Wake up! Wake up!" I shout, but she doesn't. I'm confused. I don't know what's going on, but I feel terribly alone.

Dad moans from the bed.

I walk to my father and shake him as best I can. "Daddy!"

"What the hell?" His breath stinks. "Back in bed, boy."

But I don't stop. I keep shaking him and repeating, "Something's wrong with Mommy."

Finally, Daddy sits up and picks up the bottle of tears and waves it above my head. "You want the whore? Well, here she is, boy. Years of that hag," and he turns the bottle upside down, and the liquid gurgles out onto my head.

It's cold and sends me into a fit of screaming.

As years of her tears disappear into my hair, pajamas, dripping down my arms and into the carpet, I feel her leaving forever.

He roughly carries me to my room and throws me on the floor, closing the door behind him.

I shiver there in my soaked pajamas.

For the first time ever, Laif understood his fear of water. He had successfully blocked out that night and all the previous ones of his mother's torture, safely believing that his mother left him at birth. The denial he saw in other people all these years had been inside himself as well.

His father murdered his mother.

He began to pull the jacket off his head, slowly, and through the neck hole, he saw the gray-white rain falling through the headlights outside. Fear shook him, and he pulled the jacket back over his head, but he knew in his heart this time it was not the rain that sped his breaths or stung him. It was the pain his mother had endured for the first four years of his life, the most formative years.

His heart thundered in his chest as he began to pull the jacket down again. This time, he fisted his hands with determination, keeping the material moving until it was off, resisting the compulsion to see the rain as something other than what it was.

It was not death. It was not tears. It was simply water, only a reminder of something terrible.

He felt alone. He wanted his mother. He wanted to thank her, hug her, comfort and protect her.

Sharon pulled herself out of the mud, and from behind Joe, she kicked him between the legs. As her foot entered the dark cloud surrounding him, emptiness shot inside her--

--I'm a bad person. She saw the truth of this, finally. She had failed her sister, allowing her to get hit by a car on their own front lawn. Despite everyone, including Laif, telling her she was not to blame, she *knew* now she was responsible for her sister's death. After all, she could have screamed something else besides Marlene's name to get her attention. She could have done *something* different.

She was obviously a failure as a protector. Her dog died because she carelessly let the delivery man discover her identity. Why didn't she go out to get the food herself rather than bringing danger into her home?

Her job was to protect the defenseless. She failed there too. The kids on her caseload were living proof, sitting in the SUV, both numbed out, probably victims of horrific acts.

I'm a failure. She knew this to be true. How could she have thought otherwise all these years? How could she have believed that it was chance or fate and not her own doing? What kind of sick excuses had she been telling herself to trick herself into believing she was a good person? It should have been her who died, not her sister--

--her kick landed exactly where she intended, and Joe buckled over, separating from Mary, both their dark clouds shrinking from the break in contact with each other.

Sharon fell to the ground in tears. She was worthless. She hurt Joe, a man who used to be an innocent boy, just to get what she wanted, just to make her feel like she was fighting for good. The children didn't need her to save them. If she tried, she would only screw up, just as she has done the past few months, bringing them to this low point in their young lives.

I bring people down. That's my purpose.

Laif had it wrong. *She was evil.*

There was movement out of the corner of her teary eyes. Creo was trying to stand again. She crawled over to him, not that she could do much, but more out of instinct.

Mary kicked her as she passed, sending her black covered foot into Sharon's stomach, driving hope from her soul. Mary then jumped on Joe's back, digging her fingers into his shoulders, hooking her legs around his waist, as he struggled in the mud for balance.

Sharon thought this was odd behavior for good people. After all, if she was bad, then they had to be good, didn't they? This was very confusing. No. They were all bad, including Creo. Especially him. He didn't deserve her help. But since she was bad too, she continued crawling to him so she could hurt him, like she had done to all people in her life. At least this time she would be damaging a truly evil person.

Mary and Joe's black clouds were beginning to thicken around their tangled bodies.

Maybe if she could make Creo fail, she could redeem herself. Maybe there was still a chance for her for goodness. She crawled faster to him. But it was too late.

He was standing. His arm went back and he threw it forward like a pitcher throwing a baseball, but from his palm a spear of lightening forked, one prong jabbing at Joe, the other at Mary.

They both screamed as the bolt penetrated their buffer of darkness.

Laif climbed over Cindy and stumbled out the car into the rain and fell into a puddle.

He scooped up water with both hands and splashed it onto his face, laughing and crying at the same time. His tears blended with the rain water.

He felt so alone. It was a constant pain. But he did not pull his jacket over his head. He no longer needed it.

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes, getting them smacked by fat drops, which stung and caused him to blink. He screamed and howled in joy and pain. Something he used to fear so deeply, he now saw as beautiful.

Rain was really a miracle. It was innocent. It was pure and unstained by the past now.

He opened his arms and legs to hug the storm. Somewhere behind the car he heard his name being shouted, and he rolled back onto his hands and knees.

Mary was screaming hysterically, jumping up and down in place, scratching her body and arms. Joe had a grim look in his eyes as he watched his wife, and with his hands fisted, he began punching her in the head. She went down, still scratching herself, making bloody lines on her arms. Joe knelt beside her, grabbing her hair, and began smashing her head against the ground.

Sharon couldn't stand to look any longer. She turned and saw Laif outside the car kneeling in a puddle, with his jacket around his body where it belonged.

The bearded man was coming up fast behind him.

She yelled at Laif, but he didn't turn around. Instead, he rolled onto his back like a turtle, and splayed his arms and legs into the air.

She saw the bearded man pulling out a gun from under his belt. He was getting closer to Laif. She could save him. She could yell to him. A chance like she had with Marlene. But why should she help him? He was just as bad as Creo.

She shouted at him anyway. It wasn't part of her conscious self that made her do so; it was something deeper, something she could not control, an evilness inside her causing her to meddle in others' affairs. Everything she touched, she destroyed.

I'm truly a horrible person.

The bearded man raised the gun and slowed his pace.

"Laif," she cried, "Dammit, watch out!"

The bearded man was pointing the gun directly at Laif now.

Then several things happened at once: Laif rolled back over onto his hands and knees; she yelled, "Laif! Behind you;" and an intense *bang* rang through the night.

Other campers probably would mistake the gunfire as thunder.

Laif lurched forward and fell into the puddle, face buried. The man lowered his gun and quickened his pace toward them.

"Come here!" shouted Creo. "You don't have to worry about the Brewsters anymore. They have faced the truth within themselves."

She just stared at Creo, stunned in disbelief.

"We do have to worry about bullets!" He sounded nervous and irritable.

She rose. She felt like she didn't deserve life, and she was walking not to Creo, but to the hobo with the gun, his eyes squinting as he sprinted, his soggy beard slapping against his chest. He would end it for her. He was good. He was her angel.

"What're you doing, woman?" Creo cried over his shoulder, running to hide behind an oak tree. "Get over here!"

Laif was on his side and not getting up.

Sharon ran to her angel. *I'm worthless. I'm a horrible sister. I'm a rotten person.* These things were as clear as scientific facts to her. She had to do what was necessary now to redeem herself. She had to end it. The hobo was her savor.

He was only ten feet from Laif and thirty from her. A smile cracked open in the midst of his beard. Long, wet bangs sagged down into his mouth.

As he passed Laif, white strands of light burst from Laif's fingers, wrapping around the man's thigh, fixing around the leg, causing the hobo to fall and drop the gun, which skipped along several puddles to submerge in a deep one by the side of the road. But the hobo was not moving to retrieve the gun. White jagged lines of light still sizzled around his leg from Laif's fingers.

The bearded man convulsed.

Damn that good for nothing Laif! What did he do? He doesn't know anything about right and wrong.

She found herself heading to the puddle with the gun.

Laif was rising in painful hitches, holding a bloody spot on his left side. "Let's go!" He staggered to the car and sagged into the open door.

She heard Creo's splashing footsteps behind her as she ran her hands through the puddle, feeling for the gun.

"We don't need the gun," Creo shouted.

But they didn't understand. They still believed in the lie that she was worthy. They didn't know all the horrible things she had done. *She* needed the gun. It was somewhere in the puddle. That's where it had landed. Her hand was turning numb in the cold water. *It should be right about here.* She felt something solid. Her fingers tightened and she brought it up. Instead, she held a rock. She threw this to the side and continued searching.

Creo was already inside the car. He shouted for her to get inside. But Creo didn't understand. He didn't hold all the truth. She began searching more frantically, fearing that Creo and Laif might stop her, not realizing the crime they would be committing.

By the time she felt the gun's handle, Creo had already turned the car around and stopped it beside her. The passenger door opened to her, and he was leaning over the seat, offering his hand. "Let's go."

She raised the gun. It dripped icy water from the puddle. She pointed it to her head. "Go on without me."

His face turned from irritation to dread.

She felt her index finger tighten around the cold trigger.

Chapter 47

She thought it odd no part of herself was trying to stop her. Then again, why should it? An end to her life would help everyone, including herself. She was sick of all the struggle and pain of her existence.

Sharon squeezed the trigger tighter.

“You touched one of them,” Creo guessed, “didn’t you?”

Her hand began shaking. The gun felt so heavy.

He clapped his hands and a flash of light blinded her--

--and she heard a loud bang. Her left ear immediately began ringing. A shot to the head should take the ear out completely though. It should take consciousness and life away as well.

She looked at the gun. Smoke climbed out the barrel. She dropped it and felt the side of her head. *No hole there. No blood gushing. What happened?* Before the gun went off, she must have wavered in her commitment. That was a relief. Wasn’t it?

Yes. It was.

Sure it was.

She began shaking all over. What had she almost done? Why had she believed she wasn’t worthy of life? She didn’t understand now what seemed obvious seconds ago.

“Will you get in here?” Creo shouted over the persevering ringing in her right ear.

She looked behind her just in time to see Joe thrust his wife’s head into the ground for the last time.

Mary lay dead. He stood up. He looked content for just a moment, and then began running down the road as though he were a football player sprinting through opposing team members, lurching from side to side, lunging forward, but he was the only player out there. He disappeared behind several bushes and oak trees.

“They won’t bother us again,” Creo said out the door. “But some of the other campers might. Now let’s get moving.”

Sharon slowly stood up, feeling a little dazed, probably from the disturbed emotions that had flowed through her the last minute.

“Quickly move! Something feels wrong.”

She climbed into the front passenger seat, almost twisting her ankle on the screwdriver resting on the floor, and closed the door.

Creo had the heater on, but it was blowing out cold air. The engine hadn’t warmed up yet. She realized how cold she was and saw they were all shivering, except for Adriana and Cindy.

Laif was in the back, without the jacket over his head. It was nice to see his face again, despite pain wrinkling it. He was pressing his right hand against his left side where he had been shot.

She breathed easier knowing he was alive. This time--unlike the tragedy with her sister--Sharon's words did make a difference.

Before she could speak, he smiled and said, "Thanks for the heads-up."

She wondered how she could have thought he was a bad person. She still wasn't sure about Creo, but Laif was good. Lies must have seeped into her when she had touched the Brewsters' dark clouds. She hated lies.

Creo was traveling fast along the dirt road, making each bump bounce everyone in their seats. The headlights illuminated droplets of rain, the slick road, trunks of trees on both sides and branches above. But it did more than just illuminate. It cast hundreds shadows, dancing and frolicking all around them. The taillights flickered black ghosts diving and drifting on the road behind.

She couldn't shake the feeling that something still stalked them, hidden in the night.

She reached back and touched Cindy's forehead. It was hot. The girl's eyes were fixed on the back of Creo's seat, unaware. Adriana began stirring, moaning a little. Sharon climbed back beside Laif so she could help comfort Adriana. The girl was leaning against the door and her arms were slowly moving. Her painted skin was cool. Sharon pulled off her jacket and draped it around the girl.

Adriana mumbled something.

"What did she say?" Sharon asked.

Laif replied, "I couldn't understand."

"Why is it so cold in here, Creo?"

He fiddled with the heat adjustment, but it didn't bring in any warm air. "The car usually warms up by now, at least a little." Creo pushed the air conditioning button on and off. "The air isn't on. The heater must be taking it's time."

"But it's so cold." She went back to the front.

The night sky seemed to rub against the light of the headlamps, dimming the road ahead. After a minute more of driving in silence, it appeared as though soot were raining down, causing everything to become rich darkness.

"What are we driving through? What is this?"

"Something's wrong." Creo pushed the gas pedal, but the car only choked and lunged ahead in spurts.

Adriana opened her eyes and straightened herself. In a dry voice, she said, "Where am I?"

Laif put his good arm around her shoulders to steady her. Despite appearing tired, she smiled up at him. When her eyes lowered and caught sight of Cindy, she cried in a tormented voice,

“She’s part of it.”

Cindy woke from her daze.

The headlights only illuminated ten feet ahead of them now, slowing progress, but it really didn’t matter because the car had stalled, and Creo was trying to restart it as they coasted slowly along the dirt road.

Watching the windows, Laif’s eyes were haunted. “Something’s around us.”

Adriana shivered whenever Cindy looked at her. “It’s inside Cindy. I saw darkness come out of her mouth.”

“What darkness?” Sharon asked.

Her voice was thin and scratchy, eyes pleading to be understood. “The stuff, the tiny fingers that crawl. Their whispers. They’re around the car.”

“What is around the car?”

“It tried to hurt me bad.”

Sharon looked at Cindy. What was Adriana talking about?

“She’s not well. She’s--” Adriana began choking.

She looked at Cindy again. An inner coldness froze Sharon more than the temperature in the car. The girl’s eyes were fixed on Adriana, a malicious smile rising on her face.

“Stop her!” Adriana screamed. “Someone ... stop her!”

“Would you settle down back there?” Creo ordered. “We’re not going anywhere. The car died and won’t start. So let’s just all calm down.” From outside, black smoke-like substance began entering through the air vents, and Creo flipped the switch to re-circulate the air.

“She’s shaking,” said Laif holding Adriana. “Can’t we get some heat back here?”

Adriana cried, “She’s going to do it again, to all of us. Someone stop her.”

He looked at Cindy, and Sharon saw something click in his eyes--a new understanding. He pushed Adriana away from Cindy as he reached for the door handle, but Creo locked the doors from the front, and said, “You’ll let it in, whatever it is that’s out there.”

Laif blurted, “Cindy’s turned to darkness.”

Creo flipped around in his seat, looked closely into Cindy’s eyes, which were now wide and focused on Adriana, and said, “God damn--”

--Cindy opened her mouth and coughed, sending billows of blackness which covered Laif and Adriana, and then she turned-jerked to the front and vomited several streams of black air.

Sharon consciously tried not to breathe. The air felt cold and dry, but Cindy kept coughing and retching, and Sharon rolled down her window as a last attempt to freshen the air--

--something rushed in and then nothing--

--When she began to come to, a fresh breeze was blowing through her window. The sun was coloring the sky turquoise in the east over the hills, but the rest of the sky was still black, not the solid black like it had been, but natural dark with a spattering of stars.

Somehow, with no clouds, it was raining lightly. Sharon had no idea how much time had passed.

"Close the window!" Laif exclaimed. "The rain is on fire."

But she just saw droplets of water falling.

Creo coughed in the seat beside her. Diamond glittering air expelled from his lungs. It illuminated a darkness around his light. As he continued coughing, the vision of darkness which surrounded him grew.

"He's evil!" Adriana and Cindy said in unison, faces twisted in anger like twin sisters of some odd genetic happenchance. Their voices mixed perfectly in harmony to a tune of absolute beauty in Sharon's heart. "He's turned bad. Get him!"

Although Sharon had some recognition that the bonding of the two girls was different than before, it seemed natural, right.

Creo coughed again so that a little of the diamond-like air billowed to Adriana. Her face flickered to an expression of sadness and terror--for just moment--and quickly wrenched back to anger.

"How can it be?" said Laif, still looking at the rain falling. "Trails of fire ... it is impossible."

"Hurt him!" Adriana and Cindy said in unison. Their voices tugged Sharon's heart. Her life was all about helping children, and these children were calling out to her at the deepest level any child had done before. It was as though her sister and all her failures in foster care had been resurrected and joined the chorus with Adriana and Cindy. The tune reverberated in her soul that Creo was evil. *He is the cloud of darkness. He is the creator of all the chaos tonight.*

This change felt strangely familiar to her. *Was this another trick of dust, mist, or shadow? There's no rotten egg smell, but there is a horde of shadows.*

His voice was hoarse. "We're inside a lie. Don't listen." He seemed to be having trouble breathing. Maybe all those Cubans he had smoked were finally catching up to him. She felt elated, as though she had just drank three shots of whiskey, and all her muscles were tired but in a good, relaxing way.

This is no lie. This is real. She decided that if ever there was a trick, it had been going on before this.

"It cannot be." Laif cried. "I have faced my fear. It has no power over me." He crawled over Sharon, pushing open her door, falling into the rain. He sank down into a muddy mess, body twitching as each droplet seemed to sear his skin.

She found herself driven to pick up the screwdriver that was on the floorboard. The only way to make up for all her failures was to put this evil to rest right now.

She turned to Creo and half-heartedly jabbed the screwdriver into his ribs. It must have hit bone or something because it bounced back, but it made him turn to her in his fit of coughs and expel one onto her face. She reflexively blinked and held her breath. Breathing his air was disgusting and felt violating.

She scooted away, stepped outside the SUV, and kicked Laif. "Get up and help me!" She pushed him with her foot. "We have to stop Creo. He's hurting the girls."

Laif's body was convulsing in pain. How on earth was he going to help? He was a pathetic child. She remembered the gun and wished she had never thrown it away. A few shooting stars scratched across the sky from the east where the sun was trying to rise.

Laif pulled himself up, using her legs and body as support.

"Get off me."

"I love you, Sharon."

"What?"

"I love you. You're an amazing woman. Your love hasn't failed. It never did."

Her heart fluttered. It was a warm rising feeling that drove against the elated feeling she had previously felt. It felt real. "This is hardly the time for this. We need to get rid of Creo."

"It's the perfect time. In the midst of darkness, truth guides us. Our hearts guide us."

"You're crazy." She slapped his face. "Snap out of it. We have to deal with Creo. You hold him while I shove this screwdriver into his chest."

"Listen to him," Creo coughed from the driver's seat.

Adriana and Cindy climbed behind him and pulled his red hair, holding him back from coughing out more diamond white air. They yelled, "Kill him, Sharon. Do it now."

But Laif held her back. "You are my soul-mate."

She shook him off her, and he easily fell to the ground, the rain beating him down. She felt relieved. He had become a burden and a nuisance in the last hour or so, and she wondered how she could have felt love for him before.

The twin girls pulled tight on Creo's hair. They were out of the way of the white cloud, positioned safely behind Creo's seat. They didn't need to speak. Their eyes told the whole story of the evil he had committed: killing, beating, and molesting children in the name of goodness. He was the biggest hypocrite on earth.

How come Laif never forced this asshole to see the truth? Well she would bring some reality into his diseased bubble. She rushed at him and as she did, he ripped his head from the girls' grasp, losing fistfuls of hair, and released a high velocity sneeze at her face. She blinked her eyes closed but had been taking a breath to prepare to thrust the screwdriver into him, and sucked in his moist, sparkling air--

--and when her eyes reopened, the car was dark again. The sun had not been rising. The rain was heavy, making much noise. No shooting stars were in the sky. The girls looked like frantic

dolls trying to get hold of Creo, but too afraid to touch the gem-like air surrounding him.

The darkness that was revealed spun all around the car and Cindy's mouth was curling with it.

It's the lie that Creo warned us about, Sharon thought. *Everyone is being manipulated by it.* As she breathed it in again, she felt dizzy and felt herself going back to the fantasy of daylight at night that she had just shaken.

She knew what she must do. She jumped onto Creo's lap and into his glittering sphere of air. Her head was right next to his and she breathed and saw that Adriana was still breathing in darkness. How were they going to save her?

Creo seemed to be breathing less and less, as though slowly being suffocated. He couldn't possibly fight all the sooty clouds around them for much longer.

Then she saw Laif, crawling out of the heavy rain, soaked and dirty, but shinning with a light of his own. It was different than Creo's. It came out of his body as though it and he were the same. At that moment, although she knew he was just a man, he looked angelic.

As he got closer, his light brightened. In his eyes, love spoke to her, as though it were sound, vibrating through her chest, making her feel tingly inside.

He put one arm around her. It felt like summer sun. With his other hand, he grabbed Creo's hand and together they shone as one, too bright for her to continue with her eyes open.

She heard Cindy screaming and Adriana breathing rapidly and crying.

She didn't know how long she sat there with her eyes closed, but when it grew dim again, she opened them and saw Cindy sitting back in her seat, eyes glazed over again.

"What happened?" Adriana asked, blinking. She looked over at Cindy. "What's wrong with her?"

"She has withdrawn," explained Creo. "Retreated to a place far away."

"It's sad," Laif added. "But it was the only way."

"Some truth touched her, I'm sure. She may not be lost." Creo cleared his throat. "I'm proud of you, Laif. You've faced yourself."

He put his hand on Creo's shoulder. "Thank you, friend."

Creo looked confused and worried at the same time.

Sharon went to check on Cindy. Her heart dropped. The girl's eyes appeared so vacant. She didn't return Sharon's hug.

Laif asked, "What's the matter, Creo?"

He was bent over and rocking his body as though he had swallowed something upsetting.

Adriana touched Cindy's arms. Cindy was autistic, not reacting at all. Sharon hoped to God this girl could come back. As far as she was concerned, the Brewsters' diseased state was not passed on to their daughter.

Creo said, "I didn't feel it before. How could I have missed it?"

"Missed what?" questioned Laif.

He picked up the screwdriver from the floor, doubt and ambivalence on his face as he looked at Adriana. "Adriana ... she is ..."

"What?"

"She will affect many lives in a positive way. Or at least one important life. I don't know how ... not by any extra-sensory gift like Cindy's, but in normal ways ... maybe teaching ... maybe just helping people, maybe compassion ... someone great will benefit. She is very good."

Laif looked admiringly at the girl, and she batted her eyes at him with an embarrassed, slight smile.

"She's too good, Laif. The scales of good and evil will tip too far to the good side. She ..."

"What do you mean?" Sharon blurted from the back, hugging Adriana and Cindy tightly in her arms.

Creo looked conflicted, clutching his knees, bending over, rocking his body. "Now that the evil inside Cindy is gone, it is obvious. Before it was hidden. Like things were more balanced, but now I can see. We must--"

"Now just you stop right there," she warned. "Cover your ears, Adriana."

The girl plugged her ears with her fingers.

Creo's face looked terribly pained. He held his head in his hands with the screwdriver grasped tightly in his right hand.

"This is *your* lie you tell yourself," Sharon said. "You think you're different than your parents. You're the same. You hold onto a moral calling rather than true helping and caring for people as the primary goal. Like your superficially religious parents, you place too much importance on principals and scales to weigh the right things to do or the signs in the stars or some other bullshit. Sometimes you just have to listen to your heart. Mine tells me this girl is special."

"Yes," Creo said thinly. "Too special."

"Grow up, Creo. There can never be enough goodness in this world. Don't you see? There's evil here inside us right now. It's in everyone all the time, ready to stick its ugly head out." She hugged Adriana tighter. "We have to fight it. We have to be ready for it. And no matter how good we become as a species, it will always be there."

He bowed his head between his knees and held it there.

"She's right," Laif agreed. "We have to embrace whatever goodness comes along *when* it comes. It's goodness that's fleeting, fragile, and scarce. Look how it had disappeared within Cindy. Look how it's forever lost in Sunny. When we find goodness we have to treasure it, nurture it, and hold onto it, not try to keep it *balanced* with evil. Evil will always find a way to catch up and trail goodness. *It is* the easier road."

Fred, the gecko, stuck his reptilian head out from under Creo's seat. He extended his tongue several times, testing the air, then scampered up Creo's leg.

"Sunny loved Fred. They would hang out and watch the moonlight outside the bathroom window together." Creo dropped the screwdriver on the floor and held Fred in his hands. "How can we be sure evil will easily catch up?"

"Look how easy it flows within us, and we've tried our hardest to rid ourselves of it."

"I just don't know anymore, Laif. It's all confusing now."

"You're good. Your deeds have created that. Just let that goodness continue to flow."

"I feel lost, my purpose torn."

"We all feel that when we take a big step to grow. We just need to wait until we catch up with that growth. You'll feel centered again."

Creo sat there in the driver's seat with Fred, crying for ten minutes, crying about things of which Sharon had no idea. Maybe things he had done or ideas in his head that he felt ashamed of now, maybe about what he almost was going to do, maybe about Sunny, maybe about parents he wished he had, maybe about losing himself--she didn't know. She didn't care. She just held the two precious girls in her arms, one with psychic powers and the other with a single leg but a big heart.

They stayed there parked on that road for an hour.

She and Laif discussed what they would tell the police. They decided to tell as much of the truth as the police could handle: about the child abuse and kidnapping that Mary and Joe had committed; about Joe going crazy and killing his wife; about the bearded man shooting Laif, and then having a heart attack when tripped to the ground.

The stuff about light and dark, they would keep to themselves.

They drove off with the morning sun on them, reaching across the mountains and caressing their wounds and wet clothing.

Chapter 48

Adriana felt sad. She wanted to live in the same group home as her friend, but the staff there wouldn't allow it.

Laif and Sharon drove her from her group home to the group home for autistic children almost every day, where they visited Cindy.

Adriana held Cindy's hand, spoke to her threw tears, combed her hair. It didn't matter to Adriana that the girl didn't respond; it didn't matter that her eyes didn't blink, that she felt a million miles away. Adriana loved her friend. She believed love could help.

Month after month, she believed.

Sometime after the third month, when she talked about how they used to push each other on the tire-swing in Aunt Jenny's backyard, she noticed little blinks from her friend. She saw little flickers from her friend's mouth when she talked about times they used to sit on the grass by the flowerbed and make up stories of castles in clouds.

After four months, Cindy held Adriana's hand, sometimes tightly. She was able to look at Adriana and tears fell. After five months, she began talking. It wasn't long afterwards that she was almost back to her good old self again, a little sadder but wiser.

A nice couple stopped by and asked Cindy if she wanted to be adopted. They promised her that she could visit Adriana as often as she liked. Adriana felt happy her friend had finally found a safe place to live, a permanent home, and they both promised to never stop talking with each other.

The staff at Adriana's group home thankfully allowed Fred the gecko to stay in her room. Uncle Creo--she called him uncle by choice--had given Fred to her. She knew the gecko meant a lot to him, and she treasured Fred. She liked how agile he was and that he could crawl just about anywhere he wanted. He was like a bird without wings.

She was very thankful for having him.

But what made her even happier was that Laif and Sharon had come to the group home one morning and asked, "Would you like to come live with us?"

"For how long?" she asked.

They both smiled and said, "Forever."

She was so excited it felt like her heart would pop out of her ribs. But her mouth seemed to have frozen shut.

They told her the county finally gave them permission to adopt her. A family she could stay with forever. This was a dream come true. She couldn't stop crying, didn't know why, and hoped they wouldn't think she didn't want to be with them.

Even with no words, they understood.

She wasn't sure what about Laif she liked most, his handsome face, his kindness, his treating her like an abled person not a disabled person, or just the way he made her feel when he was around--like a princess. But she knew she liked it when he and Sharon said they were getting married.

The wedding had a fifties theme, with Johnny Cash's song *Ring of Fire* playing as they walked down the aisle, hand-in-hand. The cake was shaped like an old Cadillac with candied bride and groom in the front seats. Champagne was poured from a container picturing Betty Boop, though Adriana and Cindy drank only punch.

Adriana was so happy, she tingled inside.

One thing she really valued about her new family was that she could tell them anything about her feelings. She never needed to hold back like she used to do. It made her feel centered and sane.

They listened to her, and she felt unconditionally accepted and loved.

Laif and Sharon always made it easy to live in the truth.

The End