



Banjo Strings

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Chapter 1

Augustus Wainwright was enjoying one of his favorite sex dreams - it was a sweltering late-August day, he was thirteen, still bone skinny and not allowed to over-exert himself in the heat, and he caught the dark chocolate upstairs maid smoking in his mother's bathroom, her private sanctuary. He'd fancied that gal all summer, and now he had her, close enough to touch. His mouth stretched into a toothy, goofy grin, he ordered the maid to his room near the back of the mansion. He bent her over his desk, slid down her panties, undid his pants and just watched, breathing in the faint new aroma, entranced by his first real look at a woman's vagina. The best part came when the maid, realizing her position and resigning herself to it, reached back and took matters in hand. He shuddered in anticipation, and then an irritating noise, an itch he couldn't scratch, ice-picked its way from...where?

The skinny Augustus blinked, and the maid disappeared. He looked up, the window to the backyard opened on its own where he expected to see Mother bent over the azealas in the garden. Instead, she was standing, wearing an old-fashioned plantation ball gown, passionately kissing a shirtless, barefoot black man. The noise scratched itself into a banjo being tuned, then strum. The sound vibrated through the teen and ended at his crotch. He looked down, realized he was fully erect, watching his mom and some black bastard making out. It jarred him awake.

He heard a murmur behind him on the bed, looked over to see Rebecca Sandiford, the girl from last night's party, curled up beside him fully dressed. Damn, he groaned. She didn't leave when the cops ran everybody off. Downstairs, he heard a banjo being strum. He blinked his eyes, looking over at the clock on the nightstand. 3:02 AM. "He'll come at three in the morning, the day after your birthday." Auntie Aggie's words spilled from his lips, underscored by the sound...

He slowly got out of bed, his heart beating faster as he watched the girl sleeping. He heard the first verse of "Dixie" softly playing and then repeating, at once coming from the parlor downstairs, and as if from miles away, bringing a

heaviness that settled around him and squeezed. He fought to calm himself, force his breathing a little closer to normal. He went to the window, looking up and down the street in front for the county sheriff's car. It was parked outside when he told Rebecca to leave with the rest of his friends, half an hour later he'd passed out after finishing off another bottle of Jack Daniels alone. She must've hid, and no deputy either, he worried as the song began again, a dreamy echo outside the room.

That goddamn cable show he'd been watching immediately sprang to mind. "The File Room." He hated the show, though he'd watched every week for the past year, growing more and more alarmed as they proved this supernatural crap was real. Each episode that had a ghost in it filled him with sick dread. This will make one hell of an episode, though, he thought.

Two months ago he was dragged from a beach bar in Rio and deposited in the family 'East House' on the west side of Liberty Plains in the kingdom of Wainwright county. They said it was his turn as the latest firstborn son to go through this ordeal or be disowned. He was brought before his Auntie Aggie, Agnes Wainwright, the matriarch of the family. She spoke the names Jacob and Polly, told him about the curse that afflicted the Wainwrights and the LeChettes, another old prominent plantation family in the county.

Deeply embarrassed, she explained that Jacob was a runaway field buck who was caught by Justin Wainwright and Lucien LeChette in 1832. As they were bringing him back he put a curse on them and they killed him. Polly was a crazy old kitchen slave who died when Justin was a boy, and she mainly haunts Wainwright Park as a little girl when she ain't with Jacob. Augustus could tell there was a lot more to it than that, but Auntie wouldn't say, though her face tightened with the knowing of it.

Aggie showed him manila folders containing the original sheriff's reports for his late uncle Jeffrey Wainwright in 67 and Oscar LeChette in 83. The obituary pages folded inside listed their deaths as 'heart attack' and 'stroke' the morning after their 20th birthdays.

Augustus never heard of uncle Jeffrey. The family members never mentioned him, far as he could remember. He supposed the LeChettes never mentioned their firstborn sons either, as if they didn't matter and would be forgotten soon enough. He realized he was never challenged or encouraged in school like his

siblings; he was indulged and entertained, treated more like a child with a terminal illness, soon to be covered over and forgotten, like something shameful, like he was a part of the curse, just accept it and die and let them all move on.

He quietly contacted an attorney from the Biloxi phone directory and sent him a letter with instructions.

Augustus glanced over at Rebecca and grimaced as the music downstairs paused. In 83, Oscar LeChette had a young woman with him when the ghost twins visited. She didn't survive. The girl being here was bad...

He took a deep breath as "Dixie" started again, the sound crawling up and down his spine. He slipped on a nightrobe over his t-shirt and jeans and walked slowly to the door. He opened it as quietly as he could, watching for any movement from Rebecca, then eased himself out and closed it with a muffled 'click.' He crept down the hall and paused at the stairs, the music drifting up from the parlor below. He started down, close to the wall but staying clear of the paintings and portraits of the proud lineage of Wainwright men through the past two hundred years. On her last visit, Aggie pointed out a few of the Wainwright notables, along with the row of small portraits of the firstborn sons at age ten. Eight of them since the Northern Aggression and only two ever lived past the age of 20. His picture wasn't there yet, but there was already a space for it. The grim chain was begun by Beau II, the unfortunate first son of Beauregard T Wainwright. Augustus passed his portrait as he reached the bottom of the stairs, facing the entrance to the parlor.

The banjo playing stopped abruptly. Upstairs, the sudden absense of sound stirred Rebecca awake. She reached out lazily for him, opened her eyes, finding the bed empty. She looked around the dark room, shadows draped over the Victorian and Colonial furniture. "Gus?" She felt a sudden chill, reached for the second nightrobe then slowly opened the door and ventured out.

Earlier, she'd hid in the upstairs closet as the deputy was breaking up the party, then went downstairs to the kitchen until Gus fell asleep. She had decided at the party that the ghost story was romantic, it made her like him even more, even though she'd never met him before tonight, but they both felt an immediate attraction when they met in the kitchen. On impulse she decided to stay and give him a wake up present, then go with him wherever he would jet off to, whether it was Rio or Prague or Timbuktu. Rebecca was taking a year off from college and

exploring all of her wild impulses. And she discovered Augustus liked to travel and party. But, where was he?

In the middle of the parlor Augustus saw a young, powerfully built black man, the man who invaded his dream, barefoot, shirtless, his face sweltering from the sun. There was no sunlight in the room, but he could see it glinting off his back and arms as he swung a hoe in short, sure, downstrokes, with a phantom blade that chopped into the fine oak floor, but made no damage. Old Jacob....

Augustus winced as he felt his heart squeeze again. It passed after a few seconds. He grunted, then straightened up, breathing hard as Jacob stood upright, letting the hoe slip from his hands and fade away as it fell.

Augustus shivered as Jacob calmly studied him. Jacob himself looked no more than 19 or 20, his face calm and serene, though the eyes reflected all the ugliness and inhumanity captured those few years.

“You know who I am?” the ghost said. Augustus tried not to show his fear. “Yes,” he said just as calmly. Jacob smiled. “Yo uncle Jeffrey pissed hisself ‘fore he could even speak.” In a split second Jacob was standing a foot in front of him. Before he could react, Jacob placed his broad dark hand squarely on his chest. “Time to see, Wainwright! See if you get a taste, or take a ride.”

The girl walked slowly from the bedroom to the top of the stairs, wondering did she really hear a banjo playing? She finished tying up her robe and, as silently as she could, quickly made her way downstairs, stopping at the landing. She saw Gus standing in the doorway of the parlor, shaking. There’s somebody else in there, but she couldn’t see. She inched around Gus, craning her neck to see into the dark room who it was. Rebecca and Jacob saw each other in the same instant.

Jacob froze her in place with a forceful wave of his hand. He clawed the air in front of him the way you’d catch a fly, and she was instantly standing before him, immobile and trembling. Jacob turned to Augustus, his face registering disappointment. They know better than to have anybody else there, but they still do it. He looked around at the remains of a party decorating the parlor. Wainwright first born don’t deserve birthday parties either, even one so sickly.

He continued reading them, saw that they weren’t nowhere near as bad as some Wainwrights, so they would get off easy. He only had mild charms on him this time, as concession to the tearful pleas of Agnes Wainwright. Jacob pulled Gus

closer till they were nose to nose. “You takin’ a ride alright, but you might just make it. Only on account of your weak heart, and her.”

His body glistened as he built himself up, his hands clutching the front lapels of the helpless pair’s robes. Two specks of sunlight appeared before them, bright glowing embers. They began to shine and Augustus stared into its bottomless light, his eyes beginning to shine. A flash as his speck exploded and he suddenly gasped and began struggling against unseen bonds. Jacob released his grip on Augustus, watched him slowly fall backward, land gently on the floor.

Jacob watched Rebecca’s eyes as they glowed in reflection of her speck of light. After the flash he was completely caught off guard when he saw which ride she began. Not Emma Jane, an older woman caught alone working in a slave patch at dusk, forced to service two local town boys taking a shortcut to Maison Road. This was Annie’s ride, one of the worst ones he had, but he wasn’t carrying... He felt his pants pocket for the pouch, and the two bones within, then he felt it resting on top of the pouch. Annie’s bone. He groaned, “Dammit, Polly...”

Jacob pulled the girl close, shaking with anger and regret. This girl didn’t deserve Annie’s ride. Holding her head still, he whispered in her ear “I’m sorry. I hope...” He released her, watched her settle gently to the floor beside Augustus Wainwright, who twitched like a fish on a hook.

Jacob closed his eyes, began to search the surrounding countryside for his companion, sweeping his gaze through the small town, past the square, and out beyond the town to the farms and the old Maison Road that once connected three great plantation houses, to the park where the third and most beautiful mansion used to stand. There, on the swings beside a gazebo, a young teenage girl wearing just a shirt was in the middle swing, long dark legs kicking out as she swung forward. “What are you up to now?” he muttered. Just then a car sped past, skidded to a stop on the road past the gazebo, then roared away. Polly smiled, jumped off the swing and started walking toward the road. When the car appeared back on the road approaching the park, Jacob waited, wondering who Polly was playing with.

Augustus spun, lost his balance, but didn’t fall. He looked up, dazed, and saw his hands, feeling funny, smaller than before, bound to ropes. His arms were spread

apart and tied to the large overhead branch of an old tree. The high sun dappled through the leaves. His eyes finally focused. His name was Samuel. And his skin was black as shit.

“...Tole you what I’d do if I caught you scratching on the ground again, Samuel. Young miss ain’t here now, nigger!” Augustus felt the spittle of tobacco juice splatter against Samuel’s bare back. The heaviness in his chest returning, he tried desperately to yell out, beg, scream, but the mouth had a mind of it’s own, refusing to open. He felt Samuel straining against his bonds until an ear-splitting crack exploded just behind his head. “Hold still, nigger...” Samuel froze. Augustus was reduced to shallow gulps. The frayed end of the whip exploded between his shoulder blades, two, three times. He writhed between the ropes as the overseer put just the tip of the whip next to the skin...

“...Now you see why I run the yard for Master Beauregard, boy! He say ‘don’t make no long ugly scars, make little pretty scars, like spring blossoms...” Crack! Four and five split the air at Augustus’ right ear. His head snapped away. Six snapped just above the base of his spine and his legs went numb. Augustus was in agony, struggling as a wave of pins and needles cascaded down his legs, then the maddening mix of intense pain and complete numbness swept in fading waves over his body. His mouth finally opened, and Augustus screamed out, but it didn’t sound like him, but like a young boy. It was getting harder to breathe the dry, hot air. He slumped to one side, looking like a marionette dangling from it’s strings. the heavy weight on his chest allowed him small, gulping breaths.

Seven, Eight. The overseer enjoyed this part of the job, it was why he was hired. Master Beauregard detested the long, ugly scars many slaves carried on their backs. He considered it a failure in livestock management. Still, slaves had to be corrected and trained. “Make the scars smaller,” he insisted, firing three overseers until he found one with a deft touch and deadly accuracy.

Nine.

Ten snapped sharply at the base of the boy’s skull. Augustus gasped in shock, inhaled too quickly and swallowed his tongue. He flailed, desperately, his blocked throat silent. He passed out at lash no. 13. He was dead by the time the overseer untied Samuel from the tree...

Rebecca came to running, stumbling to a noisy stop inside a line of trees, from the glow of the full moon into pitch darkness. She leaned unsteadily against a tree, her head spinning from being at Gus' mansion, then flashing eyes and sudden terror, and the sudden knowledge slammed into her head that she was also a Wainwright house girl named Annie, with a white man's blood on her hands, with her own blood staining her thighs. She looked back through the trees to the LeChette House, grand in its own way, but not as majestic as her massa's House. Screams inside and four men tearing out the back door almost made her scream as she froze behind a tree. When they went back inside she turned and ran quickly and silently through the woods. South. Wainwright house is two miles south at the other end of Maison Road, Annie whispered to her. The three remaining cousins of Lucien LeChette, the Stonehill brothers, would be on her soon enough if she didn't keep moving. And they knew where she'd be running to.

Rebecca had no control of the body as Annie worked her way well off the roads south to Wainwright House, but she saw, and felt the young house girl's terror of being caught again by those boys. She'd already been violated by master Franklin Stonehill, him still roughly pounding into her on the floor of the upstairs bedroom by the time she got one of Mistress LeChettes' knitting needles into his neck. She pulled herself off of his rigid, trembling penis as she stabbed him a second time in the neck, shoving him onto his back on the floor, pushing down her dress and watched him, wiping the blood from her hand on his undone pants. He shuddered and came, arms flailing, grasping at the large needle, sputtering loudly as death throes increased the intensity of his last orgasm. The other brothers, still downstairs in the billiard room, laughed at Franklin's garbled outcry. He stopped gurgling and struggling finally, and bending over him, she took out the knitting needle. Blood sprayed from his neck, splashing across the front of her dress, sprinkling her face and neck.

She sprang off him in a panic, scrambling to her feet. Heart pounding, she took the dress off, wiped the blood from her face, then tossed it on Franklin's exposed crotch. She found a plain yellow dress in mistress' wardrobe and put it on, panic clawing at her fingers as she struggled with the buttons. The other Stonehill brothers were just downstairs, any of them could come up any moment to join Franklin in "gittin' some high yella nigger juice...." Annie spent a long minute biting down on her terror, remembering the advice of Old Ruth: "If you ever wind up havin' to kill some damn white boy cause he won't leave you alone, only two things you can do. Run, and don't stop. If you can't run, child, use

this..." And Old Ruth reached into her bosom and took out a small leather pouch, inside was a single-shot pistol and five bullets. "If it comes down to it, save the last one for yourself, child..." The pistol, hers now that Old Ruth passed over last year, was back at the cabin, hidden underneath.

She moved steadily, walking fast through the woods, running full out across the moonlit open fields at crossroads, till finally she reached the cabins back of the Wainwright smokehouse. No time for goodbyes or nothing, she thought, as she crept to the rear of Old Ruth's cabin and felt around for the hidey hole. Make my way to New Orleans and disappear. In the city she could pass...Rebecca felt the anger that flared up in the girl at the thought of 'being able to pass', the monumental insult that being 'high yellow' was what drew the attention of the damned cousins in the first place. Two days before they were visiting young master Julius at LeChette House, stopping their game of billiards when she walked pass the doorway carrying a parcel for Mistress upstairs. They marveled at how similar she was to Alexander Wainwright's dear sister Athena, who was a lovely girl, but spent far too much time with her mother and her bible to be available, but this young lass was very available and couldn't say no...

Annie found the pouch in a hole covered by a rock. Clutching it in her shaking hands, she crept around the cabins, scanning the yard between the cabins, the smokehouse and the main house. Her satchel, with all her worldly possessions, was in the upstairs sewing room. She dashed for the back door, praying the Stonehill boys weren't already at the front door...

Chapter 2

A brown sedan drove through broad Mississippi fields and scattered farmhouses barely visible in the dark, the horizon of faint lights sliding past. The car pulled over, inside light flicked on. The woman at the wheel - mid-to-late 20s, almost 6 ft., with a toned, athletic body and loose strawberry blonde curls down to her shoulders - checked out a printed Google map of the area. The marked trail showed a left turn at the next intersection, Old Maison Road.

Now heading north, the car's headlights flashed across a sign that read "Wainwright Park, 2 mi." She sped down the deserted road, letting her high-beams play across the trees and manicured lawns of a small public park. A small building that looked like a one-room schoolhouse on the left. On the right, a gazebo set off from the road, and beside it a child's swing set partly illuminated by a solitary streetlight at the corner. And a little black girl in the swing...

It took her a second after blowing through the intersection to realize...there was a child in the swing in the middle of the night. Wearing just a shirt...

She drove on, rolling through flatlands and more wide fields, coming upon the trees and manicured lawns of a small park, with the same little schoolhouse on the left, and a gazebo and swings on the right. And a little black girl in just a shirt, now waving at the approaching car, jumping off the swing and running toward the road. The woman felt everything slow down as the girl was caught in the wide beam of the headlights. The girl looked older, maybe 15, standing over 5 feet tall, most of it legs as she ran toward the car. Then she was past.

The sedan screeched to a halt at the intersection. Part of her balked at stopping, but she slowly backed up until she was between the schoolhouse and the swings. She looked around for the girl, seeing no one. The woman suddenly felt very alone and small, the night pressing in on her again. She jammed on the gas pedal and loudly skittered away from the park.

She replayed the image of the girl's young, forbidden fruit caught in the headlights, not noticing that up ahead she was approaching the schoolhouse, the gazebo, and the girl, now standing beside the road near the gazebo.

The woman slowed the car to a dead stop, 10 feet away from the teen. She

walked toward the car, waving, with an angelic smile. The woman was entranced by her honey-brown legs, the deep chocolate-colored areola topping her blossoming breasts, clearly visible through the shirt in the car's headlights. The beautiful smile, the virginal eyes.

She no longer thought of running, only of the girl's open and available body. Her hands were sweating on the steering wheel as she breathed uneasily, slowly, unsure what was going to happen next, fear and desire coursing through her as the girl walked across to the car's driver side, stopping at the window, her belly and breasts pressing against the glass. The woman caught her breath, gaze locked onto the hard thumb-sized nipples inches away. She heard a gentle giggle behind her, turned to see the girl sitting in the passenger seat. The shirt, an old fashioned faded white tuxedo shirt, was now unbuttoned all the way down to her lap. The woman could see the swell of the girl's breasts under the shirt, the nipples hard. Her eyes trailed back up to her full lips and innocent eyes.

"Hi. I'm Polly. You're pretty." She slid across the seat, the shirt sliding away from her glowing skin, crumpling the paper under her. The woman glanced down, heart racing as she watched the dark thighs, intoxicated by the scent of an aroused female, head spinning from the aroma, her own nipples, painfully stiff, sending delicious shocks through her body. Polly finished taking off her shirt and climbed onto the woman's lap, bringing her handful-sized breasts up to her lips as her eyes pleaded with the woman to take her. Trembling with desire and trepidation, the woman brushed her lips against the girl's nipple, lost as Polly sighed.

The woman's hands roamed over Polly's breasts, her back, lightly squeezing her ass, reaching around to the front, brushing her fingers against the girl's soft, kinky mons. She lightly sucked and nibbled on the turgid nipples as Polly unbuttoned the woman's blouse and pushed up her bra. As Polly touched and caressed the smaller breasts, she read the shadows on the woman's heart. The lust, the fear, the hate. And Marcus Hudson...

The woman suddenly felt her arms become heavy, then she couldn't move, and her arousal only increased. Polly leaned back, plucking her nipple from the woman's mouth. The woman began to tremble, on the edge of a small orgasm, eyes wide in terror as the girl's face grew hard and cold.

"You really did Marcus wrong, Miss Amanda. I've known white woman like you

before, like Mistress Olivia. She liked hurting people too.”

The girl vanished from her perch on Amanda’s lap, appeared in front of the car, dressed again in the fully buttoned shirt. She looked up, as if scanning the black sky. “Jacob?” she shouted, in a voice that cut through Amanda and triggered the orgasm, mixing the brief waves of pleasure with a piercing dread.

A few hours earlier, Amanda Harris was supremely pleased with herself, twirling a finger in a strawberry curl as she took the hotel shuttle to Bush Intercontinental Houston Airport, 15 minutes away, on her way to a live meeting in Mobile, instead of the teleconference her ‘associate’ Marcus Hudson had planned. She chuckled, thinking of her ‘executive-level solution’ put into action that very night, that put a collar on “Sir Marcus,” the “Affirmative Action” MBA junior executive bucking for her spot on the board after only a year with the firm. Before him, she was the rising star at the regional headquarters; that board position was hers.

They didn’t get along at all at first, but it only took a few months to get past his natural distrust and suspicion, to change his view of her from hostile competitor to friend. She started with weekly “peace lunches” to share harmless office gossip. He soon relaxed around her, demonstrating his profound weakness by becoming far too trusting. Amanda took that time and used it well. She had enough time to sneak a keylogger onto his unguarded laptop to learn his passwords. She had enough time to gather together the different drugs she’d need to mix up a batch of her “Zeta House party potion,” which made innocent freshmen and coeds very horny, very high, and very cooperative. She laughed out loud driving through the early morning countryside, remembering the bible study group Zeta House turned into their personal harem. The two couples went from nervous and shy to welcoming nymphs, taking on all comers. She remembered the strap-on she shoved so far up that one boy’s ass he shoulda screamed, but he just wiggled and grunted as he fucked back onto the hard rubber phallus. It sounded so much like a big dog barking, she thought. A barely contained smirk stole across her face, reflected in the window of the shuttle.

When she got herself invited to one of his “presentation tours” of teleconferences and personal meetings with current and potential clients, she was ready. A week before the tour, from El Paso to Atlanta, Amanda invited him to a

bar near her apartment, where she got “tipsy,” requiring him to take her home. Once inside, she turned on him, pushing him back against the door and kissing him as she fumbled with his belt buckle. That’s right nigger, you know you want it, she thought. His pants dropped, as did she, to her knees, fishing his impressive erection from his boxers. She stroked him and waited, looking up with the babydoll face she used so well at frat parties in college. He had to make the next move. When his hands guided her lips to the bulbous, shiny head, she knew, she had him. She almost felt remorse for Hudson the first time she rode with abandon on his thick non frat-party sized dick, but she shoved that weakness aside; feeling sorry for his black ass would put his black ass in that board seat instead of hers.

On day 3 of the tour, Amanda and Marcus arrived at their hotel near the airport around 6 pm. He had a round of one-on-one teleconferences planned, starting with the client in Mobile tomorrow afternoon, and he wanted to go over it again. Amanda just smiled and patted his arm, “relax, everything’s ready.” She lagged behind at the front desk after Marcus took his keycard and walked to the elevator. She asked the concierge for any messages for “Annie.” He checked the cork board behind the desk, out of Amanda’s view, seeing, yes, a post-it with “For Annie” written on it. He checked her out: mid-20s, strawberry blonde, almost 6 ft., athletic body with pert handful-sized breasts and a shapely ass. He gave the note to her with a knowing smile she didn’t notice as she snatched it, hurrying to catch up with Marcus. She shoved it into her skirt pocket as she turned the corner into the elevator banks and almost collided into him as he stood waiting. Riding up to the fourth floor, she agreed to come by his room in a few minutes, noticing the familiar hungry look in his eyes. Once in her room, down the hall from his, Amanda pulled out the paper - “Betsy, Rm. 732” was written in the center.

“Betsy” was the woman she’d found, and auditioned, after a month of searching in LA. Smiling, Amanda called her, gave her Marcus’ room number and told her to be ready in an hour. She called room service, then went to his room and said she’d ordered burgers, fries, and mikshakes, was that ok?

A few minutes into the meal she told him she had a surprise - “some really excellent pot from a friend of mine. I thought we could eat first and then get high. But, I left it on the dresser in my room,” she said, giving him a wicked grin as she took off her blouse and slipped out of her shoes. He grinned, took her key card and hurried out. He was back in a minute, but she only needed 30 seconds

to get out the little bottle from her skirt pocket, pop the lid and pour the red, sweet potion into his chocolate shake, stirring the straw to mix it. He returned just as she dropped her skirt, revealing a lacy black thong as she sat back in the chair beside her tray. He brought her a small zippered pouch as he admired her perky breasts in the french-cut bra.

Half an hour later, after finishing off a couple bowls of her potent weed, he started getting a slightly goofy look on his face from the potion as his penis began to stir on its own. He didn't notice.

"Isn't it hot in here, Marcus?" She remarked, and smiled as he slowly attacked the buttons on his shirt. She moved the serving trays to the cart and pushed him back onto the bed, removing the rest of his clothes and stroking his erection. Five minutes later, Marcus had a tremendous orgasm, lost to the wonderful sensations he felt, his nerve endings all screaming pleasure as he spurted in a lazy arc that pooled on his chest. His dick was still erect and would be for another hour or so, Amanda thought as she lightly bit the drooling head and intently watched his quivering response. It's time.

She rolled off the bed and dialed Betsy. "It's me. come down now!" she hissed into the hotel phone. She grabbed a towel from the bathroom and gently wiped him off, savoring the moment. Enjoy your balls tonight, she thought, I'll have them tomorrow, along with control of your precious seat on the board.

She turned to his laptop on the dresser, powered it up, then opened a browser and went to her travel site. A soft knock at the door and she grinned at Marcus, rolling around on the bed in slow motion. Showtime, big boy. At the door she took the "Do Not Disturb" sign off the inside handle, quickly opened up and ushered in Betsy, tall, gorgeous, with flowing shoulder-length red hair to match her full red lips, wearing a slinky dark red evening dress, elegant sandals and pearls. She took in Amanda's pert breasts and smiled as the lingerie-clad woman hooked the sign on the outside and closed the door. They just stood there and drank each other in, then embraced and kissed, long and slow.

"Hi. Annie," she said in a sweet lilt.

"Hello yourself." said Amanda. "We don't have much time. Your host is this way, and he can't wait to meet you." Amanda led the way as Betsy admired her cute ass in the thong.

They entered the dark bedroom to find Marcus propped up on his elbows, eyes closed, his erection still strong. Amanda walked over to him and kissed him. His eyes slowly opened and he tried to reach for her, but she backed away. He noticed another woman standing beside Amanda, a tall redhead with big lips peeling down a red dress to her slender waist. She had beautiful grapefruit-sized breasts with little pink nipples sticking through the open slits of a see-through bra. Betsy knelt beside him on the bed and guided a nipple between his lips as Marcus' hands slowly, clumsily caressed Betsy.

Amanda returned to the computer and confirmed her red-eye flight to Mobile on a small airline using her own money. Nobody in the LA office needs to know about this trip yet, and Marcus will say what I damn well tell him to after tonight, Amanda snorted. She watched him, still sitting up, following Betsy's whispered instructions as she held him close. Marcus, in a daze, squeezed her breasts together until the nipples were inches apart, then alternated from one stiff nipple to the other, suckling. "That's right, like that," Betsy purred, sliding a hand down to his erection and lightly stroking him.

Amanda left the computer and crawled onto the bed at his legs, kissed up his thighs, brushed her lips against Betsy's caressing fingers, then captured his cock with her mouth. Marcus had barely come down from the melting waves of bliss he was riding. He was one big pleasure center, and he loved it. Nipples in his mouth and fingers stroking his dick was the center of his world. He'd come already and was still hard as a rock, and now a sudden wet warmth enveloped him...

Amanda kissed and swallowed the shiny head, rotating around it lovingly, then went down further, meeting Betsy's fingers coming up, admiring his cock the way she admired all her new toys. She glanced over at Betsy's dress as she relinquished his dick, eyes lingering over the barely noticeable bulge at the junction of her thighs. "Ok, ready?" she asked. Betsy nodded and they stretched him out on the bed. The redhead quickly finished undressing and got on the bed, straddling his face. Amanda smiled, admiring Betsy's neat arrangement of a slightly smaller-sized furry vagina tucked behind a small scrotum and a rigid four-inch dick.

Amanda returned to the stiff black cock, licking the head as she watched Betsy. The redhead brought her pussy close to his face; he started licking as soon as he felt her intoxicating wet folds brush his lips. He couldn't see a thing, but he

didn't care. About anything. This was the best night of his life!

Amanda left the bed and went to her skirt in the chair, took the digital camera out of the other pocket. She turned on the lamp in the furthest corner of the room, giving just enough light to avoid using the flash. She checked the camera and went to the foot of the bed and took in the view.

Betsy was guiding Marcus, slowly sliding his tongue further and further out of the wet furrow and onto her meat, getting it wet. Amanda climbed aboard and resumed humming on his dick. As soon as he moaned loudly and started shaking, Betsy slid her pelvis back and with her hand, stuck just the tip of her penis into his mouth. His lips clamped on the small head as Amanda rapidly bobbed her head on his stiff pole to keep his senses reeling. She backed off as he started trembling. Not yet, big boy.

Betsy alternated Marcus from her dick to her pussy, sliding her cunt lips, then her cock, over his busy tongue. Amanda got up and steadied the camera as Betsy moved down and straddled Marcus, facing him. She eased herself down on his rigid cock, stroking her own erection and moaning in time with him. Amanda had a dozen shots by the time Betsy climbed off his pulsing dick and slid down until her tongue found his puckered anus and painted his balls and asshole. She straightened up, reached for the pillows on the bed, shoved them under him.

Betsy wet two fingers and began slowly easing them into him as Amanda leaned down and licked his dickhead to distract him. It took a few minutes, but when he started fucking back onto Betsy's fingers, she smoothly slid them out and positioned her stiff cock at his asshole. Betsy slowly inched into him, then rocked back and forth, gasping as Marcus' clenching ass gripped her throbbing dick. When she bottomed out, Amanda moved back off the bed to get shots as Betsy stroked her full length into Marcus, grasping his wet pole of flesh and stroking it in time to her thrusts.

After five minutes of Betsy, Marcus cried out as he came again, three spurts that puddled on his belly. Betsy kept stroking him as she pounded his ass with her rigid cock. He remained hard.

Betsy felt herself about to come, so she pulled out of Marcus's ass and plunged her steaming pussy back down on his cock, grinding on his meat until she stiffened and squealed, gushed around his pole, spurts twice on Hudson's chest.

And Amanda had it all on film.

She cleaned Marcus off with the towel, then climbed back on the bed, lowering her humid pussy down to his waiting mouth. The two of them rode Marcus for another lazy half hour, Betsy slowly grinding his penis in her tight snatch as Amanda trailed kisses from Betsy's lips to both hard, plump little nipples, down her quivering belly to her short, throbbing dick. They got dressed while Amanda downloaded the photos into Marcus' laptop (MY laptop, now, she thought). Marcus lay in the bed, sighing, eyes barely open as his dick slowly began to deflate. Amanda flipped through the shots, marking the best 10, showing Marcus' face, but not Betsy's. Perfect.

At the door, they embraced and kissed, tenderly. Amanda promised Betsy that "Annie" would see her in LA in a week. Amanda watched Betsy gracefully stroll down the hall to the elevator, a smile of accomplishment on her face.

Back in the room, Amanda giggled as she went to the computer to finish her work. She printed out the 10 pictures, then retrieved a memory stick from her skirt pocket. From it she printed the letter she'd already written to Marcus - telling him in specific terms what she thought of him, why teleconferencing Mobile instead of making a personal visit was a stupid decision, not one a board member would ever make, what would happen with the pictures if he didn't do exactly as ordered (stay in the room for the next three days and hold your dick, cancel your meetings, no phone calls other than room service, and no contact with LA, or else), and what she expected of him when she got back. She took an empty manila envelope from his bags and put the papers inside, wrote "Open Immediately" on the front and left it on his chest.

He was asleep, and would be for another twelve hours, too late to interfere in her plans, but let's make sure. She went into his pants and took out his wallet. He had four credit cards and \$2500 in cash. She took out \$2000 and the cards, and returned the wallet to his pants. That'll hold him for a couple days, she thought. She turned off the laptop and took it, the sleek portable printer and his cell phone back to her room. She left the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the outside.

Amanda changed back into her traveling clothes and finished packing her flight bag. It was a little after 9 pm, plenty of time to catch the red-eye to Mobile for the afternoon meeting. With everything on Marcus' computer, she could hold her own teleconference with the other clients from any place with a connection. She

stood at the door with her flight bag and the laptop cases, feeling the rush of adrenalin wash over. We're crossing the Rubicon, she thought. No turning back. She took a deep breath and steeled herself, focusing on the image burned into her skull last year during a morning board meeting. All the members were assembled and waiting to introduce Marcus. She'd been in the ladies' room and got back too late. The board president had already begun talking and Marcus Hudson was already positioned, standing a few feet back from the slightly ajar double doors. The boardroom erupted in applause as the doors parted to admit him like a conquering hero.

At the front desk, Amanda explained that she had to leave unexpectedly and would be gone for a few days, but that her associate would be staying. She strolled out to the group of waiting airport shuttles, triumphant.

After her flight left for Mobile things started to go bad for Amanda. Her plane developed engine trouble and had to land in Baton Rouge. There were no other flights out to Mobile till morning. In a foul mood, she trudged to the car rental area, but only found one agency still open, a light-skinned girl was sipping coffee at the counter. She was such a bitch to the girl, she got an older model car without the plug-in GPS alert system "That's the only car we have available at this hour with our garage closed, ma'am," she smirked politely. The girl handed Amanda a road map of the southern states from a rack on the counter. "Just stay east on Hwy 12 till it turns back into the 10 and you'll be in Mobile by morning," she said, but Amanda barely listened as she took the map and lugged her things out to pick up her rental. It was a brown 4-door with a nasty trunk, so the flight bag went into the back seat, Amanda put the laptops in the front.

She drove out of the rental lot and made her way to Hwy 110, driving south to 10 east, making sure she was on the right onramp to Hwy 12, avoiding the depressing spectacle on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain. The radio was tuned to a news station so she turned it up as she hit the gas, speeding up on the deserted stretch of highway. "It's 1:48 and time for weather and traffic..." Hm, it's a little over 200 miles to Mobile...I'll be there before sunrise, she thought, easing back on the gas to the speed limit. Amanda began to feel her control returning, once again driving instead of flying to meet clients like a board member.

Her mind drifted as she fell into automatic driving mode, no longer hearing the radio. She loved to fly. She loved taking red-eye flights on one of the company's

fleet of Lear jets, greeting the dawn in a new city, a new day to conquer. And Marcus fucking Hudson wasn't even a board member and he's already been on more flights than any of the other junior associates. She remembered thinking he must be blowing one of the senior members to get so many free trips. But what if he does for real? What if he is 'on the downlow' and she could get proof? Amanda smiled. Now I do! she shouted, bursting out in a fit of giggles, supremely pleased with herself and her 'executive level solution.'

"...Toxic-chemical spill on Hwy 10, near the Pearl River bridge on the La state line. It's already causing backups on both sides of Hwy 10, and they don't expect this to be cleared up in time for the morning rush..." Damn! She pulled over to the emergency lane and checked the map again. Hwy 59 was a few miles ahead. It went up sharply northeast, deep into Mississippi. The map didn't show any of the state roads, so she pulled out her laptop, praying that a working cell phone tower was nearby. She was able to get online and pull up Google Earth, and zoomed in on the web of local state and county roads. She found an east-bound county road turnoff from 59 near Picayune. She saved the map, bookmarked her place, then turned off the laptop. She drove off with new determination; the executive solution is flexible, I'll make it work!

Once she reached the county road turnoff, Amanda stopped and opened the laptop back up to the Google map, listening to the news for any more on the accident to the south, trying not to listen to the sudden small voice of worry as she looked around at her surroundings. Hwy 59 shot straight ahead, NNE, the highway lights suddenly smaller cutting through the dark countryside. Up ahead, she saw the shallow offramp that curved to the right and ended at an L-shaped intersection. The branch she had to take shot east, away from the ribbon of lights and safety, into the backwoods gloom. She thought back to the girl at the rental counter, sticking her with this brown heap with no emergency call unit in the car. "Little piss-colored bitch," she muttered. "I'll show her and Marcus!" She snapped off any further nagging fears and got back to her task, saving a picture of the area and pulling the small travel printer out of Marcus' laptop case. Ten minutes later, she was rolling east with the high-beams on, the computer gear stowed and three printed pages showing a marked path all the way to Mobile laying beside her on the seat.

Leaving the cab light on, she checked the top page. The next 20 miles of the road's route crossed sparse intersections and stretches of farmland with scattered towns along the route. She drove on, making excellent time on this also deserted

road. Why didn't anyone else do what I'm doing, she wondered. She'd only lost half an hour, she sighed, relaxing as she drove on through the enveloping darkness.

The news update at 3AM didn't improve for the highway jam. Traffic was still backed up, but the worst of it was miles behind her. There was still no one else on this county road - all mine, she thought, turning off the radio and the cab light, getting into the drive now, nothing between her and Mobile...

The county road intersected Hwy 49 up ahead. Amanda saw a truck stop to the left and a motel on her right as she drove through. Once she crossed the state highway, it was like the air had a different feel and scent. Heady, familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. Then she turned left, through Wainwright Park.

Chapter 3

In the Wainwright “East House” on the western edge of Liberty Plains, Jacob stood before the contorted body of Augustus Wainwright, disgusted with the young master’s failure to endure even the suffering of a young boy. Pitiful. That was the easiest ride I could give you, he thought, glancing over to the girl Rebecca, who was still in the early part of Annie’s memory.

He closed his eyes and returned to the park. He closed in on the brown sedan, saw the out of state plates and a young woman behind the wheel, staring hard at Polly. Despite himself, he grinned at the teenaged ghost, pressing against the car window as she slipped inside. It won’t take long now to get a read, he thought.

His gaze approached the car and slid into the back as Polly was shrugging out of her shirt and climbing into the woman’s lap. The woman’s lust was coming off her in waves, a familiar tang both he and Polly recognized. As she caressed the girl’s body and feasted on her breasts, the woman ...Amanda, was being read by Polly. The darkness in her heart, right on top, hot and thick, what she did with great pride and anger a few years ago, and again to an innocent young black man just a few hours ago. The tang of Mistress Olivia LeChette, who liked girls and boys, liked them young, and often loved them to death. The young ghost shivered at the memory; Amanda mistook the movement and clutched her tighter, moaning around the girl’s hard nipple between her lips. Jacob saw Polly’s face grow hard, knew that particular look would bear down on the woman, make her arms and legs heavy and clamp her mouth shut. Wrapping her up for me, he thought. She should, the way she messed up my judging...

His gaze left the car, hovered above as Polly appeared back outside, standing in front of the car, dressed again in the shirt. Polly called his name as he returned to the parlor where the girl twitched on the floor beside the latest weak-assed prospect from the Wainwright clan. Young miss, you just got lucky, he thought.

Jacob left the parlor, stepping through a dark corner in the hallway and emerging from the shadow of an old, gnarled tree. It was one of three ancient Red Maple trees in a small stand of River Birch next to a creek that meandered through an unkept field. He walked around to the opposite side of the tree, stopping at a large knothole on the trunk above his head, visible in the moonlight. He reached up and inside it, removed a large leather bag and from it took out a piece of

wood with blood stains on it. He put the bag back inside the tree trunk and removed the smaller pouch and Annie's bone from his pants pocket. Jacob added the wood to the other charms inside, a folded scrap of paper covered in random numbers and letters, for Samuel, and Emma Jane's little bone with a piece of faded blue cloth tied to it. Annie's bone, with it's faded scrap of stained yellow cloth tied around it, Polly snuck into his pocket. All the charms in the pouch and back in his pocket, the ghost went back around to the night shadows cast by the old Red Maples, entered them and appeared on the road beside Polly.

Amanda, paralyzed, breathing rapid and shallow, began muffled wailing at seeing the young, powerfully built black man appear, looking no different than the average shirtless young ghetto thug as he walked to the car, except his eyes were sad, not hard or feral. That frightened her even more as he appeared next to her in the passenger seat. The sense of sadness and regret plainly spoken in his eyes.

"It's ok," Jacob said as he stroked her hair, attempting to calm her as he straightened up her clothes, feeling her finally relax. "I know you don't understand, you ain't from round here, but that's ok. You gon' help a young miss who's carrying a burden not meant for her."

Jacob took the pouch from his pocket and removed the piece of wood. The hard glare of the streetlight revealed a rough heart scratched onto one side. He placed it next to her cheek; she was powerless to resist him turning her face toward his. Between them a speck of sunlight sparked into being, glowed as she surrendered to it, let herself be submerged in it, then it flashed and she screamed. He reappeared in front of the car beside Polly, watched Amanda slump over in the seat and begin a twitching dance.

Jacob turned to Polly, removing the pouch from his pocket, taking out Annie's bone before putting away the little piece of wood. Her face screwed up; she was about to start making excuses, but his eyes stopped her.

"Polly, you playing around messed up my judging. That girl and this woman is on you."

He put the little pouch away, held her by the shoulders and waited until she looked him in the eyes. "It ain't over yet," he said, pointing at the car. She looked away, anywhere but at Amanda's twitching form in the car. It wasn't just

the woman. It was the out of state license plates...

"We ain't never took this outside befo'." He looked beyond her to the hard night horizon, to the world beyond the park, the town, his eyes growing hard.

Polly, genuinely regretful now, murmured a low "I'm sorry." Jacob saw her close to tears, embraced her gently, comforting the child she was. "I know, I know..."

Rebecca was losing herself within Annie's high-pitched terror of the Stonehill brothers. She felt her own legs pumping, urging the slave girl on as she sprinted from the slave cabins toward Wainwright House; get in, get your things, get away.

Annie's eyes focused on the rear parlor window all the way to the back door. The curtains were wide open, but the room was dark. She skidded to a stop beside the low steps up to the door, right under the window. She fought to control her breathing, listening for the sounds of men or horses as she crouched exposed in the broad back yard of the mansion. She swallowed and rushed up the steps, slowly opened the door and peeked through the crack. All clear. She took another deep breath, then slipped inside soundlessly.

She steered carefully around the elegant furniture as she moved to the parlor's front entrance. Just beyond, the hallway of the great house extended straight through it, taking a short left detour at the second of the three landings before opening under the gracefully curving arch of the front stairway, facing the broad double doors at the grand entrance. It was dark, only a few lanterns left glowing along the wall. She couldn't see the front door from here without going down the hall, but that risked waking up the nightboy, who normally dozed in a chair by the entrance. She didn't like him anyway; he preferred being a house nigger. He'd enjoy turning her over to the Stonehills. He'd wake up the house soon enough when they got here. she turned and crept up the rear staircase.

The sewing room was on the left, a few feet away from the back stairs. She peeked just above floor level, thankful it was quiet. She slipped into the room, went to the closet that held old bolts of material from previous balls and dances, retrieved her satchel from behind the pile.

She put the pistol inside and was about to close it up when Rebecca felt herself

being...pushed. She got a flash of another woman, around her age, screaming as she and Rebecca tumbled past each other, through whirling darkness, into...the room.

Rebecca found herself in the sewing room, a few feet away from Annie, floating a foot or so off the floor. She couldn't hear Annie's voice any longer, but she still felt the girl's fear, the other woman's panic and confusion as well. She saw Annie's reflection in a mirror, but also the woman who took her place. She was dressed in a modern skirt and blouse and appeared to float within Annie's outline. And her name was...Amanda. Rebecca heard a little girl's voice in her head now, whispering about Amanda and what she did to someone named Marcus Hudson just a few hours ago.

Rebecca was still trying to make sense of it when she lurched forward just as Annie moved to the window. Rebecca careened past Annie, passed through the window, drifted to a stop a dozen feet above the ground. Disoriented, she fought back a wave of nausea and tried to focus on Annie standing at the window. The slave's frightened start, disappearing from view and the sound of horses below told her the Stonehill boys were just arriving. Rebecca spun around, saw young master Julius Le Chette was with them, trailing from behind, staying on his horse as the boys dismounted and ran toward the entrance of the mansion.

Rebecca was flung back to her previous position a few feet away from the girl who choked back a gurgled sob. She saw Amanda's reflection in the mirror hanging beside the window as the girl rushed out the door, clutching the satchel. Rebecca was whirled from the room, through the door to see Annie creep down the stairs as she was flung the opposite direction down the hallway, then dropped through the floor to hover beside the second stairway.

She heard a noise to her left, saw Annie slowly moving through the rear parlor to the back door, then heard pounding at the great front door of the mansion. Annie's exit was as silent as the Stonehill boys were loud, bursting through the doors, slapping the nightboy on his head and ordering him to fetch his master.

Good, Rebecca thought, they didn't see us, you...

She reeled from the nausea and vertigo of flying through walls and furniture, a helpless hovering ragdoll, feeling Annie / Amanda's fear rising as she slowly slipped out the back door. Rebecca heard master Beauragard Wainwright loudly

coming down the front staircase, then was cast backward through the house till she found herself floating outside again, this time just above the ground. When her eyes focused, she saw Julius Le Chette staring at something in the back yard. Rebecca turned to look, her sick feeling confirmed by Annie, a pale yellow shadow running through the grand back yard used for outdoor parties. It seemed so wide now, as the house came alive with alarm.

Annie headed for the treeline behind the far side of the slave cabins, back behind the small garden where the slaves grew okra and collards, often used by them at night to come and go unseen between the great houses. But she cut straight across the wide swath of the back yard instead of heading for the safety of the smokehouse first. And she was in a yellow dress, she realized half way to the meager collection of cabins, looking down. Her knees almost buckled, she stumbled, then, too afraid to stop and look behind, she finally reached the nearest of the cabins, saw the door crack open and a curious face peek out, saw the house astir and the running girl and slammed it shut. Annie stopped behind the cabin, leaning against the temporary refuge, breathing roughly. Hearing shouts from the house, she bolted through the shacks and down the footpath through the garden for the treeline, then began running south along the footpath, hoping the deeper shadows of the trees helped some. She knew it was bad, but it's too late to be careful...

Two Stonehill boys ran from the mansion's back door to the slave cabins, calling to Le Chette, who was just dismounting as they kicked open the first cabin door.

Rebecca, still hovering in the yard beside the grand mansion, watched young master Le Chette and the Stonehill brothers force all the sleeping field hands out of their cabins, ordered them all to the dirt in front of the first row of shacks and trained their pistols on them as each cabin was searched for the girl. The fear and choking rage of the slaves washed over Rebecca in hard waves, searing her soul, amplifying her nausea, her complete helplessness. She screamed, thrashing violently from the assault. She tasted the dust swirling up from their short breaths in the humid night air as they lay on their stomachs in their rough breeches and shifts. She felt Annie's racing heart, felt shadows of leaves and small branches whipping past her arms and legs as she ran through the loosely spaced trees. She felt Amanda, inside the terrified girl, screaming.

After checking all the cabins they ran back on their mounts, tearing south down Maison Road. The overseer and the nightboy were sent down the treeline to look

for her. Master Beauregard didn't trust the field niggers to look for the high yella, even if they had been roused awake at gunpoint on account of a house girl...

Rebecca was suddenly flung into the air, stopping with a lurch above the great Wainwright House, then she flew south, over Maison Road, easily catching up to and passing the men riding furiously below her, then after a few minutes she was again hovering above the ground, speeding through trees alongside the pale yellow shadow of Annie, moving quickly along the path through the trees.

She could see up ahead a gap in the treeline, an intersecting crossroads marking the end of Wainwright property along the road, nowhere to hide for twenty yards on either side of the road. And the horses were approaching. Annie took a deep breath and fixed her eyes on the nearest tree across the road, then ran, head down across the exposed ground.

Halfway across the road, Le Chette rounded the intersection to her left. Rebecca saw him raise a pistol and fire. Annie yelped and fell to the ground with a muffled thud. Rebecca felt a reflection of searing pain ripple from the back of her left leg and shrieked. Annie just moaned, her energy sapped, spirit deflated as she lay there, a foot away from the treeline, her leg numb and prickly.

She'd only made it a mile south of Wainwright House.

The four men took Annie roughly, threw her over the back of Cyrus Stonehill's horse and rode hard back to Le Chette House. Once there Cyrus and his brothers Abner and Nathan followed Julius to a quiet spot in the back fields of the Le Chette plantation, where Julius and his older brother Lucien often took young slavegirls to "get a taste," or "take a ride."

They stripped off the yellow dress, tore off her underwear, threw her onto the tattered clothing, then each man in turn roughly raped her. Between each violation they cursed and kicked her leg where she was shot. After they all finished violating her, they pulled out their pistols. Cyrus shot her in the already wounded leg. Abner shot her other leg, Nathan Stonehill put a bullet through the hand that plunged the knitting needle into Franklin's neck. Julius Le Chette steadied his hand as sighted down the barrel, watching her bleeding, swollen face. He called her name, waited until her eyes focused through the pain. He expected her to look terrified, but she just stared back, resigned and trembling.

Rebecca, eyes closed tight, recoiled in revulsion throughout the assault, burning pain in both legs and her hand, then Annie and Amanda's torment abruptly ended as Le Chette fired. Rebecca kept her eyes closed through the continued pummeling of the girl's honey brown body, the connection now just a distant echo, but each sound the men made with their boots struck her with dull force.

She heard them stop, then the soft muffled shuffling of footsteps trailing away. She didn't want to look, but something told her she wouldn't get out of this nightmare until she did. She slowly opened her eyes, still shaking from the fading waves of agony now no more than ripples, looked down to the broken body and tried to look away, but she couldn't. Whatever held her above the grisly scene forced her gaze, kept her eyes open as she began to cry bitterly.

Annie's honey tones were barely recognizable, bruises and bloody shoeprints covered her body, her torso misshapen from broken ribs, the slave girl's head smoked from the point-blank bullet hole. Rebecca saw Amanda's shattered face reflected within and retched, dry heaved through wracking sobs. She regained control of her eyelids and clamped them shut, her whole body clamped tight.

She heard quick footsteps approach a few minutes later, breaking the still silence of the field, the low noise of crickets near a stand of catalpa trees. She didn't want to see anymore, the two faces were burning into her brain, tormenting her. She heard a choked-back gasp, a deep voice gripped in shock and sorrow. She heard Annie's body being held tightly, lovingly.

Rebecca heard nothing but breathing and low moans for another long minute. Let me go, she whimpered, what else there...

Her eyelids popped open, forcing her to watch an older black man struggle to wrap the tattered clothing around the girl's body. He grimaced, fighting back tears as he wiped Annie's face with a scrap of yellow. The cloth stroked down her cheek and Rebecca saw her own face, shattered, staring back at her, she couldn't stop screaming.

At dawn the next morning, Ellis Weston, the Wainwright Park groundskeeper, discovered the brown rental car covered in light dew as he came in early to open up the Slave Museum, saw inside a strange woman, face up in the blood soaked front seat, her frozen mask of agony punctuated by a bullet hole in her forehead. The old man cursed and ran to the small building, fumbling with his keys to get

inside and call the sheriff. He had a kindergarden class coming in a few hours and he didn't want some out of town gang killing spoiling the children's day. He dared not think what else it could be.

A few minutes later, Augustus Wainwright's body was found by Jesse, a deputy dispatched back to the house by county Sheriff Burt Eggleston on orders from Agnes Wainwright. "Just go collect him," she said. He found Rebecca cowered in a corner of the disheveled parlor, her screams reduced to hoarse whimpers, her body covered in light bruises. She had a fresh round bruise on her forehead the deputy thought would otherwise be a bullet hole, and she was unresponsive to his questions. Just like '83, he thought, remembering the sheriff's tales of the trouble that year, before he was even born. It was the first time he ever heard of Jacob and Polly, 'the ghost twins.' But there it was, one of the family firstborn sons dead the morning after his 20th birthday, and a woman, insane, incoherent, found near him. Ol' Burt wasn't lying after all, Jesse thought.

He called in to the station, asked for the county hospital ambulance, and stood outside the bedroom. He couldn't watch the poor girl's face any longer, and that bruise gave him a weird feeling. That feeling was confirmed when Danny called in from Wainwright Park, reporting a gunshot victim with a bullet wound in the forehead and lots of bruises, except he couldn't tell where the bullet went to. He'd lifted her head, saw the exit wound, but there was no hole in the car seat, no powder evidence from a point-blank discharge on her face or her neatly arranged clothing. Danny said it looked like she was scared to death, then shot. But no bullet.

Jesse always believed the expression "hair on the back of my neck stood up" was just a saying. He knew better now.

Part II - April 2006

Chapter 4

“...So, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the truth. The reputed ‘Ghost of Tucker Canyon,’ the terror that claimed eight lives over the course of twenty years, has been revealed as the cruel game of Cletus Tucker III, grandson of the old prospector and the supposed first victim of the ghost. Thanks to the assistance of this week’s honorary Field Agent, Henrietta Cantwell of Birchwood, Texas, we proved that Cletus not only faked his death, but carried out a gruesome series of revenge murders linked to his family’s past.”

A tall, distinguished man in a natty suit held up a file, talking as he walked over to a table with a small gray file cabinet sitting on it, named “Myth.” Once again, you, the aware public, have aided us in getting to the supernatural truth. Once again, we take hard evidence and employ an open mind, to discover the reality, the proof behind these phenomena. And this time, the file must, alas, rest here.” he said, placing the file inside and sliding it shut. Dark, eerie background music swelled as the man turned to the camera. His deep, rolling voice continued...

“As always, ladies and gentlemen, we ask you, the aware public, to bring your hard evidence to us, bring us proof -“, he gestured over to another small file cabinet, this one ornate, made of mahogany with gold handles. A brass plate held the word “Truth”.

“Send us your evidence that documents the supernatural and the supernormal and if we investigate your case file, you will become an honorary field agent and receive a grant of 10,000 euros, courtesy of the Slattery Trust, certified by Lloyd’s of London.

The camera backed up as the man walked forward, through the doorway of a vault.

“Next week, we investigate the case of a sweet little girl in Nebraska who claims to move large objects at will with her mind. Until then, this is Roger X. Lowell. The file room is now closed.”

Lowell stepped out of the frame as the vault door swung closed with a deep,

echoing clang. The closing music of the outro came up. Lowell walked over to the sound table, picked up the new copy of Variety with the front page item, “‘File Room’ spooky smash hit for Phaedra Channel!”

“And cut!” barked the director, as the crew on the set broke into cheers and applause. Lowell merely nodded and smiled, then he stepped back onto the set as the lights came up, holding the paper proudly.

“Thank you all. And a special thanks to Xavier. This could never have happened without your tireless efforts on behalf of the program.” He pointed to Xavier Slattery, standing beside the director’s chair, beaming in that subtle way of his, from the eyes more than the slightly upturned lips. “We wouldn’t be here without you.” This round of applause finally made Xavier’s smile split wide open.

Xavier was the real force behind the success of the show, Roger thought. Steering “The File Room” through treacherous waters - the highly suspicious and resistant members of the Campus committee, plus his access to the historical case files, made the show an excellent vehicle to properly introduce the no-longer secret organization to a skeptical and frightened public. It wasn’t just entertainment - we provided a public service, considering the way the world discovered the Campus, on live television, he laughed to himself. God bless the ‘Amherst Incident.’

“And now,” Roger continued, “I can confirm the rumors sparked from today’s most gratifying article. We have indeed signed on for three full seasons with Phaedra, and according to Xavier, the success of our program means, on the Campus, we graduate from “Media Relations” research project to full Media Lab status. And with it, a raise for the production staff.”

“Now, we are having a small celebration at the alehouse a few blocks west. Some heads of different labs and a few of our agents are already there, so please stop by if you can before you all disperse on a well deserved two weeks of R and R. Again, congratulations, everyone.”

The mood at the ‘alehouse,’ actually Monroe’s Tap on Melrose in West Hollywood, was lively with the buzz of the production staff, friends from Spectral, Alchem, and one of the Tech Labs and a few field agents from around the globe, trading congratulations and stories from the past year. The bar was closed down, so the shop talk was lively, currently rambling from the

electromagnetic properties of ectoplasm to new tweaks in alchemy-based computer chip design. Lowell was at the bar chatting up a young thing from Spectral3, Xavier was ensconced in a back booth, focused on his open laptop computer, trying out a new benefit of being a full Lab: security-level clearance. He now had access to the encrypted data search and surveillance resources in Basic Research, and the secure email system as well. An application suite that shielded the Campus from the world's spy networks, including the CIA's Echelon.

Finally, he thought, I can do this with discretion...

He looked up at the clock across the room. 4:35 pm, West Hollywood time. 11:35 in London. Not long now, he thought, bending back down to the computer, waiting for the 'pending pile'

He looked up again, smiling at his old friend Sylvia Cavendish, current Director of the agency, who came by to personally present him with the good news from the Campus, and the encryption upgrade. She was positively glowing, chatting with friends a few feet away, brushing a strand of blonde hair away from her glasses. She surprised him earlier as he approached her, moving to a seat at the booths. She brushed her hand across the front of his trousers as he sidled past in the crowded back room. This new, sexual side of Sylvia still surprised him, and left him intensely aroused. This same reserved, highly intelligent, and aching beautiful woman he'd pined for (and lusted after) since he was 16, who was never less than professional among the quiet and orderly library aisles at Oxford, or around the sleek racks of blade servers in Basic Research's data centre, was now reciprocating his long-smoldering attraction, and stoking the fire. "Dear boy, in one hour, we are leaving on holiday. I've made all the arrangements. I am so very proud of the effort you've put into this project, so I intend to see you take this holiday," she said, moving closer, pressing the back of her hand firmly against his crotch, "even if it requires constant surveillance." She giggled softly as he made it to a seat, painfully erect and blushing furiously.

With Sylvia's support, Xavier's "Media Relations research project" (some senior committee members on the Campus still refused to utter the cable show's name), was accorded equal status with the inhouse prospective research labs - they were given Campus computers, allowed full access to the historical case files, but only general access to active investigations. And the committee watched him like a hawk as he competed for good case files along with the other labs and research

projects. She told him as much the first time they made love, after, as she lay atop him, drenched in sweat, reeling from the best sex she'd had in fifteen years. She said some members of the committee were waiting for him to stumble, to kill the very idea of his public relations program for a secret organization, convinced they could go back underground. They were outnumbered by his supporters in the various labs and on the committee, for now. The news only increased his determination and healthy paranoia.

Xavier watched the cool blonde, her pert, athletic frame slightly obscured by her lab coat. He could easily imagine what holiday Sylvia had in mind. He chuckled as he bent back to his task at the computer. Cases for next season's shows, and waiting for any bad news in this week's pile of 'red' cases...

Solid, definitive cases solved were the bread and butter of the research labs on Campus, whether it documented the supernatural and the supernormal, exposed frauds and hoaxes, or discovered the truth behind myths and legends. And the competition was fierce for new phenomena, not merely cases that updated long-running "active archive" files, so a strict protocol was established.

Today was Thursday. As midnight became Friday, all the labs received a weekly 'pending pile' download of prospective case files from Basic Research in London - the cases they generate, plus those submitted by the labs themselves: three dozen or more neat one page F-2's, or "Factual Summaries," of details, along with copies of any source documents (audio, letters, emails, blog hits, news clippings...), and any similarities to 'active archive' cases. The pile itself is downloaded in a few minutes, but it stays locked until six after, to give all interested members time to log-in. Once the download is unlocked, most research labs quickly go to the 'red' files of cases they submitted themselves, to get the numbers and officially register them as active investigations. Later, the rest of the F-2's from Basic Research and any from the Tech Labs are considered.

Some 'red' files are so tantalizing, the details will get leaked before the weekly pile, then a more established lab will right away protest the claim, forcing a hearing before the full committee for arbitration. The older Labs, with more resources and manpower, usually won those showdowns, no matter how forcefully the prospective lab would argue. Case closed. Good case files brought prestige for your Lab, could speed up the process from research project to full Lab status, and meant more resources next year. And Xavier, to the great surprise

of Sylvia and a few other committee members, developed during “lab rat” training a knack for picking good cases other labs overlooked. As a result he’d already lost three ‘red’ cases to other, established labs before.

It was a quarter to 5pm. Not long now, Xavier thought.

On the laptop, the fruits of three weeks’ worth of F-2s were currently displayed, a world map with yellow, green, and red glowing pins hovering over Zaire, Serbia, Scotland and three spots in the US: Warwick, RI., Alamogordo, NM, and Liberty Plains MS. The yellow pins marked Scotland, and New Mexico - F-2’s passed on by at least two other labs but Xavier felt them worth further study. The green pins, in Zaire and Warwick, marked two of seven new investigations begun by other Labs last week, and officially off limits, but Xavier’s friends from his Campus training class of “lab rats” were in charge of these cases. If they became show worthy, he’d send Lowell and a news crew down to discreetly inquire, and play up the lab in a live webcast news piece. It worked spectacularly when he last did it this season. Agent Carrie Dubinski from Spectral3 was still enjoying a bit of celebrity after Lowell’s “field report” with her, tracking down a killer through the Paris sewers with the aid of a ghost, and clearing a man three hours away from execution. It made international headlines after the episode aired. That put the cat amongst the pigeons, Xavier chuckled...

The red pins marked any unregistered F-2s from previous weeks. Serbia and Liberty Plains. The Serbia file came from Wolfen5, concerning an unidentified, untagged werewolf. Wolfen Labs 2 and 5 had been in arbitration the past week. Both labs were evenly matched, but Xavier hoped it would go to Wolfen5 - his fellow “lab rat” Steven Brindley was slated for lead investigator if they won the case. And werewolves would make great tele...

The Liberty Plains file was his, and it was perfect - a rumored slave ghost taking revenge on the descendents of plantation masters for over 100 years, a tightly kept antebellum gothic tale exposed by the death of the latest victim. A case that managed to elude the thorough agents of the Trust for most of its existence. Only the F-2 wasn’t official, wasn’t even registered - it came from Roger Lowell’s slush pile of “honorary field agent” letters, a supplement to the Campus pending pile. The letters arrived in December, sent in by a fan named Augustus Wainwright. Actually, Wainwright’s lawyer, Rufus Patterson, after the man’s sudden death last November. Xavier was sending two or three of these interesting letters to Basic Research each week, to generate F-2s, but when

Roger showed him these, Xavier knew this case was explosive, but he wouldn't stand a chance of proving anything if he sent it as a red file, because of what he discovered.

The letter from the deceased young man, Augustus Wainwright, mentioned other incidents in 1967 and 1983, in Liberty Plains, where either a Wainwright or a LeChette firstborn son was visited by Jacob or Polly. Both young men died, but the news never left town. Xavier did a cursory search through old case files from those years, finding nothing, then he expanded his search through the historical database for any clues from other cases in the region. After two weeks he found a Spectral7 report from 1985 that mentioned a case in "Wainwright, Ms" dismissed by Spectral4 in July of 83. Dismissed cases were F-2s that, after initial investigation, proved lacking in evidence or substantiation, not even worthy of "hoax" status. These cases went back to Basic Research stamped "dismissed" and filed with the rest of the rejected F-2s in a binder from that month. He located the reference number for the binder, but those files were removed from the database and only in paper form, in a box somewhere in the basement of Basic's data centre in London, sharing space with stacks of boxes filled with binders of decades of old F-2s.

In January, he cooked up an excuse to visit London and the data centre, visiting friends who lived in the residence building on the grounds, which allowed him to access the facility at 2am. He checked the building maps and located the stacks of dismissed files in a cramped room in the centre's basement. After half an hour of searching the disorganized pile of boxes by flashlight and watching the door, he located the binders for summer 1983 in an unmarked box and removed the one marked July, confirming the reference number. He was looking through the binder for the file when a noise behind him made him swing the flashlight around, facing the no-nonsense director of Basic Research at the door.

He stood there in shock, expecting the worst, when Sylvia closed the door, ran to him and turned off the flashlight. He was about to speak when she grabbed him by the waist and pulled him behind the stacks of boxes. She held a finger to his lips as he heard voices passing by the door. He had never been this close to her before, breathing in her bouquet, conscious of every place their bodies touched, and despite the danger of being caught, his body was responding to the contact. She responded to his growing nervous erection by moving her hand from his lips to a firm grasp of his ass. Shocked, he looked in her eyes and saw the same ignited fire. Without thinking, he dropped the binder, caressed her soft, shapely

ass under her lab coat and kissed her, hard. She returned the passion, but shortly broke the kiss. "Come with me," she said, straitening her skirt and moving to the door. He wanted to stay and look for the box from 1967, but she hissed that that was entirely out of the question. Luckily, the room wasn't in a high-security area of the basement, so she and Xavier were able to escape detection back to her suite on the grounds. That was the first time he made love to Sylvia, and discovered the committee's surveillance of his project. And the first time he ever hated a member of the Campus.

The dismissed case file from the July 8, 1983 binder confirmed his worst suspicions. The case agent's report pronounced a 'suicide' for Oscar LeChette in Wainwright, Ms and rejected a vague mention of 'ghost twins' as "no evidence to substantiate supposed legend. No connection." The same agent was a new investigator whose first case was in 1966. Lucas Jonesborough, a young agent then, now the director of Spectral4 for almost ten years.

Spectral4 was an old, established Lab on the Campus, with their US base in Memphis and one of Jonesborough's most loyal agents living in Gulfport, Ms., who'd already done work on the Ormond and the Mytles Plantations in LA. And he was known to be more sympathetic to the masters than the slaves. Xavier had no friends in Spectral4 either; he'd be completely shut out from any access to HIS case if it went to arbitration, which they would demand. Then Lucas would bury it, like the others. He and Spectral4 had betrayed the very spirit of the Campus. It disgusted Xavier; Lucas Jonesborough was spitting in the face of Alexis Slattery, who began the Campus out of a genuine thirst for knowledge and truth, no matter where it led. He was determined to expose Lucas and Spectral4, by fully investigating the case and documenting everything, but it had to be a covert operation outside his project, outside the Campus completely. Xavier himself couldn't go anywhere near the town, or send anyone from the show, or Spectral4 would know. An established lab might occasionally launch a 'red file' investigation before it becomes official, but never a prospective or new lab, and definitely not a Slattery, unless there were a bloody good reason and evidence.

This case could well add to the positive press the Trust gained in America during the Gulf Coast disaster, he thought. At first, only a half dozen agents were there in the days leading up to the storm, quietly moving data files, artifacts and equipment from Spectral7's base office in New Orleans to houses in the El Capitan district and the Baton Rouge office, but Katrina hit before they finished,

first washing away the homes of two field agents in Timberlane, south of New Orleans, then they lost contact with a third, the voodoo houngan who lived in the bottom of the 9th ward bowl for over 50 years. They'd been missing ever since, joining the estimated 3,000 people lost to the disaster.

In the days of chaos after, the Trust sent MediVac air and water rescue units to get their people, then they saw the disaster unfold on TV, and got involved in the general rescue efforts, joining those who went around the useless FEMA and managed to get some help into the area, even aiding the Coast Guard who also ignored FEMA and went ahead with rescue operations. In the weeks after the water went down, American field agents from 12 different labs suspended active cases and went to help search the wreckage for survivors, not caring to hide their identities, or their contempt for the government. The network and cable news shows did glowing profiles on the three agents lost to Katrina.

There were still agents from different spectral labs in the worst-hit areas of the Gulf Coast, patrolling the devastation at night, contacting the newly passed-on and collecting data, so many souls overwhelmed and suffering from fear, rage, and confusion. With this temporary situation causing a backlog of cases, he had time to start a covert investigation, but not long before the data mining filters in Basic Research come across a news item or a keyword hit from somebody writing about this ghost online. He was waiting for this batch of 'red' files for any clue that Spectral4 was trying to suppress the latest incident. The wait was nerve-wracking.

I need somebody on the ground for the next couple weeks to get an investigation started and hand it off, Xavier thought. A reporter not connected to the show, and there's only one name on that short list. I need Lionel Perry, I really need him now. It's been a couple years since he lost his TV reporter job. Last time I asked it was only a couple months after...

He brought up a window for the Trust's financial search engines that had access to bank accounts across the world. He entered the name "Lionel Perry" into the database, quickly locating his New York bank accounts.

He had an account in Manhattan Savings before it failed, his other bank, Gotham Federal, hadn't shown any activity in over a year, since a transfer of over \$300,000 to the account of a Henry Smith in the Santa Monica, Ca. branch of Bruin Saving and Loan. Xavier entered that name into the database and tapped

into California's DMV to look for a license. Lionel didn't show up, but Henry, with Lionel's face, did. The license date was three months after the transfer. All right, Xavier smiled, you're Henry Smith...

He pulled up Henry's withdrawals for the past two months. He noted a loose trail of gas station, RV park and motel charges along Hwy 70, from Kansas City to Denver, then down to Las Vegas. The same pattern of aimless walkabout Lionel... uh, Henry, had been on since the last time Xavier tried talking to his old friend.

He'd been in Vegas for a few days. Suite 827 in the Matador, on the Old Strip.

Xavier brought up his new, private, encrypted email system and searched for any email traffic by either Lionel OR Henry. Nothing. He had three cancelled email addresses from his old job, and there were more than a dozen "Henry Smith's" and "H.Smith's" in the search results. Crap. He couldn't send a mass encrypted message, and he didn't dare send all those Henry's an email on the open internet - Basic Research would be onto him in hours when, not if, they plucked a message with that many keyword hits out of the data stream.

Xavier shrank the private email screen and checked the time - seven minutes. Scrambling, he started looking for courier services in Las Vegas. This time I have to convince him to be a reporter just this once more, look into this as a favor, he thought, then, I can deal with Spectral4 and the hidebound Campus. I should ask Sylvia...

He looked up and saw Sylvia, pale blue eyes twinkling as she approached his booth, bending close to him. He quickly filled her in.

"Xavier, in light of the information you discovered, I approve of your covert investigation, and I wouldn't worry about the Campus at the moment," Sylvia said. "I will also support your enlisting a freelancer to do the initial investigation, but you must monitor the situation, and be prepared to take over when your friend has enough evidence to present in arbitration. The full committee needn't be informed, as long as you and your friend don't misstep, dear boy."

Xavier was amazed at how the older woman shifted from 'a freelancer' to 'your friend,' as if she'd read his mind as he considered Lionel (damn... Henry...). But I need to guarantee he'll do this...

“Working on it as we speak, dear lady,” Xavier said as he located an LA - Las Vegas courier service. Mercury Executive Couriers. Speed and Discretion.”

She smiled, glancing at the clock near the bar. 4:55pm. “Xavier, dear, I’m sorry, but you’ll only have 30 more minutes, then we must be off. I’ll leave you to it.” She glided over to three dateless Tech-heads, who stammered and gulped as she approached.

Half an hour. That should be enough time.

Xavier looked about the bar, spotting one of the interns who didn’t look drunk, waved her over. “Jean. Excuse me, could you be a dear and bring me the notebook computer no. 6 from the cage in Roger’s office. Don’t bother signing it out, I’ll handle that myself. Thank you ever so much,” he said, giving her his keys.

He assembled a folder with files covering the Wainwright information, and the declassified Campus history and regulations handbook, then downloaded them into a memory stick. As the timer on his laptop chimed the hour, the weekly download began. Xavier reopened his encrypted email and wrote a hiring letter to Mercury Executive, with instructions to execute in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Jean returned as he sent off a generous advance via electronic payment.

He closed the encrypted email and returned to Henry’s bank to do a little business, then he brought up the Basic Research screen, watching the ‘pending pile’ download as it completed. He saved it, then took out the other, Campus-issued laptop, checked for the ‘grenade,’ turned the computer on and installed the encryption upgrade and the files from the memory stick. He wrote out a note on a Post-it, stuck it onto the bag and took it up to Jonas the bartender to hold for pickup.

At six minutes the download unlocked. This week it was 42 files, 17 “red” files. He scanned through them all, including the latest “red” files, made note of two unassigned F-2’s from Basic Research, and sighed in relief, seeing no bogus entries for his case from Spectral4. He closed up and packed away his laptop and regarded Sylvia with a wicked grin.

“All right, Sylvia. One quick stop at the studio, then, time for holiday.”

Chapter 5

The casino inside the Ogden Hotel buzzed with the noise of money; coins disappearing into chirping electronic slot machines, chips clattering onto felt tables, the emotionally charged tribal sounds of joy and despair erupting over the general murmurs of the players. Just another day in “Vegas, baby!”

A bubbly redhead named Cindy was sitting at the bar near the blackjack tables, sipping a coke. She was watching the action with half an eye on the TV above the cash register. The commercial for that Phaedra show was on, where this guy crashes through the doors of an historic old house, while a morning TV show was on location live, wrestling with a ghostly figure dressed like a Pilgrim. It gets hit with a blast of green light, turns into a skeleton wearing rotten clothes, and the guy lets the corpse go and, standing there in shock, blurts out a bleeped “This shit is real!” as the Campus field agent comes through the door, holding this weird weapon. The scene freezes when the agent notices the camera. The commercial ends with the voiceover, “The File Room. This ‘bleep’ is real.” The show creeped her out, but it was a guilty pleasure.

Cindy was also watching the tables for anybody on a lucky streak who wasn’t attached. She noticed one prospect trying to be anonymous, a black man wearing a fishing hat and shades, approaching the bar with a basket of chips. He got an orange juice, then went to the nearest table and in two hands his chips had all changed color. He didn’t make a sound, just smiled and nodded as he got up and wandered over to another table. Her interest piqued, she casually followed, ending up a couple feet behind him with a clear view.

His first card was an Ace of Diamonds, the dealer had the king. “Again,” he said, and a seven of clubs landed on the ace. The dealer drew a nine of spades. “Again,” the man said quietly, as he sipped his juice. Cindy smiled as the two of clubs hit the table. The dealer drew a five of hearts. “And twenty wins it,” he said, and the guy’s pile of chips almost doubled. He let them ride and did it again, hit a perfect blackjack, while all the other hands busted out. His pile was exchanged for a smaller bundle of new chips, in a third color. He tossed one of the \$500’s to the dealer and was getting up again. Cindy gave him a bright smile as he walked past her and back to the bar. She sidled up to him as he finished off the OJ.

“Damn, you’re good” she said, touching his arm and admiring the basket. He paused, then turned slightly, nodded and smiled at the girl. For a moment, he looked familiar, but she couldn’t remember from where, so she let it go. Inside he groaned. Another minute and I’d be out of here, he thought, now this party girl, as usual, swoops in at the worst possible time. The curse on his fresh winnings was so strong it might as well be radioactive, and she was cute - tightly wrapped and loosely tied and looking for a good time, or a date. And he wanted to; he hadn’t been laid in a couple months. But she looked too good to accidentally end up in a hospital or the morgue, like the others.

“Hi, I’m Cindy. What’s your name, baby?” she said, full of promise and innuendo. “Uh, Henry,” he said as he paused, and took a small wad of cash from his pocket. It had a scrap of paper with ‘Saturday’ written on it, clipped to the outer bill. This cash was almost clean; if she spent it before tomorrow, well, the worst to happen would be something spilled on her dress or breaking a heel on her shoe. He pulled a Ben Franklin out and pressed it to her palm.

“Sorry Cindy. I really wouldn’t be any fun tonight, but this is for being nice. Maybe I’ll see you later.” He picked up his basket and headed for the cashiers window. Cindy’s sweet look of surprise at the money lasted until he’d turned around, then, with a hard smile, she ordered a fresh coke and turned back to the tables looking for fresh meat.

Henry walked outside to the early evening lights of downtown Las Vegas, down Fremont street to an old Ford Econoline van, white, with a blue driver-side door. In the van he opened the glove compartment, took out a pen, a paperclip and a small calendar and slips of paper on another clip. He took out the one with “Monday” written on it, clipped his \$25,000 to it, wrote the date and “6:37pm,” crossing out the last entry, wrapped a rubber band around the wad and put it in the glovebox.

That’ll be a good Monday, he thought. Maybe I’ll bump into Cindy if I’m still in town...

He drove east on Lake Mead Road out to Frenchman Mountain, what the locals called “Sunrise Mountain.” The sky above was a cloak of purple, the stars just visible behind the last shadows of sunset. He parked the van and walked up the trail toward the “Great Uncomformity,” the geological attraction on the mountain. He stopped at a bend in the trail, stared up at the expanse, wishing for

a meteor strike. The last time he tried celebrating with a hot, willing and eager female attracted by fresh winnings from “that damned money,” she was hit by a bus and he ended up in the Atlantic City jail, bringing him another round of bad press in New York.

At least it happened pre-Henry, he thought, before he learned. He had to wait ten days, then he could give this damn money away, he could burn it, do whatever he wanted. But fresh money was a magnet for bad luck, the stench of the curse was too strong.

After ten minutes Henry, seeing no one else on the trail, pulled out a joint and fired up as he continued staring at the turning sky.

He hadn’t worked in two years. Back then he was Lionel Perry, hot shot reporter for “Action 7 News” New York, who cut corners and bent rules to get face time. Then he cut one too many corners covering a gang killing in Alphabet City and endangered a witness, Manuel Trujillo. The family’s home was peppered in a drive by that killed their youngest child. After that, he became the latest example of disgraced TV journalism, and personata non grata in town.

His \$80,000 in severance pay from the TV station, normally kept confidential, was gleefully leaked to the tabloids (“Trujillo Blood Money,” the Daily News and Post both screamed). It made it easy to condemn him, then Fox came and turned him into a national disgrace. So much for starting over in another market. He tried donating the money to little Ahora Trujillo’s memorial fund, and got a scar behind his left ear and a family curse from the girl’s mother for it. But you can’t save blood money, you have to spend it.

He fled to Atlantic City, hiding in the Trump casino, trying not to feel anything as he set about feeding dollar slot machines and blowing hundreds at a time at blackjack and the roulette wheel, giving away his winnings, until he got down to the last \$500, his burden beginning to lift. He carelessly fed a dollar coin into a machine near the entrance, automatically pulled the lever and paused to count a handful of coins. Bells and sirens went off above him. He turned around, stunned, saw the machine was a “Derby Day Jackpot” with a half million dollar payout and more unwanted publicity. He tried to fade into the crowd, but the staff pulled him back for the publicity photo, then they recognized him. The Trump, well acquainted with people who’d rather not make the news with good fortune, simply cancelled the publicity, gave him his money and hustled his ass

out the back and told him never return. The other hotel casinos in town quickly got word - and his picture - and also barred him to avoid the tabloids that would demonize anybody seen helping this guy 'live it up.' Then the incident with the girl exploded. Maybe the money was cursed...

After that he deposited the "damned money" in a separate bank, sold off his things, his Chelsea condo at a vastly below market rate, packed the rest away and traded in his classic Mustang for a Ford Econoline van. He was left with \$320,000 of his own money in Manhattan Savings. Let the other cash rot, don't even touch it, he thought, I can make it. A week later, the bank's manager was indicted for money laundering and embezzling, and the feds impounded the bank, freezing all accounts. Still he refused to touch the cursed money. He had a few thousand on him, so he drifted down the eastern seaboard, doing odd jobs to make it stretch. Things were fine for a few months, so he took a chance in Maryland and stopped in at Pimlico, bet on a 20-1 shot for fun. And the horse won. He felt sick. All of his money was tainted. He slid into depression and anger at fate and the cursed pile of cash, spending the rest of that year driving to racetracks up and down the coast, making big bets on racks of horses and tearing up the winning tickets, trying to burn the damned jackpot away out of spite. He was down to \$2,000 when he carelessly bought \$10 in lottery tickets at a gas station in Maryland ten minutes before the drawing, and won \$17 million dollars. The store's security cameras had him clearly identified, which just brought more bad press. He knew then in his bones he was stuck with this curse. He took the lump sum and stopped pissing it away, which now came to over eight million.

He gave up. He made his peace with the curse, discovered its 'ten-day rule' through hard experience. He left the pile in the bank and only gambled when he needed to build up pocket cash, no contacting family or the few friends he had left. He drifted out to California, staying in Slab City long enough to become Henry Smith.

With his new ID, he fell into the vagabond nomad life of gas, grass and ass. Spring in Key West and Ft. Lauderdale, summer in New Orleans, went up to Memphis fleeing from Katrina, then back to Key West to ride out the mild winter and mark the new year 2006.

In the last month he'd passed through St Louis, KC to Denver, then rode southwest until he arrived outside Las Vegas two days ago. He was down to his

last \$200 of clean cash with a tainted thousand from an instant scratcher he bought in KC, and an ATM card from his west coast bank. He needed a room, a shower, and a cleaned out van. The long, healed scar behind his left ear itched from the prickly desert heat. He ran his fingernails down the raised line of flesh, lightly scratching.

At a gas station outside town he used his bank card to fill the tank, then picked up a hotel guide and booked a suite at the Matador Hotel downtown. The electronic currency from the card was safe, as long as no cash from it touched his hand. Still, he only used it sparingly out of a healthy sense of paranoia.

Henry watched the lights of the city to the west, pulled evenly on the joint, chewing on his promise to stay just long enough to build up a safe cash reserve, then leave Vegas for the coast, no visiting the Strip, and nothing stupid. Vegas was still safe as a rest stop - the last place anyone who bothered would look for him.

Chapter 6

Henry stood silently on the steep slope of the gravel trail that stretched up Frenchman Mountail, watching the stars as he toked on the joint. Now down to a roach, he let it go out and swallowed it, turned to head back and was startled to see a woman standing ten feet down the trail, wearing a denim shirt, shorts, and hiking boots. She was cute, with long black hair like flowing ink in the growing darkness. She waved and giggled as he approached.

“Hey,” she said, “I saw you smoking up there. Got any more weed? I got a pipe...” She reached into her fanny pack and took out a little glass bubbler.

“Uh, yeah, I have a little, in my van. Are you parked here, too?” “No,” she said, smiling at him. “I hitched. Going back into town?”

“Downtown, sure,” he said. “I’m Henry.”

“I’m Meredith, but friends call me Sunny,” she said, smiling as bright as the sun as they walked down the trail to his van. She was a few inches shorter than him, with an athletic build and nicely tanned legs. Henry smiled, thankful they didn’t meet at the casino. This could be interesting, he thought.

There were no other cars parked near the van, so once inside, he decided to stay there and smoke. Henry reached under his seat for a shoe box with assorted items in it, took out a baggie with a small amount of marijuana in it. “Here, you can have that.” “Wow, thanks,” she said. Sunny took off her fanny pack, got the pipe and packed the bowl. Henry passed her his lighter, admiring her breasts that filled out her shirt. They looked more than a handful, framed by her arms as she took a deep draw and held it in, her eyes wide open. She couldn’t hold it long and started coughing. She gave the pipe and lighter to Henry after her eyes focused. “Boy, this is good shit.” He merely nodded, drawing from the pipe.

They smoked another bowl before Sunny put her pipe and the weed away, then sprang across the seat and hugged him, pressing her delightful breasts in his face. “Thank you Henry. I love you already!” Henry was feeling the buzz from the weed as he absorbed the woman’s tangy scent. His hands found her waist, slid down to her soft ass, squeezing her cheeks as she leaned away from him, unbuttoning her shirt.

“Stop. Let’s get comfortable,” he said, pointing at his bed behind the seat. She giggled again, then climbed over the bench seat onto the bedding. She moved to the end of the bed and resumed removing her shirt, giving him a show as he joined her. He took off his shoes and t-shirt and leaned against the seatback, watched her swoop her jet black hair forward, covering her face and chest. Then her white cotton bra fell behind her curtain to the mattress. She sighed and straightened up, arms folded under her ripe, round breasts, nipples parting the dark curtain, the tresses flowing around the soft globes.

His erection almost painful from the two-month drought he was in, he crawled to her as she was undoing her belt buckle. “Let me,” he said, kneeling before her, kissing her lightly on the neck and under as he undid the button and unzipped the shorts, letting them slip to her knees. She moved to take them off but he stopped her. “Do you like foreplay?” he asked, seriously, she realized. She shivered, smiling as she remained on her knees.

He began slowly, brushing her lips with his, lightly kissing her as his hands floated above her skin, barely touching her as they glided down her back, lightly grazing her panty-covered ass, back up her torso, barely brushing the sides of her round breasts. Sunny felt the almost-caress intently, wrapped her arms around his neck and purred as their kiss grew hot and demanding. His hands settled on her supple flesh as she reached down to undo his pants, pushed them and his briefs to his knees. He slid her panties down and they pressed hard against each other, writhed and moaned as their tongues duelled. They separated and, staring into each others eyes, removed their remaining clothes. They came back to the center of the bedding and resumed.

Henry reached between her thighs, slid two fingers lightly back and forth over her fur-covered outer lips as their mouths found each other again. She grasped his hard penis, squeezed and stroked him as her breathing increased. He brought the moist fingers up to her left breast, painting the wetness over Sunny’s hard nipple as he pinched it, feeling her shudder. She positioned him between her moist thighs and held him tight, sliding her humid pussy back and forth over his cock. They clutched each other tightly, falling to the bedding. They stayed that way for long minutes, locked in fevered grinding passion, Henry’s senses reeling from the strong impression this woman was having on him. She felt like a lost love rediscovered, rather than some crazy stoner chick who just wanted to party. It felt like heaven just to hold her, feel her squeezing him back, soak in the scent of her hair, her taste, her heady perfume filling the inside of the van.

Suddenly, they both stopped, pulled back a few inches. Henry and Sunny both stared deep into each other - to the bottom of her soul; to the depths of his. And still he felt it - the electricity just from being near her.

She sighed, laying back on the mattress, legs spread, eyes closed, circling her clit with her finger. Henry moved to her, kissing her inner thighs, capturing her finger in his mouth, then copied her movements with his tongue, his warm breath further igniting her senses. Her clit stood at attention as he circled it, a half-inch nipple surrounded by the soft black hairs. He clamped his mouth hard onto her, dueling with the appendage as he sunk two fingers into her. Her sighs became cries, she started fucking back onto his hand. He broke the suction on her clit with a pop, took his other hand and started squeezing and rolling it, adding a third finger plunging into her. Sunny grabbed his arms, pounding herself onto his hand until she gasped and froze, every muscle straining as she came. She bit down on a scream as the orgasm rippled through her.

Once she let go of him, he slid his fingers from her soaked pussy, flicked her clit and straightened up, lubricating his dick with her juices. She smiled and sprang on him, pushing Henry to his back as she captured his scented erection in her mouth, swinging herself around until her furry pussy was above him, the neatly trimmed black down framing her swollen inner lips, up to the stiff clit. Henry breathed in her essence as he ministered to her desire and she painted his balls and the length of his cock with her tongue, up and around the head as he drove her over the edge.

He sucked her swollen lips hard, making her shiver. She whimpered as she attacked the polished head of his cock, kissing and licking it. He slid up to her puckered anus, licked gently around it as Sunny groaned around his cock, plunged her mouth down, swallowed as much of it as she could. His hips trembled, hers shook as his tongue probed her and licked the puckered rim. She began cumming, he shifted down to her soaked folds, taking the clit back into his mouth as he felt himself about to come. He stiffened, signaling to Sunny he was about to come. She reared up and grabbed his dick, started licking the head as Henry brought her to another orgasm. He groaned and she captured the head. His cock exploded, shooting four strong spurts into her mouth as he drank down her juices.

They went again, Henry feeling more alive than he had a right to for years. He had given up the idea of any woman being interested in him, just him. He was

content with the occasional dopers, hippie chicks, pickups, then this woman comes along.

They ended up just making out, as if intercourse would be too intense. They were both drained, giddy. “So this is foreplay?” she asked. “Damn,” he said, chuckling. “What was that?” “I know,” she said. “I’ve never felt anything like that before.” They stayed that way for another few minutes, buzzed from each other more than the dope.

“Where are you staying? I want to see you again,” he said. “I’m in town for the Athletic Trainers convention until Monday. I’m staying at Circus Circus on the Strip. Do you live here?”

“No, I’m on my way to the coast,” he said. “Please tell me you live out here?”

“Santa Cruz, south of San Francisco,” she said, smiling.

They giggled like kids as they got dressed, pausing to touch and caress the other, then they piled back into the front seat.

They drove west into downtown Vegas, then south to Circus Circus on the Strip. He walked her all the way to her room, touching her in the lobby, making out in the elevator. They parted with him promising to call when he got back to his room.

Back in the van, Henry was still tingling from the connection he had with Meredith. She had hurriedly scribbled down her Santa Cruz address and phone number on a notepad and left it for him on the dashboard. This woman was amazing. And they didn’t meet because of the money; she wasn’t touched at all by this stupid curse.

He was smiling all the way back to his room at the Ogden. He replayed the melody of her laughter as he entered, walking straight through the darkened suite to the bathroom. He came out a few minutes later, walking into the now lighted room. That broke into his euphoria; the man sitting on the sofa stopped it cold.

He was a big man, wearing a hotel staff jacket. A briefcase sat next to him. Henry was frozen, the experience of Meredith pushed aside by the curse. But it couldn’t, he thought. He wracked his brain, wondering what he could have done this time to screw things up. The man, seeing the distress on his face, stood up

and smiled.

“Henry Smith? Mr. Smith?”

Henry tensed himself; that’s how it comes. That sinking feeling as you crest the top of the roller coaster and plunge down into whatever ride awaited him this time. “Yes...”

“Mr. Smith. I’m not with the hotel. My name is...Adam. I’m just a messenger.” He reached his huge paw into his shirt pocket, took out and presented a small card to Henry:

“Mercury Executive Couriers. Speed and Discretion.”

Henry glanced at the briefcase on the sofa. It was a computer bag. Adam unzipped an outer pocket, took out an envelope and a pda phone. “My client, Mr. Xavier Slattery, wished to contact you privately on a matter of urgency.”

Henry didn’t relax on hearing his old friend’s name. This is about Xavier’s damn cable show?! I told him the last time I wasn’t a reporter anymore, especially not a tabloid TV hack like Roger Lowell, he thought. He had enough bad mojo already, the last thing he wanted was to wade any deeper into that spooky world. And Xavier’s family was neck-deep in it. Hell, they started that damn “supernatural CIA” agency.

He took the envelope from Adam. It had “Read me first” written on it. He removed the letter and opened it up, watching as Adam dialed a number on the phone. It was Xavier’s handwriting, today’s date:

April 17, 2006

Hello Lionel,

Terribly sorry to have to intrude upon your self-imposed exile, but I require your immediate, yet minor, assistance on a most important matter, and I must, regrettably, insist upon your cooperation.

This is a simple fact-checking mission in Mississippi. No reporting or public exposure will be required. After, you can return to Las Vegas and continue to be ‘Henry’ (and I can certainly aid in making your fellow more legitimate, if you

wish), or you could join me on holiday and we could have a proper chat about things.

The computer and mobile device are for your use during this minor task. The mobile is encrypted for privacy; the computer, however, has a GPS chip that must be disabled with the “grenade” - a pen drive with a little programme that blocks the signal to the Campus satellite. The other half of the device, a base unit, tells the satellite that the computer is off, and still in Los Angeles. Never operate the computer longer than three minutes without the grenade in the rear USB slot, or things will become rather sticky for all of us. I’ll be in no position then to protect you.

I regret that it has come to this, but you wouldn’t return my calls and you owe me, Lionel, whether or not you appreciate this opportunity. The courier should have dialed my number by now. Take the phone.

Xavier.

His brow furrowed. I’m being drafted, Henry thought. He looked up at Adam, who held out the phone. “It’s Mr. Slattery,” he said. Henry reluctantly took it, saw Adam turn and head toward the bathroom as he put in earplugs. Here we go, Henry thought as he put the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

There was a low background rumble coming from the phone. “Helloo Henry. Having fun in Las Vegas?”

“Hell, you tell me. You been friggin spying on me.” Henry said. “Where are you?”

“I’m enroute to one of the smaller of the Hawaiian Islands. I’m on holiday, which is why I desperately need you to do this small task for me.”

“What is this about, then? You’ve got a whole supernatural spy operation behind you; why do you need me?” Henry asked, feeling even more boxed in, now.

“Well ‘what’ this involves is a mere bit of fact-checking on a potential casefile. Simple ‘Who, What, Where,’ dear boy. All of the details are contained in the ‘Wainwright’ file in the computer. Now, as to ‘why,’ obviously because you’re not with the organization. The locations of all active Campus personnel are monitored. In this case I need an outside man who can discreetly confirm this

information and relay it to me, that's all."

"Like hell, that's all!" Henry whined. "Look, you know how I feel about your show..."

"Mr. Smith! Perhaps we haven't impressed upon you the importance of this task." The flowing, but firm woman's voice took both Henry and Xavier by surprise. "I'm Sylvia Cavendish, the director of Basic Research. I run the Campus. This matter has the potential to disrupt our entire organization, but despite my great reluctance, Mr. Slattery has convinced me that you are the only person who can, and will, perform this minor task in the time required. I am prepared to assist you in any way we can to help rehabilitate your life, such as it is, but if you refuse this opportunity, I am equally prepared to make your next two years a worse hell than the last two. You think you've been cursed? You have no idea."

"Sylvia, please," Xavier said. "Henry, look - you are not investigating. Just confirm the data in the computer file, and for God's sake don't mention the Campus or my programme to anyone there. Just do this, and I'm sure Sylvia will help you in the proper way to remove the curse you are currently under, and thank you very much you stupid git for not coming to me first for help."

"All right, all right," Henry said, resigned. "So, what's next?"

"That's the spirit, Henry," Xavier said. "I took the liberty of purchasing tickets on flights from Las Vegas to Houston, then to Baton Rouge, La. in your name. It leaves from McCarran Int'l Airport in less than three hours, your time. I downloaded the travel details into your mobile, you can consult them later. Inside the case you will also find \$5000 in operations funds that I assure you are curse-free. And where is the courier?"

"He's in the bathroom, wearing earplugs," Henry said.

"Very good. Please retrieve him from the loo and give him the phone."

Henry knocked on the bathroom door, then opened it, saw Adam examining his teeth. He motioned him out and held out the phone to him as the big man removed the earplugs. Adam took the phone, answered "yes sir," "of course," and "thank you ma'am. It's my pleasure to assist the Campus in any way." "And good luck to you, sir," Adam said, as he gave Henry the phone, then moved to

the door and checked the peep hole, opened it swiftly and surveyed the hallway before he left, silently.

“Henry? Still there?” the phone buzzed. Henry put it back to his ear. “Yes?”

“The courier will be in his car, waiting near your vehicle. Don’t check out of the hotel. I need you to write a note for the front desk, that you are going hiking in the mountains for a few days and to just add it to your bill. Then you are to follow Adam to his company’s facility at the airport, where your vehicle will be secure until your return. Adam will then assist in expediting your boarding. You’re in first class, which should give you a bit more privacy as you view the file. By the way, the ‘grenade’ is already plugged into the computer. If I were you, I wouldn’t even touch it.”

“Once at Baton Rouge Metropolitan, there will be a Bayou rental car waiting for you, also in your name. By the time you land, you’ll have in your mobile a marked route to follow to the town, Liberty Plaines, Ms. That’s all for now, Henry. Remember, you’re going hiking and coming back. I’ll talk to you again once you’re in Louisiana.”

He didn’t even ask for a reply, already he’s treating me like one of his agents, he thought. Henry slumped over to the sofa next to the computer bag. he found a notepad and pen in the outer pocket and wrote out a quick hiking note for the hotel, then he stared at the paper, drifted back to the almost-mythic meeting and foreplay session with Meredith. He forgot to call! He called her room at Circus Circus, but no answer. He checked his watch - only twenty minutes had passed since he dropped her off. He called her front desk and left a message, then packed up his flight bag and left, feeling that roller-coaster unease rake through him.

Ten minutes later, Henry was following Adam’s unmarked sedan south on Paradise Rd., taking the other way to McCarran Int’l Airport, avoiding the Strip completely. They drove to Mercury Executive Courier’s hangar away from the terminal, where they parked his van inside, then Adam escorted Henry through baggage and around the security stop to the gate for his flight. Adam wished Henry luck and departed, slowly faded into the crowd. He got his boarding pass and found a seat in the waiting area near a window, looking out at the stretch of desert to the west.

He took out the mobile and dialed Meredith's room again at Circus Circus. Still no answer. She didn't answer ten minutes later, or after an early breakfast of fast food eggs and sausage at 2 am, or an hour later as he boarded the plane for Houston.

Chapter 7

After takeoff, Henry closed the shutter on his window seat in first class and checked his boarding passes. In Houston he had a short commuter flight to Baton Rouge, where the rental car was waiting. He tried one last time to call Meredith's room, still no answer. She felt even more like a fading memory as he stared at the number scrawled on the paper.

He took out the computer to get his head back into assignment mode. Assignment mode, he groaned. He had accepted that his career ended over two years ago. He never expected or wanted to chase down leads again, he sure the hell didn't want to end his career in desperation and delusion, but he did owe Xavier for helping him out back in the 90's.

Ok, he thought, I'm only going to this town to confirm the facts in Xavier's damn casefile... He ran his fingers around the back and sides of the laptop, brushed against the USB ports on the right side near the rear. He flinched, then took a better look at it. The "grenade" was a short memory stick that barely protruded from the slot. On the casing there was a little sticker with a grenade and the number "2" printed on it. He gingerly pushed against it, making sure it was firmly seated, then set the computer on the seat tray and turned it on, shaking off a sudden flush of anxiety that crept over him, made his scar itch. He fought the needling urge to quickly reach up and scratch; he didn't want to draw any attention to it, not in first class.

The desktop displayed a picture of Stonehenge and icons for three file folders: "Mobile User's Guide," "The Wainwright File," and "A Brief Primer on the Campus." He skimmed through the instructions for the mobile, then opened the Wainwright folder, saw the documents "Augustus Wainwright letter," "Rufus Patterson letter" and "Note from Xavier."

He opened the Wainwright letter first:

October 30, 2005

To Rufus Patterson, Attorney, Biloxi, Ms.

This is my testament, given two weeks before my possible death on my 20th

birthday.

I am a firstborn Wainwright son. Like the firstborn sons of the LeChette family, we are cursed to be visited by the ghost twins, in particular, Jacob, a Wainwright field nigger who was killed by Justin Wainwright and Lucien LeChette in 1832, before the war of Northern Aggression. No one knows where they buried him. He's usually accompanied by Polly, who appears as a little girl, though she was a old woman who died before Jacob was born on the plantation. There is a third plantation house, built on the old Maison Road that connected them, belonging to the Wexley family. According to the stories, Sara Wexley, the mistress of the house, disappeared the night Jacob was killed, but the boys claimed they never saw her, they were busy playing with the nigger.

Justin got married that year, and had five children, but his first child was a girl, the second was a son, Beauregard T Wainwright, born in 1834. In 1861 Beauregard married a girl and left her with a baby boy, Beau II, when he joined the Confederate Army. He survived the great conflict, coming home a decorated major. Justin was a local Homefront commander during the war. On May 1st, 1863 he fell at the Battle of Port Gibson.

After Reconstruction, the families regained their rightful position in the county, and in 1881, Beau II was about to turn 20. Two weeks before his birthday, Jacob visited Beau's mama in a dream, told her he would be tested on account of his granddaddy Justin 'not fixing things when he was alive.' "Three hours after his birthday passes, I will come to him wherever he is, and he will be tested. Best he be alone - anybody else there will share in his trial."

Nobody took it too serious, but the morning after his birthday, Jacob visited Beau the second and tested him, and the fourteen people still at the birthday party. They were all found the next morning, dead, their faces frozen in horror, their bodies showing cuts, bruises and lash marks under undamaged clothing.

Since then, between the two families there have been 16 firstborn sons tested by Jacob, and/or tormented by Polly. Only three ever survived the tests, and they come away crippled and crazy. The last Wainwright to be tested was uncle Jeffrey in 1967. Oscar LeChette died in 1983.

I learned most of this from my Auntie Aggie, Agnes Wainwright. She has a box full of old papers and police files in her upstairs vault. She showed them to me

yesterday, then locked them away and said she hoped I would make it.

I never got a clear answer as to why this particular nigger keeps coming back to haunt us. Auntie just said “the meadow house,” and nothing else, but I’ve looked at maps of the old plantation, and there ain’t no meadow house or anything else larger than a chicken coop that ain’t marked down.

Anyway, Rufus, I hired you because I don’t want this dirty little family secret to kill me in private. I want you to come to town, and bring a police scanner so you can follow what happens. If I don’t survive and they cover this up again, I want you to send this letter to that goddamn supernatural show “The File Room.” I want this out in the open, so maybe it can stop.

Augustus Wainwright.

Henry opened up the lawyer’s letter next, wondering what “the meadow house” would be.

December 15, 2005

From the office of Rufus Patterson, Biloxi, Ms.

To: Roger X. Lowell, “The File Room”

Subject: Confirmation of Written Testimony of Augustus Wainwright

I was hired by the above-mentioned Mr. Wainwright for the specific purpose of documenting details surrounding his death the morning following his 20th birthday, November 12th of this year. The Wainwright family has stopped watching me, so I feel safe in sending this package now.

In accordance with my client’s wishes, I rented a room at the Liberty Inn, a motel located on the county highway west of town. I brought with me a police scanner radio and a voice-activated tape recorder to have a record of events.

At 10:13pm, the night of his birthday, I recorded Agnes Wainwright directing the Liberty Plains sherrif’s department to the family’s westside home where Augustus was carrying on a loud party. There was some commentary by one of the deputies about “the ghost twins,” but the sherrif told him “and everybody else to shut up about that tonight,” and no further relevant radio traffic occured

until 5:37am, when the sheriff told a deputy that “a disturbance was reported” at Augustus Wainwright’s address. The deputy found his body in the downstairs parlor. He also found a young lady alive, but out of her mind.

A few minutes later, another deputy reported a woman’s body found at Wainwright Park, in a rental car with Louisiana plates. The deputy mentioned that the woman had a bullet hole in her forehead. The first deputy said that his crazy woman had a bruise on her forehead that looked like a bullet hole.

In the local cafe the following day, the deceased (one Amanda Harris from Los Angeles), was said to be found near the Quarters, the housing project on the other side of town from Wainwright Park, the apparent victim of a failed carjacking.

The newspaper account of Mr. Wainwright’s death mentioned his suffering a “heart attack,” with no mention of what caused the heart attack, or any of the family history.

The girl, one Rebecca Sandiford, was taken to the Wainwright clinic, a wing of the County Hospital, to tend her physical and mental wounds. She wasn’t mentioned in any news accounts.

I have the police scanner recordings safe. When you begin your investigation, your agent should meet me at the Liberty Inn where I will release a copy to you. Your agent should avoid any contact with local law enforcement or members of the Wainwright or LeChette families. Instead, go to Dottie’s Cafe in town and talk to Ms. May Ella Jemson, the owner. Mention my name and she will confirm all the information related within our respective letters.

Mr. Wainwright wished this family secret to be exposed in the hope that your organization can put an end to it. I will assist in any other prudent way I can to settle this matter.

Rufus Patterson

Henry snorted. He’d have to steer clear of the local cops and the people who still run the town. Well, nothing I haven’t been doing lately, he thought. He considered what cover he’d need for this little mission as he opened up Xavier’s note. It was just a bullet list - day one, meet Rufus Patterson, get the tape, take shots of Wainwright Park; day two, meet May Ella Jemson, ascertain/confirm

any and all historical information; day three, get the hell out. “Casual undercover duty, dear boy. Childsplay.” Childsplay my ass...

Henry moved on to the desktop folder named “A Brief Primer on The Campus,” saw a PDF document with the same name:

The Campus is a global network of operations centers, training and detention facilities, and specialty-based research and technical labs, along with the internal security and investigative branch, the Inspectors.

The organization was founded by financier Alexis T. Slattery, who lost his young wife in giving birth to Benjamin Slattery in 1827. After attempts to contact his beloved, he swore to discover hard proof of the afterlife, which spread to include a search for the truth behind all of myth and superstition. In 1832 he formed a “research group” of trusted associates and friends with similar interests to investigate and document the supernatural. Upon his death in 1841, Slattery willed \$100,000 pounds of his personal fortune to the informal yet secretive society and investigative agency, now known as “The Campus.” In 1850 Benjamin Slattery, after graduating from Oxford, joined the agency as a research assistant, becoming Director in 1878. In the intervening century and a quarter, the various research and technical “Laboratories” within the Campus have documented, to the declassified satisfaction of the Royal Academy of Sciences, 19,238 authentic manifestations of the supernatural. The nature of the phenomena being collected and catalogued required its being withheld from a public unable at the time to handle such knowledge. That all changed with the “Amherst Incident.”

Basic Research controls and coordinates the activities of the different labs, runs the training facility for research and field agents and detention facilities around the globe. The data centre is where the world’s daily communications, entertainment and media stream is sifted for mission-specific keywords, articles, TV news items, etc, for further investigation. The location of Basic’s operations center is classified.

The research labs investigate, catalogue, and contain (when necessary) a variety of manifestations of the supernatural and the supernormal. The number and types of research labs change occasionally. The current breakdown is:

BEMs: (Bug Eyed Monsters) 1

Spectral: (Ghosts) 7

Hybrid: (Mutants) 3

Esper: (Humans with psychic ability) 6

Scarab: (Egyptology and Mummies) 2

Mage: (Sorcery and Witchcraft) 6

Lamia: (Vampires) 4

Wolfen: (Werewolves) 5

Necros: (Zombies) 2

And the newest lab on the Campus:

Media 1 (“The File Room”)

Tech labs develop scientific equipment for investigation and detection, stealth, and defense. Tech Central coordinates the different tech labs and manages patents on hardware and methods.

Owl: (Investigative and Diagnostic Equipment) 3

Tiger: (Surveillance and Stealth) 5

Coyote: (Magic Offense and Defense) 7

Lion: (Advanced Weapons and Tactics) 8

The Inspectors, the internal security and investigative branch, has regional offices around the globe. In the US: Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, Denver and San Francisco. Their insignia is a falcon.

There was a short history of the different research labs and why the Vampire labs had such a weird name, but Henry had read enough. He turned off the computer and dozed, dreaming of Meredith.

Henry landed in Houston at 3:30am, Texas time. He had a 90 min. wait to catch

the 5am early bird commuter flight to Baton Rouge. He passed the time by checking city sites in Baton Rouge online. Once he landed, this little mission would be on his ass; he needed his own plan...

After the smaller plane landed at Baton Rouge Metropolitan, Xavier's driving directions to Liberty Plains arrived in the mobile. Henry couldn't make out the details on the small screen, so he put the device back in the computer bag and searched for the car rental desk.

He was told he had a choice of vehicles, so he picked a cargo van. He put his three bags in the front seat, fed the directions into the dashboard GPS, then left the airport, driving south, then east to a downtown bike store off Florida Blvd. He bought a Trek bike that didn't look brand new, got a helmet, lock, and lights, then drove to a resale store and bought a sleeping bag, biker clothes and a few items to add to his 'trick bag' of old undercover disguises. His final stop was an electronics store for a portable police scanner, earphones and a car charger. He felt much better as he stowed the new gear in the van, particularly the scanner. His old one was back in Vegas, and it would be vital gear out here.

It was almost noon. He got back in the van, felt his stomach mildly complain as a yawn escaped him. He needed to sleep, but he needed food more. He stopped at a fast food place on the way to Gus Young Park. Henry parked in a quiet spot and ate inside with the windows cracked open to the muggy overcast day, crawled in the back and set his travel alarm for 6pm.

Roger X. Lowell breezed in through the rear entrance of Campus Media Studios, the West Hollywood home of "The File Room," still elated from his Friday night and Saturday morning spent with Mareva, the charming young lass from Spectral3. He said goodbye to her over breakfast at LAX, sent her off to Prague with a promise to email her. She was a valuable contact as a field agent, his personal contact, bypassing Xavier; the lad was much too tightly wound about all that Campus intrigue. The show was a great success, the grumpy old bastards on the committee should be grateful for the good press they receive, thought Roger.

He came in to get a Campus laptop with the new declassified upgrade, to study the new features at home. Roger really wanted more information about

Spectral3, and Mareva's case history with the lab.

He walked across the darkened set toward his office, to the caged shelves of special Campus-supplied equipment inside, daydreaming about the girl's brunette locks, and the delightful mole at the base of her spine. The computers were stacked neatly on the shelf, all...six?

Roger counted five Campus laptop bags. Puzzled, he looked around and picked up the clipboard with the sign-out sheet: no computer was checked out, a direct violation of policy. Roger cursed - he was on his way home to West LA, now he'd have to check the security video. He'd be here a while.

He found the last person at the cage, 5:03pm, Friday afternoon. It was Jean, an intern, taking out number six and a pda phone. She was in a hurry, probably getting back to the party at Monroe's. She had Xavier's keys as she closed the cage and was gone in under a minute. She didn't turn the computer on and set up the base, he thought, so why take unsecured equipment...unless she's a cover...

He went on, slowly scanning the footage after Jean left, saw a jump in the time signature from 5:27 to 5:34pm. It was a rough cut, but enough to fool a cursory check.

Roger brought a chair near the cage, climbed up to check the top for the item they weren't supposed to have - the 'Grenade' GPS masker, obtained by Xavier from a friend in Tiger3, one of the "Surveillance and Stealth" tech labs. Unauthorized and strictly prohibited equipment, if the agency knew about it. The base unit was hidden inside a old box underneath a small stack of magazines. The unit was on, green indicator light blinking.

Xavier, Roger thought.

He turned on his office computer and pulled up the base unit tracker. On the program's map, he saw the faded main icon for laptop no. 6 in Los Angeles, while the yellow and black button indicating the masked unit was located in Baton Rouge, La.

Roger fumed. The Wainwright file, the case he wanted to investigate himself, as a field agent, from start to finish. The case Xavier said they'd talk about next season, and he picks our two week vacation to sneak around behind me...

He called up his cameraman Harry Sims in Encino, found him on the couch watching cable. He had to promise Harry \$1000 a day to get him to come down to the studio and prep the equipment for an impromptu on-location webcast.

Roger felt recharged as he hung up the phone. He was going to take this investigation back and make a little news of his own.

He booked Sunday morning flights to Baton Rouge for himself and Harry, checked the map again and saw the yellow and black button slowly moving. Roger zoomed in; it traveled east along Hwy. 12. Headed to Liberty Plains, no doubt.

Henry Smith had a Thermos full of coffee and a dozen donuts sitting on the passenger seat of the van. The GPS screen on the dashboard showed a green dotted line going east on 12 around the north shore of lake Ponchatrain and down to the 10/59 cutoff, taking 59 up and out of the state.

The coffee started kicking in 20 miles up 59, as the green line on the screen veered west onto a county road. Henry took it, noticing the sun below the horizon behind him.

It was close to 9 when he reached the end of the dotted line, the intersection with state Hwy 49 where the Liberty Motel lay in wait. He took no. 19, a room in the back, drove around to the rear parking lot, satisfied the van was shielded well enough from the hwy. He left the bike in the van and brought his things in, casually checking the windows of the other rooms during the two trips. None moved, far as he could tell.

Inside, Henry set the bags on the bed, the Thermos and the donut box on the dresser, took out the mobile and turned on one of its Campus features, performing a sweep of the room for bugs. He found it clean.

He finished a partially eaten donut as he dialed Xavier's number displayed on the screen, found him enjoying a beautiful Hawaiian afternoon, about to board a helicopter for his own cabin on a private beach. He kept it short, told Xavier to call Rufus Patterson at the motel and tell him to come to room 19. He felt drained, the long day catching up with him, the caffeine and sugar wearing off, but he only needed to be up a little longer tonight. He turned off the overhead

room light, turned on the little table lamp on the dresser, sat in the rustic chair and waited, fighting off a yawn between remaining sips. After six minutes there was a light knocking at the door. He peeked through the window, saw a young man in a t-shirt and sweats, carrying a backpack. He opened the door and the young man hurried in. He looked too young to be a lawyer, average height, with a mop of blond hair.

“Patterson?” Henry asked. Rufus nodded his head, then took a brief double take as a shadow of recognition crossed his face. It passed, then he took off the backpack and opened the small front pocket, took out a CD in a case and placed it on the dresser. “Mr. Smith? Xavier said to be brief, so-” as he reached back into the bag, “the raw audio, plus a second edited summary is on the CD.” Patterson placed a brochure beside the disc. “Wainwright Park is only a couple miles from here, on Old Maison Road. Polly goes there to play sometimes, but only after sunset. If you’re alone and she likes you, she might show herself. If she’s a little girl, you’re ok. If she’s a teenager, don’t stop and say ‘hi,’ leave the park and don’t enter after dark.

The county road takes you east into town, through to the town square,” he said, putting his backpack on again. “Ms. Jemson at Dottie’s will be expecting you on Monday. Wait until after 1 o’clock.”

He went to the door, checking the view outside first. “One last thing. I think the families found out about Augustus’ letter, and along with the death of the Harris woman, they know somebody from your TV show is coming, but they expect a news crew. At any rate, the thing about three days is true. Lots of people come through Liberty Plaines, but anybody from outside hanging around three days in a row gets noticed. This concludes our business, Mr. Smith. I wish you luck.” He left quickly and quietly, jogging quickly across the parking lot and out of view. Henry closed and locked the door, feeling more sleepy than ever now. He put the CD and the brochure in the computer bag, undressed and crawled into bed.

Chapter 8

Henry woke up at 11:30, groggy from the stale humid air in the room. Stomach rumbling, he stumbled over to turn on the air conditioner and peeked out the window, saw the rear parking lot, and the county road into town on the left, the blacktop rolling away through the Gulf Plains countryside. He shuffled to the bathroom for his morning toilet, then finished off the last two donuts as he checked his 'trick bag,' deciding on the floppy hat, shades, and a fisherman's vest for the drive up Hwy 49 to the next truck stop.

It was 10 miles up the road. A gas station, liquor store, burger stand and a cafe that served breakfast anytime. Perfect. He drove into the lot near the cafe, parked and went to the liquor store first for rum and cola. It had been months since his last drink, but he left most of his weed behind in Vegas, and he wanted something to take the edge off this strange place. He felt it on the ride here - a pervasive Old South creepiness that hung in the air. Just being here was cause enough for alcohol.

After stashing the bottles in the van, he entered the cafe, found a seat at the counter and ordered the breakfast platter, took out the brochure for the park and looked it over again.

Wainwright Park was dedicated in 1977 on the grounds of the original Wainwright House, one of three grand mansions constructed along Old Maison Road. The plantation house and slave quarters were burned to the ground during the race riots of 1905, which also witnessed the destruction of the original town, Wainwright, MS. The largely black town of Liberty Plains was built in 1907, east of Old Maison Road. Today, Wainwright itself is a small unincorporated community of white-owned homes and businesses 10 miles north of the park. A slave museum and local history center is located in the park. It's claimed that if you visit at night, alone, you can sense the souls of the plantation slaves.

Henry was rounding third base on his breakfast platter when a sheriff's deputy entered, a short, muscular black man who casually surveyed the people in the cafe as he greeted Fran who worked the counter. She said "the usual, Danny?" and he says "Not today darling, just lunch," and laughed loud enough for Gilbert to hear in the kitchen. Fran rolled her eyes at the worn-out joke. Danny walked on, through to the restrooms, coming Henry's way. He fought against a nervous

shudder, but he didn't get a second look from the deputy. He saw a big "Wainwright County" shoulder decal from the corner of his eye once the deputy went past.

He was sweating under that hat, but he had to admit, the old undercover buzz, the rush of fear, the hunger for the story twitched in his gut, an old, familiar itch he hadn't scratched in a long while. Dammit, the eggs and sausage tasted a little better now. He smelled the coffee and orange juice of the diners beside him, the aromas richer. He could almost taste the rum.

The knot in his full stomach faded. He continued eating at a good pace, finishing off the plate as he watched the news on the cafe's TV. The deputy was coming back any minute for a sit-down lunch; time to go. He tucked the Wainwright Park brochure in a vest pocket and left a \$5 tip. He calmly left the cafe and was about to reach the van when he saw the deputy hurrying through the cafe and exiting. Henry turned his back a bit, but Danny cut in the opposite direction, running to his cruiser parked a few yards away in front of the burger stand. Henry got in the van, resisting the urge to look over, though the screech of tires and the fading wail of a siren was tempting, magnetic in its pull, but he reached under his seat for the police scanner, plugged in the charger and put in his earphone. He clicked it on and went to the frequency Patterson wrote down.

"...be there in ten minutes to assist!"

"Naw, Danny, just go to the east house and sit there. And turn that damn siren off. Jesse, you stay till they finish checking the rest of the hospital. She's still inside."

"OK chief." "Yessir, chief."

Getting back on 49, Henry recalled Patterson's letter made mention of the girl, Rebecca Sandiford, being secretly treated, or held, at the Wainwright Clinic. If this was a real story assignment, the clinic would be among his first stops, to try to visit the only survivor of the latest incident. No way in this situation was he going to see the house or the girl...

Returning to the now crisp and comfortable motel room, he got a bucket of ice, changed into the biker outfit and double checked the mobile's instructions for taking photos. He slipped it into the rear pocket of the bike jersey, then looked over the park brochure again as he poured a nice big rum and coke for himself.

He retrieved the bike from the van, and noting the prickly sun and stifling heat, decided to wait a few hours to let the worst of the day pass. It was a little after 1pm. Henry rolled the bike into the room and turned on the laptop, bringing it and his rum and coke over to the rustic chair beside the bed. Just for curiosity, he searched online for data on the Wainwright clinic, finding only that it was a wing of the county hospital north of Liberty Plaines.

Henry searched on for any detailed accounts of plantation life, putting aside his personal distaste for delving into the slave experience, the long chronicle of misery he could do nothing about. He located slave narratives describing the habits and clothing of adults and children, the typical diet a slave was fed, *etc.* He found quite a few plantation history websites, and even a few that delved into ghost legends, but they all seemed to be from the perspective of the masters instead of the slaves, and none about this particular haunting. He started drifting, so he turned off the computer, reset the travel clock for 4:30 and finished his drink, stretched across the bed for a nap.

At 6:30 pm Henry woke up. He was enjoying a very pleasant dream starring Sunny, when suddenly she stopped moaning and said “Henry, wake up, it’s time to wake up!” and she smiled, glowed bright as the sun and he sat up, wide awake. He saw the time and grimaced; he slept through the alarm. He staggered to the head, splashed his face, stretched, checked the mobile and decided to bring the police scanner too. Henry put it in a side pocket and the earbud in his left ear, took the bike, now cool to the touch, and left the room, riding across the rear lot to the county road, heading east. It wasn’t as hot, Henry could smell the air starting to cool as a sudden breeze whispered through the branches of red maple and sweetgum trees on either side of the road. The sun was still above the horizon line of trees, but not for much longer.

A mile or so east of the 49, Henry came to Old Maison Road, turned left and pedaled past the sign “Wainwright Park, 2 mi.” as he rode up the broad throughfare. It seemed out of place today among the fields, though Henry could imagine parades and processions along the road, passing before the grand houses.

He didn’t hear any police traffic during the ride up, so he relaxed as he dismounted, turned off the scanner and tucked away the earbud as he walked the last 100 feet to the park. It was two to three acres of manicured lawn on either side of the road. A one room schoolhouse, the slave museum, on the left, the

gazebo on the right, and a few feet away from it, a swing set. There were a dozen or so people at the park: a family picnic, two girls on the swings, and a group of college-age students emerging from the schoolhouse, walking across to the gazebo.

He parked and locked the bike on the rack in front of the museum, then went through a few stretches as he took out the mobile and the earphones, plugging them into a non-audio jack as he turned on the photo function. He bobbed his head as if listening to a beat, watching the screen and taking shots of the schoolhouse. Henry pivoted around and took a few blind shots in the direction of the students, and the little girl still on the swings, then he put the mobile and earphones back in his jersey pocket and entered the museum.

It was small, probably 100 sq. ft., with display cases along the sides, portraits, documents and faded pictures were framed and hung above. On the opposite wall was a “wall of fame” of photos and portraits of famous African Americans in history, framed by a US flag at one corner, and the Black Liberation flag in the other.

He checked as discreetly as he could, looking for the security camera he was sure would be in here. No obvious camera in the corners, and not many other places to hide one in the room.

Taking no chances, Henry repeated the earphones bit with the mobile and took a few quick photos of each wall inside before any body else came in, then put it away and left. He unlocked and walked the bike across the broad road to the gazebo, watching the students pile into a minivan and drive off, north to Wainwright. The family were at their car, putting the last of the picnic items inside. He smiled at the little girl still on the swing, not wanting to go. The sun was almost below the treeline.

He took out the mobile for more pictures of the gazebo as he entered, admiring the unique paint job in the softly shaded light - a red, black and green motif instead of the usual white. He took out the brochure, looked at the painting of Wainwright House on the front, tried to imagine how large it would be.

Henry heard the picnic family drive off, going south, turning east on the county road toward Liberty Plains. With no one else in the park, he left off the earphones as he took more shots from inside the gazebo as the shadows grew

longer.

Henry heard giggling behind him, turned around to see one of the little black girls still on the center swing. Puzzled, he took a closer look. She was barefoot, her hair in pigtails, a big smile as she kicked her legs forward to swing harder. Henry checked the viewscreen and was confused at first; the center swing hung still with no little girl on it, but glancing up, there she was, swinging and giggling. And she was only wearing a man's shirt, a common form of dress for small slave children. "Oh shit," he whispered, slowly turning around, putting away the damn mobile and slowly stepping out of the gazebo. That's why everybody left before the sun went behind the trees, he realized, walking around to the bike.

Henry picked it up and got up on the road, about to mount it when "Hi!" sounded out behind him. Henry turned to see the little girl, in the now still center swing, waving at him. He waved back and called out "Hi! Bye bye."

"Bye bye!" and happy giggles floated back. By then Henry was back on the bike, pedaling south and not looking back. He could still hear the little girl in his head until he passed the sign and turned onto the county road back to his motel room.

Jacob sat unseen on the roof of the slave museum, watched the stranger wave to Polly then ride off in a hurry. He appeared in the swing beside her, closed his eyes and saw the black man turn right onto the county road. Jacob glanced at Polly, who was smiling for the first time in weeks. "Well?" he asked.

"Uh huh, it's him. I heard him thinking in the museum. He here to look in on it," she said, starting to swing again. "He can help me with Rebecca!"

"About time," Jacob said. The thought of the innocent girl brought up his anger again, added to his decades-long frustration with these two families. This was becoming wearisome, Jacob thought. Testing the firstborn sons was no longer working; lately they were weak and sickly, and the ones that actually passed his test didn't survive their family long enough to do anything. And with the latest firstborn dispatched, he was expected to just go back to visiting the matrons of the families and let Polly play with the tourists. Business as usual.

And business at the meadow house was picking up again, he could feel it, even if

he couldn't see it. He could tell when a visitor to that house came through town, the stink of depravity was strong on them, then it was like they vanished for a time, into a blind spot. When he became aware of them again, they all but shouted out the evil things they did. Somebody told them never visit the park after sunset; wish they would, Jacob thought. But more of them were passing through town. Many of these men were worse than the masters. Things ain't getting better.

Maybe it's time I go outside, he thought.

Polly stopped the swing and hopped out. "I'm gonna see how she doing, then I'll go get a better read on him."

Jacob's attention focused back on Polly. Yeah, the girl...

"Polly, we won't get a third chance to do this, so if he here to help, you be nice to him, even if he is bad."

The little girl pouted, then her smile sprang back. "Ok, but I don't think he's bad." Polly went unseen and flew off toward the county hospital. Jacob sat in the swing pondering, then decided to visit Jason Wexley. He's got some work to do.

Henry skidded to a stop beside the van. He got off the bike, hands shaking on the handlebars. He put the bike back in the van, rushed into his room and stumbled onto the bed. After a couple minutes spent shaking off the encounter, Henry took out the mobile and turned on the laptop. He brought up the photos he'd taken, 32 total, and uploaded them to the computer. He pulled up Xavier's email address and attached them to a short note. He didn't mention his near-encounter with a ghost, maybe one of the ghost twins, or how rattled it made him.

Henry put the mobile and scanner on the dresser, changed out of his biker gear for a t-shirt and jeans, the cool air in the room aiding his relaxation. He got the hat and shades again, hopped in the van and drove back up to his breakfast intersection, this time stopping at the burger joint, then the liquor store for more rum.

Back in the motel room he turned on the scanner for background noise. He turned on the lamp and checked online for more data about slave children dress,

confirmed just that the girls were usually given a simple shift or a shirt to wear, like the little girl in the park...

The power suddenly went out in his room, even the laptop shut off. Henry sprang from the chair and went to the door. The knob refused to turn. He pulled back the curtain, saw light from the rooms beside his. Light from the parking lot spilled into the room. He heard familiar giggling, turned to see the little girl standing a few feet behind him in the patch of light. Cute as a button, in long pigtails, in a man's tuxedo shirt.

"Hi Henry, I'm Polly."

Henry gasped and stumbled backwards, falling across the bed, almost knocking the laptop to the floor, scrambling to find the chair. Oh shit, oh shit; Henry was terrified. The girl smiled, climbed into his lap, placed both her little hands on his trembling chest and closed her eyes.

In a flash Polly saw his last few days, his mission, then his last few years, saw the hard knot of shame, grief, and remorse in the pit of his memories, and a little girl named Ahora Trujillo at the center.

Her smile faded into a sigh, glad that a decent man had come to look into things, like Jacob said someone would. Unlike some people from outside who visit the park, this man had none of the 'meadow house' in his heart. Polly snuggled closer, head on his chest. She felt his heart racing, started patting his chest lightly, repeating "It's ok," but he was gonna pass out soon unless she calmed him down...

"It's ok, Henry, don't be 'fraid. We need your help."

Polly straightened up in his lap and gently closed his eyes. Henry felt her suddenly heavier, softer, felt full lips press against his. His startled gaze took in her full grown form as she drew back: mid-20s, tall, with full breasts topped by thick, dark nipples. She had long kinky hair in loose locks, a full sensuous mouth, eyes full of compassion. She stood up; he saw the shirt, unbuttoned, trailing down the smooth chocolate skin, stopping at the swell of her hips, a few inches above her lush bush of trimmed hair.

"Henry, I need your help."

She parted the shirt further, exposing her nipples to the fading light. She closed her eyes and began lightly pinching each one between thumb and forefinger. Her low moans and the scent of arousal filling the space between them slowly overcame his fear. His erection growing, he stood up, still uncertain as he placed his hands gently atop hers, stared into her opening eyes, level with his. Her beautiful smile came back as she hugged him, pressing her pubic bone hard against his erection. She melted away from him, sat on the bed and drew him to her by that intoxicating smile. She undid his pants, and the next thing he knew he was on the bed, she was perched above, just beginning to ease herself down upon him. Her skin was cool to the touch, even as she began to sweat, but inside she was a cauldron of terrifying passion.

She snuggled down firmly upon his length and began to grind, breath quickening. Henry reached up to her nipples, pinching both firmly; she purred, started bucking against him, her noises resonating within him. He was swept up in the intense sensations. By instinct, Henry's hands slid to her waist, he began thrusting until she clamped down on his penis, driving him over the edge. He froze, shooting three strong spurts, then continued pounding her. Polly collapsed down on him, showering his face with kisses, her skin sweaty but still cool as she ground against him, tensing up for a thunderous orgasm that drove Henry over the edge once more.

The room was filled with their hard breathing. Henry was reeling from the heightened senses. He felt her clasp him, realized he was still humping in loose rhythm to her undulations. He was reduced to breathy groans, riding the ebbing waves of ecstasy she shared with him. The contact lessened as he slipped out of her, but he was still drifting, completely helpless in her embrace.

Polly again planted slow kisses on his face, his lips, until Henry's eyes focused on her. She grinned at him. He smiled back, completely relaxed and unafraid now.

"Henry, I really do need your help. It's the girl, Rebecca. They gonna kill her. Let me show you," she said. "Close your eyes..."

Henry did so, found himself floating above the entrance of Wainwright county hospital, a three story T-shaped building, from this view an upside down T along the north county road. 'Two floors on the west wing was turned into the Wainwright Clinic,' Polly whispered into his ear. He drifted left, past the glass

and brick exterior, around and through the west wing clinic entrance, past the nurse's station to the patient rooms. He slid through the floor and down the short hall to a room at the end. Room 0, the padded room. Straight jacketed and asleep, the girl lay curled against the far corner.

"They waitin' for her to come around to see what she remembers. When they find out she saw Annie, they gon' kill her. Just like they did Jeffrey..."

Henry's eyes blinked open, stared up into her clouded face. He knew the look she bore - Rebecca was her fault somehow, and she couldn't fix it before, but maybe now...

Henry realized what she was asking him to do, felt suddenly more naked and helpless than his present state. He slowly slid from under her, torn between his fear of this ghost and these plantation families. They were willing to kill their own blood to keep their secret, they wouldn't think twice about a washed up reporter.

"Henry, I can get her out of the clinic, I just need your help getting her away. Don't nobody know she's even here. Please."

He fixed his clothes, went over to the dresser and poured a big rum and coke, downed half of it before turning around to see her sitting crosslegged on the bed, the shirt still undone, her body intoxicating. Just one more day, he groaned to himself.

He took another strong pull from the glass and set it down. It's like riding a bike through rough streets; don't think, just do it. "OK, when do you want to do this?"

Polly jumped off the bed and into his arms, pressing her cool ghostly flesh against him. "Thank you, thank you," she said between kisses, happier than she'd been in weeks.

Chapter 9

By the time Henry woke up, at 6:30, Roger Lowell and Harry Sims were just leaving Baton Rouge in a rental sedan. Their morning flight from LAX was delayed for 2 hours, then it was diverted to Houston thanks to a drunken idiot in the rear section.

The next available flight to Baton Rouge was later that night, so Roger decided to charter a private plane, which wasn't easy that particular Sunday afternoon, as most of the private flights were booked or already gone. They arrived in Baton Rouge three hours later with the day largely wasted - the travelogue footage they planned to use in the first segment of the webcast was shot, unless they spent the night there, but Roger wanted to travel on to Liberty Plainses and start fresh on location. He finished the last of the blog entries he'd been posting throughout the day, promising the show's online audience a video report on Monday.

They arrived at the Liberty Motel shortly after Henry and Polly drove off in the van. When they checked in, Roger used an alias, but the manager recognized him from the show. He didn't let on, but made sure to call Sherrif Burt with their room number and make and model of car.

Henry sat sweating inside the dark blue van, head bent to the police scanner. He was parked on the shoulder of North County Road well west of the county hospital. Polly had him approach by driving into Liberty Plainses as she steered them with her eyes closed. They only had to stop behind buildings a couple times to avoid the deputies, then they rolled on up and went past the hospital. He listened for any chatter on the radio during this maneuvering, driving gingerly through this weird little corner of the Old/New South.

Polly said there'd be no police car around for another ten minutes, but that wasn't reassuring. Another five miles down the road was downtown Wainwright, and he had no intention of going there.

She said the other ghost, Jacob, was already at the clinic. Henry felt a further shiver at mention of the one who 'tests' people. He shook a drop of sweat into his eye, it stung. Polly gave Henry a kiss, told him she'd be back in a few

minutes, and flew from the van, leaving him with the sounds of night and his pounding heart.

Polly appeared unseen on the main floor of the clinic, drifted over toward Jacob, who'd come down the long hall from the main hospital to the nurses' station, unseen, standing behind Lloyd the orderly. He watched over the young man's shoulder as he monitored the girl in the padded room downstairs. Jacob was just about to take possession of him and get on with it.

He'd been watching the clinic since he gave Jason Wexley his task. It didn't smell right. For the last half hour there'd been only two people on the floor instead of the usual six, and no security guards. Mighty nice of them to leave the chicken coop door wide open, seeing's how she almost wandered off today. Uh huh, he thought. Polly drifted next to him, looked around at the empty rooms and offices with a similar frown. They're expecting us...

"While ago they shot her up with some glowing stuff, it put her to to sleep. I sent the nurse to the bathroom, and the other staff all stayed upstairs. Go get her," Jacob said.

She dashed down to the basement level, to room "0" at the end, quickly slid inside, saw the young woman on the floor, bundled in the straight jacket. She paused a moment to take a deep, ghostly breath, then took possession of the girl, righting her onto shaky bare feet. Polly was suddenly aware that Rebecca felt very different from before. The girl's body felt so heavy. She stumbled back against the wall near the door. It took more than a little effort just to move Rebecca another three steps to reach the door. Polly had a nasty metallic taste in her mouth. It had to be that stuff they put in her. She grew agitated at this new complication.

Jacob read her distress, seeing her struggle to get the girl near the door. He took possession of young Lloyd, flipped the switch that unlocked the padded room, killed the lights with a wave of his hand, then hurried down the stairs.

Polly heard the 'click' of the lock as she reached the door, pushed it open as the lights went out. She fell to her knees, winced for herself and the girl; they'd both feel that tomorrow. She stared down the hallway - she should be at the stairway by now. Polly struggled and failed to get back up as the emergency lights kicked on, afraid she would run out of time, again, and Rebecca would die in here. The

door at the end of the hall flew open, the orderly running toward her with Jacob's concern on his face. Polly separated from the girl as he picked her up; he was also surprised at her unusual heaviness. Polly was lying on the floor, breathing hard, panic rising.

"When you get your wind, go get him," Jacob said. He paused to heft Rebecca over his shoulder, then he walked to the exit. With a grunt, Jacob pushed up the stairs to the main floor.

The floor was still empty and dark, nobody coming downstairs, or through the double doors from the main hospital. The ghost struggled toward the clinic entrance with the girl over his shoulder, walking as swiftly as one would toting a full load cotton sack. The doors parted before him and he walked out, down the steps and labored into the woods.

After a minute of hard walking, Jacob had to stop. He could see the van another 200 yards down. Damn. Jacob gritted his teeth and marched on, getting halfway to the van before he ran out of steam.

He put the girl down as gently as he could, then separated from Lloyd. The young man fell to the ground, asleep; Jacob steadied himself against a tree, breathing hard. Polly flew past toward the van. Jacob looked back to the clinic, that wing and half the hospital was still dark but not for long...

Jacob heard the van rapidly approaching with the lights out, He picked up the driver's terror as the van roared past, swung around in a wide arc and stopped a few feet away. The man's heart was thumping wildly. He's breathing as hard as I am, Jacob thought. Well, no sense scaring him any further, he chuckled between breaths. The ghost went unseen as he thought of Polly. She likes him well enough to show her grown self to him, that means a lot. Still...

The side door of the van slid open and Polly's black man emerged and ran down to the sleeping girl, bundling her easily in his arms and walking back to the van, his face turned away from the direction of the hospital. Jacob reached out to lightly read the stranger, moving past his fear, his guilt, getting a sense of his pride, his lusts, his desires. No, no scent of the meadow house on him. Good, Jacob thought, 'long as he gets the girl out of town.

The van door closed with a light 'chunk.' The vehicle rolled off down the dark road. Jacob knew the van would speed a couple more miles down the county

road, then cut left onto a dirt-road that led back to the park and away from Wainwright.

Jacob felt his strength returning, but he noticed, the shoulder he carried the girl on was actually sore, and he had a slight metallic taste in his mouth. Things are getting worse.

Three miles north of Wainwright, a weathered farm house sat in the woods just east of Old Maison Road where it crosses the Biloxi River. Inside the old house, down the cellar and through the doorway under the creaky stairs, a small complex of playfully furnished rooms lay down a short hallway. A den, bathroom, and a bedroom crammed with 6 empty children's bunks. Small juju charms and little dolls were attached to the upper walls and hanging from the ceiling of each room. They completely covered the inside of the cellar door. A small equipment room sat across the hall from the bedroom.

Past this area, through a bullet proof door adorned with charms, a narrow concrete passage led to an old, paint-chipped, rusty door underneath the Biloxi River bridge. On the inside this second armored door was completely covered in charms, dolls and painted arcane symbols.

In the den, an elegant divan sat in the middle of the carpeted room. Stuffed animals, toys, young teen magazines, mats, manacles, ball gags and a video camera sat on the floor or on shelves on the walls. A padlocked cabinet hung between the shelves, brightly stuffed pillows sat in the corners.

In the dark equipment room, an old man wearing a headset sat before a bank of small monitors, drinking a Mountain Dew and eating peanuts, watching the live feed from the clinic cameras as the emergency lights came on. He saw the wispy amber outline of a woman's body emerge from the straightjacketed girl lying on the floor, also around the orderly rushing toward her.

The possessed young man picked up the girl and walked to the stairway. The ghost's body stayed on the floor, glowing, taking heaving breaths, thanks to the special Coyote Tech Lab potion fresh in from Memphis. Lucas said they'd just procured it days ago when visiting the facility in Nigeria. One of the chemists had been caught in a compromising situation and gave up the formula and a sample to avoid a scandal.

The serum worked better than they expected; she was fully illuminated and drained of energy. He timed her; it took three minutes for Polly to get to her feet, a little longer to levitate and fly from the hallway. The serum performed as promised, but it don't stop 'em long enough, he thought. We'll need to up the dose.

He glanced at the view from the second floor stairway camera, pointed west toward Wainwright, taking in the north county road and the woods alongside. He could just make out Lloyd the orderly propped against a tree and the unconscious girl next to him about 100 yards away as a dark van stopped near them. "Zoom in," he barked into the mic. smiling as the clear but fading amber outline of a right arm, shoulder, and neck, up to the ear filled the monitor. From the arm's position, Jacob had to be facing the camera. Bet he looks pissed, the old man chuckled to himself...

The light from the monitors reflected off the sharp features of the sandy-haired old man. He dialed the sherrif as he watched a dark figure bundle the girl into the vehicle. "Burt? Ethan here. Tell your boys to look for a dark van on the north county road. They might be coming your way." "Thanks Ethan, and I got some news for you. That guy Lowell from the TV show is here, just got in at the Liberty, room 106." "See, just like I said. But the girl's more important right now. Find her."

Things are getting worse.

Jacob flexed his right arm and shoulder as he watched the dark van drive away. The arm felt heavy and a little numb. The slight taste of metal in his mouth was unsettling. He glanced down at Lloyd, took pity and propped him against a tree. He'd sleep a while longer.

The numbness almost gone now, Jacob could feel someone watching him. He extended his gaze out and around, sweeping the woods around him and across North County Road, focusing back to the darkened clinic. On the second floor landing, he saw the tiny red light of a video camera on a tripod, pointed right at where he stood. A security guard wearing a headset stood behind it, saying 'Yes, sir' as he operated it.

He swept around, directed his gaze through the viewfinder, saw his right arm,

shoulder, and part of his head outlined in faint amber. Jacob came back to himself, looked down at his arm. It felt and looked normal to him, but that stuff from the girl must have rubbed off on him, lighting him up. And it put Polly on the ground. He remembered her lying on the floor outside the padded room with the wind knocked out of her, the panicked, helpless look on her face.

Jacob stared back toward the camera, at the unknown person watching him from safety, wondering which one of the families it was. It was the only thing Jacob could do at the moment. But the families, they been busy...

The girl was the first person from outside involved in a long, long time. She might wake up tomorrow with her mind intact, and the families were terrified of what she'd remember. They never tried this hard before to stop him and Polly, not with some strange new juju. The last time they got this desperate, he was closing in on the last 'meadow house' back in '38. The worst one was in 1905. Them people coming round lately were not just the few family members and their depraved friends, the small trickle of depravity he and Polly barely tolerated since '38. It had become an unspoken arrangement - leave the children of Liberty Plains alone, and only the first born sons would face the ghost twins. And after the judging, he might've just gone back to rest a bit or go back to visiting Agnes and Vivian LeChette, let Polly play in the park while he kept an eye on her.

But somebody started another one, right under his nose and he couldn't even see it, but he got Jason looking, right now. Can't be too many places left in the county to hide, he thought.

Jacob drifted back into the woods, out of sight of the clinic. His anger mixed with worry for himself and Polly. He reached out to her, told her to hurry up getting that van hid, then he flew toward Wainwright, to pay a visit to Agnes.

Jason Wexley sat in the darkened county clerk's office at Wainwright City Hall, a small stack of files spread before him. An hour ago he was enjoying his chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy and watching a wildlife show on TV, then Jacob appeared in front of him, said he had a task to perform at City Hall and it couldn't wait for tomorrow when he'd draw suspicion.

Jason couldn't argue, couldn't complain. His older sister Emily was the last

Wexley given a task by Jacob and she did it without question, it was a family obligation. He put down his chicken, wiped his hands on his napkin and listened.

Following the ghosts's instructions, Wexley used his ring of work keys to enter the modest building from the rear, slip into the office and check the file cabinets for non-residential building projects since the hurricane, anything in a quiet place, outside town. He was more than a little nervous skulking about; he'd grown up in this town with the other two families resenting the Wexleys cause they weren't under the old curse, had even been protected by Jacob in the past, but from what the ghost told him, not even he could protect Jason if anyone knew what he was looking for.

He found minor municipal repairs at city hall and the hospital, and some drainage ditch and bridge repairs. The project for the Biloxi River bridge cost three times what the others did, and it wasn't that much bigger. The area around the bridge is just woods, and the old Kingston place, if it was still standing...

He put the files back and snuck out of the office, nervously checking the windows for patrol cars. As he exited city hall, Jason decided to casually check out the bridge tomorrow on his lunch hour.

Chapter 10

Henry drove the dark van down the dirt road toward Wainwright Park, with his lights off, barely seeing anything, following Polly's gently whispered instructions as she navigated, too nervous to do anything else. The dirt road ended at Park Road. Henry could see the gazebo and swings on his right, about 30 yards down on the other side of the road. He quickly steered the van across the asphalt and onto the grass, stopping just beside the swings. Polly extended her vision high above the van as she laid hands on the side door and the ceiling, and 'pushed.' She looked down at the vehicle, saw it go unseen as a shroud of clear smoke settled over and around it. That done, she concentrated again on the four Sheriff's patrol cars, 2 had scrambled from Wainwright, speeding down North County Road, came close to seeing them as they turned off back toward the park. the other 2 were at the Liberty Motel and tore east down the county road into town, one car stopping there to search, the other racing toward the county line.

One patrol car had stopped at the clinic. She could hear on Henry's scanner that it was Danny, the short black deputy. Her gaze zoomed down toward his cruiser, stopping in the back seat. She liked Danny ok; he hadn't done anything bad, yet. Sheriff Burt was telling him to go back and "watch them two at the Liberty. Don't waste time coming back through town; take Old Maison and git over there." The deputy heard a small chorus of chuckling at the mention of Old Maison, He shook his head and reluctantly turned around and went back, turning left onto Old Maison. He approached the intersection of Park road at a good clip, then slowed, and stopped at the corner. He sat there on the northern boundary of the park, within spitting distance of the gazebo, shaking off his nervousness. She lightly read him - Danny wasn't raised in the county, but he listened to the stories about the ghosts. In the two years of being a deputy, he'd only seen Polly, once, as a little girl on the swing, but lately, he been getting a bad feeling about some of the things (and some of the people) he'd been seeing at the police station and the hospital. He was afraid one of these nights he'd see Polly as a teenager, and she'd torture and/or kill him, according to the legend. She was so touched at his spark of aversion to the families, she decided he would eventually quit or turn on them, so he was ok.

She immediately came back to herself in the van, then flew to the patrol car,

settling onto his lap unseen, though he could feel her body as his arms and legs went limp. Then she appeared, as the teenager. His eyes widened in shock, but she just smiled, lightly caressed his cheeks, embracing him as she whispered, sweetly. "It's ok Danny. You not one of them bad ones." She kissed his cheek, then leaned back against the steering wheel, her unbuttoned shirt parting to reveal her ample round breasts and thick dark nipples. Her hand dropped down to his crotch, brushed against his penis and it was instantly, painfully hard. "You come visit any night, alone, we have us some fun!" And with that, she vanished. Danny's arms and legs came back to life, he gripped the wheel and floored it, squealing down the road and through the park. Polly giggled as she went back to the van.

Henry was still bent over the scanner, following the search as she appeared in the front seat, in adult form. "Henry," she rested a hand on his shoulder, "it's time to go. I can't keep the van unseen for too much longer. I got a place on the county line, east of town." She pointed to the county road south of the park as Henry started the van, rolled back onto Old Maison and hurried to the intersection, turned left and sped down the road. She closed her eyes and checked again: the patrol cars were either searching in town or up at the clinic. Good. She turned around and watched the sleeping girl, still out cold from that stuff in her, wondering how long before she could help. Polly drifted over to her, tentatively touched her cheek, felt her hand become prickly and heavy, and pulled it back. It wasn't quite as strong as before, and she still tasted metal. Not yet. This may take most of the night, she worried.

At the county line she had Henry drive off the road into the woods, to a hill behind a stand of Red Maples. The back side of the hill was dug out, leaving a walk-in pit, big enough to hide the van from the county road. Henry killed the engine, took the earphone jack out of the scanner, turned around to see Polly anxiously watching the girl, who looked so innocent, wrapped up in the straightjacket. The ghost noticed him watching her and she brightened, crawled over to the front seat. "We never woulda saved her by ourselves tonight. Thank you Henry," she gave him a tender kiss that lit a fuse deep within him. "Come meet me outside," she whispered, and vanished. Henry looked around, saw her through the rear windows, the shirt sliding down her arms, falling to the grass. Henry hurried from the van, pulling off his t-shirt as he reached Polly, she starting on his jeans. They laid down above the grass as they caressed and squeezed each other, floating just above the tops of the leaves.

Jacob drifted back into the woods, out of sight of the clinic. His anger mixed with worry for himself and Polly. He reached out to her, told her to hurry up getting that van hid, then he flew toward Wainwright, to pay a visit to Agnes.

He drifted west over North County Road, crossed Old Maison, which formed the southeast corner of Wainwright proper, the town itself inhabiting the land between Old Maison and State Hwy 49. A little further west and North County road became the southern boundary street of the modest town square, dominated by City Hall on the east, and the Police Station on the west. Jacob flew north of the square, half a block up Planters Ave. to the elegant townhouse that now bore the name Wainwright House. He floated up to the third floor, where he knew she'd be waiting.

Jacob entered her room unseen, observed Agnes Wainwright sitting at her night table, looking through a small photo album, shaking her head as she thumbed through the pages. Augustus as a baby, at five, at ten, when he sat for his solitary portrait. He walked over to her, the matriarch of the family, a vibrant 65 year old who looked half her age, thanks to me, he thought. She was wrapped in a long nightgown instead of her usual gardeners' pants and workshirt, her hair not in curlers, but combed out and shining, ending in loose curls on her shoulders. He was touched that she made herself pretty for him, but he shrugged that off - he was determined to have it out with her, got to be stern.

Jacob noticed Jeffrey's photo album sitting under her arm. He again started to feel sorry for her, but that wasn't gonna help what had to be done. Maybe it's time for that too...

He appeared standing beside her, his expression flat. She looked up, smiled faintly. "I been waiting, like you asked," she said, getting up, moving over to her bed, a simple divan in the corner. She laid back, head propped against pillows. "Ok, I'm ready." Jacob sat on the bed beside her, his face calm as a speck of sunlight appeared between them. Agnes took a deep breath of anticipation, then fell asleep as the speck exploded.

She opened her eyes and smiled, finding herself once again in familiar surroundings, standing in the center of an elegantly furnished bedroom complete with a beautiful mahogany four-poster bed with gossamer canopy. The window

open to the warm gentle breeze of a summer night. She spun around to the large mirror atop the dresser, took in the vision of herself at 35, wearing an elegant black evening dress, flowing blonde locks perfectly done, as if she'd just returned from a grand engagement. Last time, her hair was in a bun and the dress was white, she remembered. Always different.

Just then the door opened and Jacob entered, barefoot, shirtless, skin glistening as he closed the door and leaned back against it, eyes calmly surveying her beauty. She shivered in anticipation as his eyes raked over her - she knew she shouldn't, but she was always turned on by the glances and leers of black men who could look (if they didn't get caught) but never touch. And Jacob could do whatever he wanted, especially here. She shook again from the thrill of it.

"Take off your clothes" he softly ordered. She swallowed, began removing her pearls, earrings, each one disappearing in her hands, kicked off her shoes and they dropped through the floor, the clasp at the back of her neck undid itself and the zipper slowly eased down the elegant dress, exposing her creamy skin. She shrugged out of it, let it drop through the floor. She stood there in a lacy black bra and panties, nipples beginning to press against the sheer fabric. She closed her eyes and waited. After a moment, she felt his breath on her neck, a multitude of ghostly hands caressing her, unsnapping the bra, easing the panties away from her hips and sliding them down, softly squeezing her nipples, teasing her ears and the backs of her knees, carrying her away on a wave of pleasure, until she found herself horizontal, over the bed, floating a few feet above, arms and legs pointing at the four posts as if tied to them. The ghostly hands were still caressing her breasts, and new pairs gently probed her as a phantom tongue duelled with her clit.

Agnes cried out in ecstasy as she built to an orgasm, fingers became a fist thrusting into her, an oiled finger worked it's way into her ass, a warm mouth engulfing her nipples and clit. Agnes was on the edge of bliss, riding a towering wave of fire, building the delirium of senses until the tension became unbearable, and even that made her cry out in loud exquisite yelps.

She was still crying over Augustus, Jacob thought. It added a sourness to the metal taste that hadn't faded. He left his spot against the door, strode to the bed, face cold as he held her on the edge, until he stood next to her writhing body. Her eyes locked onto his, widened in terror.

“He couldn’t even take the memory of a young boy!” Jacob shouted, releasing her into a thunderous explosion of senses, and another. As she rolled with them she saw little Samuel tied up in the noonday sun, the overseer delivering little red sunspots on the boy’s brown back for scratching numbers and letters on the ground with a stick. Agnes even felt the shadow of two of those lashes, mixed in with the rippling waves of pleasure.

Suddenly Jacob appeared on the bed, kneeling, poised between her outstretched legs. He grabbed her hips, brought her moist sex down to his thick erection and forced half his length into her. “Did you know they built a new one?” He smashed her fully down on his penis, then ground against her in a hard rhythm. She gasped as her body bucked from the sensation, little waves of guilt and shame crashing within her.

From a corner of her mind, she tried to focus as the ghost grabbed one of her memories and slammed it in front of her - the night before her mama Esther died. Laying on her deathbed, she was saying “... might build a new one, if they get the right help or wait long enough. If Jacob suspects another meadow house, you do whatever he asks. Listen to me, Aggie - he threatened to kill all the members of both our families back in ‘05 over this!” Esther was yelling the last part and collapsed back onto her pillow in a fit of coughing. Then the memory was gone.

Reeling, she tried to answer. “No, I didn’t know another abomination was being built, I don’t run them boys, they don’t tell me much of anything, I’m just the one in charge of ‘the curse,’ like my mama before me. I didn’t know!”

He noticed her on the verge of tears, and let go of her hips. Agnes never knew the whole story about Jeffrey either; she was in college then, and her momma didn’t tell her about that before she died and left this legacy on her shoulders. Maybe i’m being too hard on her, Jacob thought; after Jeffrey died, he didn’t do anything about that either. He went back to routine; why wouldn’t they think they could start another one?

His anger dissipating, he released her arms and legs from their unseen restraints. She immediately wrapped herself around him, kissed him deeply, hungrily as her still weightless body bounced with abandon on his erection. “Like mama said. Whatever I need to do,” she said breathlessly between groans and squeals. She could tell he wasn’t angry anymore when he bottomed out within her and his

hips backed away from her body. Now three inches longer, he began slow, deep stroking as he feasted on her breasts, Agnes shivering in delight.

An hour later, as they lay on the fine white silk sheets, Jacob told her the truth about cousin Jeffrey. “Jeffrey was raised with his mama’s folks, had nothing to do with the family, but he was firstborn. They kidnapped him, planned to kill him before his birthday, but he escaped and went to Memphis. It was there in a motel room where I tested him. He passed, came out perfectly fine, and ready to do the right thing, bring it all out and settle it. But I went to rest and they found him and killed him to keep they damn secret. And now they started another meadow house. This is the third one; what’s that they say in baseball? ‘strike three?’”

Jacob sat up and looked at Agnes sternly. “I mean to put an end to this, do what I shoulda done back in ‘67. Bring this all out myself. And you can help. You know Jason Wexley?”

“No, not really, but I do know Emily. She’s on the county Gardening Committee.”

“Well, he’s her brother. I’ll have him visit you tomorrow. He’ll fill you in.”

It was after midnight by the time Polly could safely touch Rebecca, another hour or so before the effects of the serum completely wore off, leaving her sleeping normally, but fitfully. Polly took possession of her, entered her fractured dream, found herself walking through tall grass.

Rebecca was stuck in the last moment at Annie’s torment, floating above her in the back fields of the LeChette plantation, near a stand of catalpa trees. Julius LeChette pointing his pistol at Annie’s bleeding, swollen face, calling her name, her just staring back, resigned and trembling. Rebecca closing her eyes before he shot. Then it was a maddening jumble of Annie’s face, then Amanda’s, then her own, lying amid the tatters of a yellow dress with a smoking hole in her forehead. And she died a little all over again. Polly knew she’d have to catch her before the shot, to pull her out of it. The ghost drifted up, took Rebecca’s face in her hands, slowly brought her down to the tall grass, struggled to get her attention. It took three times before Polly noticed Rebecca’s eyes shift toward her for a second before they squeezed closed again. Good, I’m getting through,

she thought.

Rebecca reeled from the torment, then her eyes were open again, but instead of Julius LeChette, she saw the little black girl again, fading in and out, then felt her hands on her face and she was giggling, coming close so she filled the girl's view. "Rebecca! Hi Rebecca. You're not in the field anymore, you're with me!" Rebecca still closed her eyes before hearing the shot, but they blinked open instead of staying squeezed. Good, she's coming around, Polly thought, as she continued talking to her.

"Look up," the little girl said. She glanced up at the black man who was cradling her/Annie/Amanda in his arms, bereft and sobbing. He had a kind face, she would have liked him, she thought. She looked back to the little girl, who was coming in clearer as the field began to fade. She looked around at her new surroundings: she was inside the back of a cargo van, a bike was secured against a back corner. She looked over her left shoulder and could see darkness outside the window. She glanced up and saw a black man wearing a t-shirt, he looked a little like the man who found Annie. She flinched a little at the thought of the poor slave girl, but it didn't cast her back into madness, though she realized she was changed by sharing that small part of a slave's life. It was infuriating, depressing, it answered questions she never thought to ask before. It opened her eyes.

She looked down at herself in the straightjacket and vaguely remembered being in a padded room. "We'll take that off before you wake up. Now you need to rest, and tomorrow you can meet Henry!" the ghost said, closing her eyes and casting her into a deep sleep.

Henry eased her out of his grasp, onto the mat. She curled into a contented ball and slept as he and Polly gently undid the straps and freed her from the straightjacket, draped it over her. Polly changed to adult form as Henry crawled back over the seat. He tried to stifle a yawn the ghost caught.

"Henry, you need to rest, too," she said, but he pulled her down until she was on top of him. Just to feel her ghostly weight upon his body was exciting, but he knew tomorrow was a big day. "Stay with me until I fall asleep" he said, kissed her tenderly. She smiled, lay her head on his chest and tried not to think about tomorrow while he lazily stroked her back, the caresses slowly tapering off.

Chapter 11

Roger Lowell tentatively peeked out the curtains of room 106, taking in the lightly-traveled stretch of State Hwy 49, the morning shadows still long enough to reach across the parking lot before him. He half expected to see a patrol car out there. He saw the reaction from the manager when they checked in last night. He recognized me, Roger thought, and Who knows what trouble Xavier's mystery man has already stirred up. Roger walked over to the laptop on the dresser. Harry was packing their gear, but that piece always went last.

He brought up the tracker map. He'd been watching every move that damn button made the past day and a half. All day yesterday at the motel, then they arrive on the same map that night, not 5 miles away from the motel, and the guy flees, drives an erratic, looping course, up Old Maison to North County and back, then east, not stopping till he crossed the county line.

Roger stared at the screen in frustration. Damn button hadn't moved, it was faded, meaning the computer was turned off, but so what, it could be a decoy. Xavier's agent could be anywhere, interfering with, spoiling, and stealing my investigation, he thought.

The day he showed the letters to Xavier and said THIS was the case he wanted to investigate himself, it was "Absolutely dear boy, by all means," then in January it gets moved from the TV schedule to the webcast-only schedule 'out of deference to the agency.' It was a line of bull and they both knew it, but he went along. Then last month it was "We'll schedule it when the new season starts." and he let that go. And the first chance he could he sneaks someone down here. Under the nose of the Campus? That's fine by me, he thought, but under my nose as well? If I hadn't gone back to the studio Sat. afternoon, I never would have known any of this until it was too late.

This is my case! Roger mumbled, lip curled into a faint snarl. Well, whoever it was, he only had a day's jump on me; he thought. I can still make up for lost time.

He shrunk the map, exposing the business end of "The File Room's" website, the webcast application that allowed them to stream up to 30 minutes live, then quickly edit that into excerpts. He turned it over to Harry as he grabbed their

bags and went out to the rental sedan. Another minute and they were leaving the parking lot, driving up onto the county road, Harry finishing up the live webcast prep on the computer. Roger noted the empty patrol car parked near the air pumps at the gas station across the road. He turned right and hurried on to Old Maison. "We're going to do as many reports as we can today, put our stamp on this investigation and wrest it back from Xavier, then have a little talk with our dear leader," Roger said.

Jacob sat unseen at the gazebo, watching the morning sky as he surveyed the action. Polly had the girl hid outside the county, the deputies been searching all night, but they been properly respectful to any townspeople in Liberty Plains while doing it, Jacob thought. Smiles and politeness, he snickered.

3 patrol cars were back at the police station, 1 was parked at the gas station across from the Liberty motel. Things were relatively quiet. Deputies got chewed out for losing the van.

He saw a dark sedan approach, stopping just south of the museum. Two men got out, one with a small movie camera in one hand, and a laptop computer in the other. Nobody in town had one of these, just them big metal boxes with big TV screens sitting on their desks. Jacob drifted closer as the man placed it on the hood. Couple times a week tourists come through with cameras and such, but these two weren't tourists.

Coming round to the screen, he noticed the other one holding a microphone with no cord, and saw a smaller version of him on the computer. He lightly read them both, his country boy grin stretched wide at learning they were also here to investigate, for a TV show! They weren't with Polly's black man, but they know where he is, and Jacob saw the map. He wasn't sure if this was a concern, but made note and moved on.

Jacob came across the Campus in their minds, intrigued by a group of people who do nothing BUT look into haunts and such, and horrors Jacob didn't even know about. The ghost smiled, this is more like it.

Roger, the one with the microphone, stood by as Harry, the camera guy began tapping keys on the computer. Onscreen the intro began for a "File Room Special Report: The Curse of the Ghost Twins." Jacob smirked at the title; Polly

would get a kick out of this.

Roger began, quickly describing his location and introducing the legend of the curse and the last few victims, weak-assed Augustus included. He added the rumor that the ghosts were involved in the 1905 race riots, the fire that consumed the three great plantation houses and the original town of Wainwright. Well, that DID get out of hand, Jacob thought, less interested now in the story Roger was telling than in the fact that it was live, on his computer TV. He caught the numbers from Harry - thousands of people were watching them right now.

Roger mentioned that they would be making reports all day, the next one at 9am, less than an hour from now. He ended and Harry tapped more keys on the computer and the stuff they just did was saved and put in a box onscreen to watch again.

He rode along as they drove up Old Maison toward downtown Wainwright. As they turned left onto North County, Jacob could see Jason Wexley on his bike up ahead, turning right on his way to City Hall. At the town square, the sedan turned left into the downtown parking lot making up the southern border.

Jacob left the pair in the car and drifted into the square, watched Jason making note of the strangers as he locked his bike on a rack. He waited until Wexley walked into the building, nodded hello to Sam and Alice who'd come in early and found his desk among the double row of cubicles in the Clerk's office, then Jacob drifted through the window, stopping behind him, unseen.

Jason watched the pair through the window, walking over to the coffee shop, camera and computer in hand. He recognized Roger from the cable program. "That's right, they here to investigate, like I told you," Jacob whispered behind his ear. "But never mind them. What you got for me? Don't say it, think it," the ghost said.

"Well," Jason began, swallowing, hoping nobody entered his cubicle at that moment. He didn't want to be caught 'daydreaming,' the town code-word for a Wexley "tellin' Old Jacob on you."

He shook off the childhood memories and continued.

"The Biloxi River bridge north of town, the repair work cost three times what it should. I'm going to take a look during my lunch break."

“Ok, good. When you get a chance today, go visit Auntie Aggie at Wainwright House. Take a copy of them papers for her to keep, too. She’ll be expecting you.” Jason felt Jacob’s presence vanish from his cubicle as his eyes darted. No, nobody peeking over or around the modest shelter of his space. He relaxed, stood up and himself looked over the fake walls surveying the office, the file cabinet in question near Elmer Johnson’s desk, at the other side of the room. He waved hi to Elmer who’d just come in and ducked backed down in his cubicle, fake smile wiped off, the weight of Jacob’s words from last night settling on him again. What it might be in the file, that ‘meadow house’ Jacob talked about. It made him shudder anew.

He stood up again to see if Stuart LeChette, the current County Clerk, had arrived yet. The office across the hall was still dark. I’ll wait until their first smoke break, then get the file and make the copies at my desk, he thought, his heart beginning to beat faster. One thing at a time, Jason thought. Get the file, don’t get caught, check the bridge, then go have a chat with the matriarch of the Wainwright family. He’d never personally met Agnes Wainwright before, though he’d known about her and Vivian LeChette all his life, the two most powerful women in the county. This being family business, he did not want to disappoint.

Jacob had gone back out to the town square, sitting unseen on a park bench across from Roger and Harry, at a table in front of the coffeeshop with two cups of coffee and a bag of donuts, about to set up for their next report. He considered the Biloxi River bridge as he observed the pair. He had a few ideas on how best to proceed, and he had all day.

Around nine o’clock Rebecca Sandiford was stirring beneath the straightjacket draped over her, blinking her eyes and brushing away loose strands of brunette hair. She was lying on a workout mat in the back of a cargo van. She blinked again and remembered being in that awful field, not being able to move, and then a little girl somehow brought her here, told her she was safe, she could sleep now. She saw daylight coming from the rear windows and a bike in the corner. The side door of the van slid open. Rebecca heard a woman’s voice, then there was Polly, standing just outside, the bright morning sun shining on and through her, holding a bulging paper bag and smiling. “Morning, Rebecca!” she said, setting the bag down and sliding it over to Rebecca as she climbed inside. The door slid shut gently behind Polly with a ‘click.’

Rebecca sat up, realized she was only wearing a long hospital gown underneath the straightjacket as it fell away. "Here, I got you some clothes, and this -" She reached in and removed two smaller, plastic bags, set one in Rebecca's lap. The other one floated up past the front seat, rested on the dashboard. "One of my people in town brought these," Polly said. "She's about your size, so they'll fit."

Inside the bag were three pieces of fried chicken. At the first whiff, Rebecca's stomach demanded filling. She immediately reached in and took out the two drumsticks, devouring them. Polly took the jeans, a sweatshirt, bra and panties and tennis shoes out of the paper bag, set them neatly beside the girl's feet. After a minute, Rebecca, now attacking a breast, noticed the little girl sitting there grinning, holding out a cloth napkin. Rebecca, distracted, suddenly self-conscious, took the napkin as she finished the last piece.

"Sorry. Good morning, uh, Polly?" she said as she dropped the last chicken bone in the bag, wiping her hands and face. Rebecca was feeling better, her head clearing. and she clearly recalled the sunlight shining right through the girl's head as some of it reflected off her pigtails, but it was a solid hand that offered the napkin. And that wasn't a long vivid, visceral nightmare I had, Rebecca thought, it was all real. Annie, that woman Amanda, the Stonehills, the LeChettes, the Wainwrights. It happened. And I was a witness to it. And Polly was a slave. And Polly was...

"I'm your friend," Polly said, again all smiles and giggles, coming forward and giving Rebecca a great big hug. "And I'm glad you ok." Rebecca hesitated, then hugged her back. She felt little waves of warmth, concern, genuine affection coming from the girl, and she relaxed - it didn't matter what Polly was. It was the memory. Rebecca was there, inside it. And she brought it back, made it live again, every vile detail burned into her soul. And she would tell it.

"That's why you been in that clinic the last five months. They was waiting for you to come around, see if you would tell. I was waiting, too," Polly said softer. "But now you're ok! And later on today, you can leave with Henry."

She let go of Rebecca and floated up near the van's roof. "I'm gonna take a look around, then you can come outside and play." And through the roof she went.

Rebecca dressed quickly, not at all certain about going outside while they were looking for her. She felt nice and safe right here. She crawled up to the big front

seat and looked over at Henry, the black man with the kind face, sleeping peacefully.

“He got one mo thing to do in town, then y’all’ll be leaving” Polly said. “It’s really nice out. Please?” she said. She looked so cute and innocent standing there in that old shirt, “Ok,” Rebecca said, going to the side door as it slid open. “The Camellias and Magnolia trees are in bloom.”

Chapter 12

At 12:15, Jason Wexley grabbed his sack lunch from the office fridge, got his backpack and smiled all the way out to the front entrance of City Hall. He mounted his bike and quickly rode east on North County road and up a residential street to his home. He cut over to the alley and entered through the back door, which faced away from City Hall. He'd managed to copy the dozen or so documents during his coworkers' smoke break, and at home he stashed the papers and grabbed his digital camera. In less than ten minutes he was riding across the Biloxi River bridge, pulling over and walking into the lightly wooded area. The Kingston place was only about 50 yards or so down, away from the road. He nervously looked about as he took the camera and a sandwich from the backpack; if anybody came upon him, he wanted to be ready with his "lunchtime birdwatching" story.

He walked down a little further until he could see under the bridge, noticed the service door underneath. The repair work was done less than 6 months ago, but they used a dented up, rusty door. The concrete on both sides of it had some funny looking graffiti scribbled on it, but there weren't no gangs anywhere in the county.

Jason put the remainder of the sandwich in his mouth, took up the camera and zoomed in under the bridge, taking a few quick shots, then panning across until he came to the old house, the rickety back porch, the back door missing.

As he walked along, he noticed something strange in what used to be the yard beside the house...

Henry was just putting out the joint, the only joint he brought along. He'd planned to light up after he was finished with this damn assignment and on his way back to Baton Rouge, but he was pissed at Xavier for taking away the computer and that idiot Roger showing up. This was his last day; in a few hours he was leaving this damn place behind. The rest was Xavier's problem. If the girl wants to go with me, fine, but she's not my problem, either, Henry thought. After changing into the biker gear for the ride into town, Henry took just the mobile, leaving the police scanner with the van, along with the keys. The sheriff

was still looking for Rebecca; if things went south she'd still have a way to escape. He didn't even know if she could drive, but it was the least he could do.

He climbed over the front seat, got the bike and exited the rear of the van, stepping into the hot and sunny Mississippi afternoon. He could see the girl and the ghost through the trees, enjoying the shade. He waved to them, saw Polly disappear, then she was standing beside him as he got on the bike. He told her he left the police scanner and the keys in the van, just in case, and he would be back in a couple hours. Polly said she'd watch over Rebecca, and that the girl would gladly go with him to talk to that Xavier feller. "We'll be right here waiting for you," she said, floating up to peck him on the cheek, then she vanished, appeared again next to the girl. They both waved as he rode off through the short grass toward the county road, back into Wainwright territory.

After a few miles he approached the Quarters, the public housing project on the east end. This was where Amanda Harris was officially found, the supposed victim of a carjacking, but this place looked like a college dorm community, blocks of beautiful brownstones and single family homes. He didn't see any trash on the street, there were no shirtless gangbangers standing on corners, the only music escaping from open windows was jazz or r&b. One window a block away poured Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" into the air. This is the buppie suburbs, he thought.

A little further and Henry entered Liberty Plains proper, and it looked the same. The few people he rode past smiled, nodded, or waved hi. There wasn't any tension in the air either, even with a police manhunt underway there was no hint of panic or dread. A patrol car came down the road, the townspeople waving and smiling, the deputy waving and smiling right back. Only Henry tensed up as car drove past. These people weren't afraid of the county mounties at all. Must be great having the ghost twins for protection, Henry thought, chuckling as he rode on to the town square, an open green space for celebrations and events, currently, an outdoor art exhibition.

He parked outside Dottie's Cafe, entered the air conditioned establishment and found a seat near the kitchen. Duke Ellington was playing softly from a speaker up on the wall behind the counter. The place was half empty, only a few late lunch customers at the tables. The girl behind the counter smiled at him as she approached. The name 'Celia' embroidered on her blouse. He ordered a coffee and a slice of pecan pie, then asked if Ms. Jemson is around. "My friend, Rufus

Patterson told me this was a great place for pie.”

Celia caught his meaning and smiled, asked for his name, then left for the kitchen.

Halfway through his pie, Mae Ella Jemson came out of the kitchen. She was a big woman, about mid-50's, with salt and pepper hair and an easy smile. He smiled as he stood up to greet her, and took the mobile out of his jersey pocket as she sat down. The device had a digital recorder; he asked if she minded, she smiled, shook her head. “Naw, it’s about time to get it out, with what’s coming?” He’d just sat down, was about to hit ‘record’ and stopped dead. “Uh, WHAT’S coming?” “Never you mind about that,” she said, chuckling. “Now I got a question...are you with that fool from the TV show who was in here earlier?” Henry guessed she meant Roger Lowell; he shook his head, “No, ma’am,” as he pressed ‘record.’

“We gon’ have a lot more fools with cameras soon enough.”

Henry started getting that bad feeling, percoating in his gut. He didn’t need her dancing around it, He only had one question for her. He hoped it was the right one.

“Ms. Jemson, what can you tell me about the Meadow house?”

“Call me Mae,” she said, her face brightening, head nodding slow approval.

“Well, I first heard about it from my cousin Dottie. She was a young girl back in ‘38 when Jacob found the last one. Burned it to the ground, killed three Wainwrights and five LeChettes. Polly had her hide 4 or 5 of ‘em for a day or so after.” “4 or 5 what?” Henry asked.

“Children. None older than 13. Them two families, they been doing this for over a hundred years. And they’ve killed people to keep it secret. Kill me if they knew I was talking, ghosts or no ghosts.”

“Dottie told me that Polly took her on a taste so she’d understand, see it for herself. I’ve had that same taste”

“Back in the slavery days, some of the masters’ young men got tired of messing around with the slave girls, they went searching for something more, and found

it in New Orleans. A special, very exclusive market for child slaves. Some as young as four up to 13, 14, white and black, being kept in a network of secret brothels. A dozen different meadow houses. A lot of children didn't live to 20, those that did were sold off to become field hands on some other plantation, did their best to forget about it. Jacob wouldn't forget, they could see it in his eyes."

"Jacob was one?"

"Yeah, Polly too. She was a very pretty girl, who got a lot of extra abuse. By the time she was 16 or 17, she had stopped talking, she wasn't quite right in the head, but she stayed on at Wainwright house, in the kitchen, started picking up voodoo from one of the older women who cooked. She lived to about 50 and died in that kitchen, in the old mansion, grabbed the side of her head one day and fell to the floor, dead. She died before Jacob was born, in the meadow house. His mama was 14, she died bringing him into the world. The meadow house was his world. He lived in the children's bedroom, taken care of by the older children until he was about 5, then he was introduced to the meadow house and the special friends of the master's families inside the network. Then that became his world.

He endured it until he was 19 going on 20. When it was time for him to go, he found out he wasn't gonna be sold off to another plantation far away, They was gon' kill him. They could see it in his eyes. He was always gonna be trouble. That day Jacob ran off, was hiding in the Wexley's smokehouse and was discovered by mistress Sara Wexley. She kept him safe for two days and he told her all about that place. He swore he'd come back and burn it down. She promised to help him escape. That night, Justin Wainwright and Lucien LeChette caught them both, brought em back. After he cursed them they cut out his tongue, then castrated him, then lynched him, then burnt him up and dumped his ashes in the river. They made her watch the whole thing, laying on the ground, bound and gagged. The she was put in the back of a wagon and an associate took her to New Orleans. And the meadow house went on as usual. The official story was she ran off with a couple of field bucks that night and disappeared, but Sara wasn't like that."

"After the war, the network had largely collapsed along with everything else in the South. Most of the slaves in the other brothels were outright killed as liabilities when those plantations were about to fall to the Yankees, but the houses on Old Maison never fell, and they never completely shut down their

private brothel, even when Jacob and Polly showed up and started carrying out the curse.”

“They shut one down in 1892, and 1905 was real bad. The whole town burned down, Jacob even treatened all the Wainwrights and LeChettes for the sins of a few. That’s when the colored folk in the county were made off limits and he thought he’d put a stop to it. In ‘38 they were at it again, and he burnt that one down, and that seemed to be it, until now.”

“Now, Jacob is fed up mad. Something bad is coming. We can feel it.”

Jacob was still floating in the back seat of the sedan as Roger and Harry drove by the County Hospital, pulling into the small parking lot of the Wainwright Clinic. The two of them decided against Dottie’s for lunch, instead they went to the hospital to try their luck there, then go on to Wainwright. A deputy was approaching from the west. Roger was just stepping out of the sedan and watched the cop car with aprehension. The deputy just smiled and waved as he passed them. Just like this morning, when they shot their report in the town square, A deputy was headed to the Police Station in the background. Instead of coming over or even looking at them with interest, he just waved hello and went on his way. Roger knew they knew who he was, but so far they weren’t interfering. He was tempted to relax, attribute it to the live camera he was using, but he was still suspicious.

Harry set the laptop on the car’s hood and set up for the test shot as Roger rearranged the clinic bullet points he’d written out on note cards. Jacob made note of the time, almost 12:30. Jason should be up at the bridge about now, Jacob thought. These two will be here a little while, he decided, rising into the air and speeding away north.

He arrived at the river, drifted west until he was hovering over the worn, rickety house itself. He’d scanned the area coming up, everything was normal, there’s nobody here but me and Jason, that’s all he saw.

He set down a few feet away from Wexley, remaining unseen, observing. He was cramming the last of a sandwich in his mouth and had the camera aimed under the bridge. Jacob drifted down to the landing at the bottom of the service stairs and stood before the door. It was an old, dented, rusty metal door. Jacob put his

hand against it; he couldn't phase it through the door. He stood there in shock, he could phase through any goddamn thing! He tried to push against it, but it was like his muscles refused to work. All he could do was touch it.

He glanced at the concrete wall around the door. It looked like ordinary fresh concrete, bright and bare. The wall in Jason's viewfinder focused in on the funny looking scribbles on both sides of the door.

Jacob returned to hover above the ground near Jason, as he walked on until he was across from the old house, looking at it through the camera. He was staring at something in the yard beside the house. There was a large area where the tall uncut grass was at least three inches shorter than the grass around it. You couldn't tell until you were right on top of it. He took a few quick shots, walked further down to get a few more at the other end of the house. Jacob tried this time to see beneath the grass, but he couldn't see past the top layer of dirt.

It was the same on this side of the creek, too, he discovered. This was becoming irritating. He shot high up into the air, and 'pushed,' read the ground around the old battered house as hard as he could. After a minute he could make out an outline, a rough oval from the house to the bridge 50 yards out from all sides, it was all blank surface and he couldn't penetrate it.

First that serum, and now more new juju, much stronger than anything he'd ever seen before. Jacob's unseen face twisted in rage, there could be children in there right now and he couldn't do shit!

After a minute, he calmed down, started wondering what else they were up to. What if they had something that could stop him and Polly for good; they wouldn't go to all this trouble just to rub it in my face once I found em, he thought. These assholes are declaring all out war...

Jason had walked back to his bike, rolled onto Old Maison headed back to work. The boy spent enough time out here, Jacob thought, watching him ride off. Later on he'd check out them pictures he took, but for now Jacob remained high above the new meadow house, still secret, still untouchable.

Things had just gone past worse, to critical.

Inside the equipment room of the meadow house, Ethan saw Roger and his cameraman in the clinic parking lot on his monitor. He switched his headset phone from the guard at the camera to comm line 1, connecting him to the Memphis headquarters of Spectral4, the office of the director, Lucas Jonesborough, who observed the action on one of a pair of monitors on his desk.

“Well, he’s outside the goddamn clinic now, been live on the internet all morning,” Ethan said. “He ain’t mentioned the girl yet, but I bet he knows where she is. If she gets on there and starts talking, there’ll be no end to it then.”

Lucas looked at the equipment Roger and Harry were using. “Ethan, can you zoom in on the car?” Ethan relayed the command to Lester on the second floor landing, and he focused in on the dark sedan in the parking lot. Through the windshield resting on the dashboard, Lucas could see a pda phone. A standard type 3 field agent’s “mobile,” as the UK agents call them.

A properly programmed type 3 couldn’t be monitored or tracked even by another mobile, but they did have an emergency channel that broadcast a silent beacon in a 5-mile radius and made itself visible. With a second device and a wireless override, one could remotely force the beacon on. The overrides were for emergencies only and under lock and key at Tech Central, not even the Director had one, but Lucas had a friend in Tiger6. Tiger labs built Surveillance and Stealth equipment, and 6 was one of the labs that worked on the type 3’s. And he paid his guy damn well to build a few, just for him. They’d been put to good use twice in the past 8 months.

“I got just what you need. Send somebody up to the airport, I’ll have it there in an hour,” Lucas said, opening his desk drawer and picking up a small wooden box. Inside were the three devices, each a short thick antenna sticking out of a black base the size of a large marble. A USB plug emerged from the base at a right angle to the antenna.

On the screen he could see the two of them finishing up, the camera man working on the computer.

“We’ll need to use that pda phone sitting on the dash, you gotta keep him there.”

“No problem. I’ll have Jenkins feed em lunch and give em a tour of the hospital and clinic,” Ethan said. He switched over to Lester back at the clinic, told him to get Dr. Jenkins who worked the day shift. When Jenkins came up and took the

headset Ethan explained the situation and told him to just be courteous, but keep em there at least an hour.

He switched back to confirm with Lucas, who was handing off a small manilla envelope to his secretary for the courier.

The monitor showed Dr. Jenkins walking toward the two men; Harry was sitting in the front seat, posting the excerpt of their just finished clinic report. Roger was still holding the mike, watching the old distinguished doctor as he approached. They shook hands, and after a minute of conversation, the two followed Jenkins back to the clinic.

Ethan called up the sherrif. "Burt? Send somebody up to Airport City. We got another care package coming from Memphis."

The police scanner radio, back in the van, picked up Burt calling Danny at the truck stop cafe on Hwy 49, ordering him to finish up lunch, quit messing with Fran and git on up to Hattiesburg-Laurel Regional Airport for a pickup. The van was empty, Polly and Rebecca were still enjoying the shade a short distance from the vehicle, the fragrant blossoms of the Cameilias and Magnolias carried aloft on a light breeze.

Chapter 13

Roger and Harry were more than happy to break for a long lunch, then take in a tour of the hospital and clinic. Halfway through the tour, the helicopter from Memphis arrived at Airport City, what the locals called Hattiesburg-Laurel Regional Airport. Danny was parked over near the private hangars, waiting on the hot tarmac with the windows up and the air on and his guts churning.

Things were getting tense back at the station, the deputies pissed that they couldn't bust in doors or knock heads in the Plaines or the Quarters, get some info on where the ghosts were hiding that girl. She hadn't gone and told anybody yet or they woulda heard from their redneck contacts in the State Police. These people seemed to have contacts everywhere, Danny thought. He tolerated them treating him like a damn retriever, sent to 'fetch' things or people, most of the time kept out of the station house. Suited him just fine. Up to now, it was a quiet job and the pay was ok. He'd only been a New Orleans police officer 3 months when Katrina hit. He quit three weeks later, he couldn't take it anymore, his hometown was gone forever. He didn't want to leave the Gulf Coast, so he applied at different towns and was hired by Wainwright County in December. The last couple months, he'd been fetching things from Airport City to the Station house, but a couple weeks ago he delivered an ordinary looking desktop computer to a strange place underground at the Biloxi River bridge, to an old cracker he was pretty sure had a hooded sheet in his closet, he damn sure had one in his eyes when he looked at me, Danny thought. He could feel the cold hatred the man threw off. Ethan, connected to the LeChettes, somebody Sherri Burt answered to. After being in that place, seeing those dolls and symbols everywhere, the job started feeling dirty. He knew enough to recognize the dark voodoo they were playing with, the discovery made him mad, fearful, dirty.

And the ghosts didn't like dirty, and don't matter what Polly says, she can go from sweet to deadly in a blink, kill you or cripple you for life and laugh about it. Meeting her last night hadn't changed his opinion one bit.

The runway was empty, no flights coming or going. Danny waited until the helicopter set down, less than 20 feet away, then sprinted from the car toward it as the pilot's door opened. He handed the deputy a small manila envelope. Danny checked it to confirm the delivery, then signed for it. The pilot signaled to him to back up, then took off once Danny got clear. The chopper was speeding

back to Memphis, the sound fading fast as he trotted back to the patrol car and tried not to think about it. He turned the engine over, whipped the car around and squealed off down Terminal Dr. to Hwy 59 south, then onto 49 at Hattiesburg, sirens screaming all the way down the 45 miles to Wainwright county, sirens off as he approached the county line.

Meanwhile, Lester was waiting for Roger to begin his live interview with Dr. Jenkins in the padded room, room “0,” 10 minutes later, Lester put his slim jim to use on the sedan, and acquired the mobile. 15 long minutes later, Danny arrived at the clinic, handed the envelope off to the camera guard.

Lester was following Ethan’s instructions, accessing the mobile’s emergency channel with the stylus, then plugging in the override. After a few seconds, an amber message box flashed onto the screen:

“Operating strength: 100.

1 or more type 3 devices detected”

Options:

Monitor, Initiate Beacon, Initiate Remote Beacon, Lock Out, Disable Device.”

“Yeah, the screen just came up,” Lester said, tapping “Initiate Remote Beacon” with the stylus. An amber light pulsated beneath the top left corner of the mobile, through it’s translucent housing. For about five seconds, then it went off.

On the screen it said “Emergency Beacon active on 1 detected device.”

“Yep, it’s working,” Lester said, as Ethan had him bring up the emergency map. It opened to a view of half the county, with the clinic in the center, a white button pulsing on the map. He tapped the onscreen controls to zoom out, then increase the scanning range, then he saw it. A second button, amber, located in downtown Liberty Plainses, about 4 1/2 miles southeast of the hospital. “Yeah, I see him. He’s in the Plainses”

Ethan buzzed into his ear “Good. Give it back to the nig and fetch it hear! That interview won’t be going on much longer.” Lester smirked as he finished up with the device and unplugged it from the mobile, handed it back over to Danny. “Ethan says fetch.” Lester said, laughed as the deputy just shook his head and

walked off to his patrol car.

Lester went on through the parking lot to the sedan, placing the mobile back on the dashboard in reasonably the same place, then beat it back up to the second floor landing. A minute later Roger and Harry came out of the basement level, still shooting live as they finished up, thanking Dr. Jenkins, heading out to their car.

Jacob leaned against a young poplar tree in the woods, across from the old Kingston house, mad, frustrated, worried.

He'd been trying the last couple hours to beat this thing with no luck, around, above or below - he went underground searching for a way in, came to a solid barrier of dirt, about 50 feet under the old house. He could barely press his fingers into it, then when he relaxed, the ground pushed them back out. Up top it was the same, he couldn't get within 50 feet of the yard or the house without hitting an invisible barrier. He went and got his big juju bag, but none of the charms he had helped, not the bones, not even his goofer dust. He floated off into the woods, tired from his efforts, and from staying unseen the whole time. He sat against a tree with the equally unseen bag beside him, feeling lost and helpless, for the first time since that long ago night he was lynched.

Jacob heard a car driving up Old Maison from town, ignored it until it stopped on the other side of the bridge. He looked around, saw Danny, that black deputy, getting out and going down the service stairs to the door underneath. Jacob flew to the landing, grateful he could at least reach the door as he hovered there. Danny looked like he'd just tasted something nasty as he waited in front of the door. Presently there was a 'click,' and he turned the knob and entered. Jacob made himself smoky, poured through the entrance above Danny's head, getting all inside before the door was closed.

Jacob formed himself up again, saw the deputy walking down a dimly lit narrow passage that angled off to the left, more bare clean concrete, even the ceiling. Immediately he was hit from all sides with a blast-furnice wave of heat, dry heat. Made his skin prickly, his guts cramped, his mouth went cottony, He made a noise, Danny was 10 feet away, he stopped, turned around, saw nothing in the dimly lit passage. Just a narrow-assed hallway with them dolls hanging from the

ceiling. He walked on, Jacob concentrated, made himself more solid, drew himself up the best he could and pushed on, trying to catch up. The further he went down the passage the more he could feel a gentle resistance, something pushing against him from all sides.

He came up behind Danny as he reached a second door. Another 'click' and he opened this one, left it ajar as he turned to the right, into a small room with electronic equipment on metal shelves and a desktop computer with a flat screen monitor, and little monitors on a table. Jacob stayed at the doorway, observed an old man with sandy buzz cut hair and a sharp nose sitting before the little monitors, looking at Danny with a hard stare as he entered. "Well, where the hell is it?" he barked. Danny just gritted his teeth as he stopped at the table, reached into a breast pocket of his uniform, took out the little manilla envelope and gave it to the old man, who snatched it from the deputy. He turned back to the monitors before him. "What're you waiting for, a tip? Boy, get the hell on out a here!" he snapped, but Danny had already turned to leave as soon as the old man's mouth opened. He wore a hard, sour expression as he left.

Jacob quickly moved back, leaned against the opposite wall just past the other, closed door, fighting the heat, fighting to keep himself solid and remain where he stood as he watched the deputy leave through the exit. He looked behind him, saw a black curtain at the end of the short hallway he was in. He knew what was behind there, that dee-van, the last goddamned stick of furniture from the original meadow house, the only piece he missed in '38. Soon enough, he thought. He struggled back to the open doorway and entered, trying his best not to bump against anything or make a noise as he moved slowly, painfully around to see what the old man was doing.

He was watching the little TV monitors, there were four of 'em, only three of them lit; one had a view of the parking lot and grounds outside the Wainwright Clinic, another showing the entrance underneath the bridge, Danny just closing the door, looked like he was muttering to himself as he walked up the service steps, back to his car. The old man got a laugh out of that.

The third view was out the back of the old Kingston house, showing the woods across the river bank. Dammit, Jacob thought, they saw Wexley out there.

Jacob considered how bad it might get for Jason as he watched the old man roll the chair over to the desktop computer, tapping the keyboard. The larger monitor

sprang to life. He took a black ball and stick thing out of the envelope, plugged it into a little slot in the back.

Jacob was sorely tempted to read this peckerwood; this was the one who set that goddamned trap last night, but he couldn't risk it now. It took all he had to remain standing, not be flung out. His skin had gone from prickly to a burning itch all over. He was trembling slightly from the exertion, mouth screwed tight as he fought to stay silent and watch.

The computer monitor showed a light colored square with words on it:

"Operating strength: 100.

"Emergency Beacon active on 1 detected device."

The old man leaned over and flicked a switch on a box in front of the monitors. "Yeah, Lucas, I'm bringing it up now," he said. He started moving and clicking that mouse thing and presently, a map came up, the old house and the bridge in the center, not much else. "Hit 'Control F7' and keep hitting it till you see the whole county." Jacob could just make out the voice from the headphones. Somebody named Lucas.

The map now covered the county. "Good," Lucas said. "Now hit 'Control F11' and keep hitting it, till you see it." After about five or six times two pulsing lights appeared, a yellow one in Liberty Plains, moving slowly east through town, the other, white, at the 49 - county road intersection, the Liberty Motel. "Them other two both at the motel?" Lucas asked. The old man flipped the switch to another dial. "Burt? Both them boys at the motel? "Yeah, Jesse called in 'bout 10 minutes ago. they both in the room."

"Good. Put Danny on that detail, and send Jesse over here. I got a job for him."

He clicked back over and relayed the message to Lucas, then leaned back in his chair, smiling. The yellow light kept going east, passing the Quarters. "We'll see where he settles, then we'll see 'bout him and that girl," the old man said.

Just then Jacob was hit by another cramp, a low grunt escaped from his lips. The old man whipped around, stared hard in the ghost's direction. "What was that?" "What was what?" Lucas buzzed in his ear. The old man squinted as he stared dead at Jacob, as if he could see him. "Ethan?!" Lucas said, louder. Ethan said "I

don't know, but I think the nigger let a chigger sneak in here."

"Shit, stop thinking and turn on the flush! Hurry up!" Lucas said. Ethan took off the headphones and hurried over to the metal shelves behind the computer, to a cassette tape player and a small stack of tapes, picked out one, snapped it in and turned it on. Jacob was immediately bombarded by the heavy beating of drums like fists, hard blows to his head and body, and chanting then was a piercing wailing high-pitched scream that shattered his concentration. He yelled out in rage as he was flung from the room backwards and up. As he passed through the ceiling, he felt it scrape hard against him, then he was tumbling through the air.

By the time he righted himself, he was floating high above the trees, at least a mile south of the old house. He felt cooked on the inside, and raw outside. He was pissed off, fed up mad now. They brought new juju, from outside, mean to do us in. They ain't learned shit. They ain't gonna stop. He decided right then, the big juju bag. He'd take out the 5 or 6 worse memories, but that still leaves a couple dozen, that oughta do it, he thought. He kept seeing that yellow dot going east on that map, just had to be Polly's damn fool, gone take 'em right to the girl.

Fast as he could, he flew back, not bothering with the meadow house now, he landed at the poplar tree where he left his unseen big juju bag, then flew on to his old, gnarled tree near the three ancient Red Maples. He was starting to sweat a little from having to do so much unseen during the day when it was harder, particularly in the heat of mid-afternoon. He reached into the large knothole on the trunk above his head, took out the little bag and emptied it into the larger, then sorted through the big bag, taking six out to go in the little bag. Back into the knothole it went, then he cinched up the big bag, floated up through the small stand of river birch surrounding the ancient trees, then flew off toward the Liberty Motel.

It's my turn now, Jacob thought.

Henry was smiling in the sunlight as his bike rolled past the county line sign, cruising down the road to the clearing on the left, stopping and making sure the coast was clear before he rode off in to the woods. He felt a huge weight lifting off his shoulders, He was gonna chill out until after sunset, then the van was gonna head east and south to Hwy 10, then shoot back to Baton Rouge and back

to Vegas. He'd even take the girl to LA, deliver her to Xavier himself, he felt so good.

He stopped next to the back of the van, now in full shade. He was about to open the rear doors, but looked inside and saw Rebecca sleeping. Smiling, he rolled the bike up near the front door, parked it there, then retrieved the mobile from his rear pocket, sat down in the cooling shade and typed out a final text report for Xavier, attached the audio of his long interview with Ms. Jemson and hit 'send.' When it finished, he turned it off, then gently eased the front passenger door open and put the mobile away, in the same bag as the computer he couldn't use. He fished the half joint from the ashtray and checked for the book of matches that were in his pocket. He sat back down in the shade inside the hill and smoked the joint down to a corner, let it go out, and swallowed it. After a minute or so, he got up and decided to go look for Polly; he wanted to say goodbye. He was gonna miss her.

After a few minutes of walking through the woods, admiring the spring blossoms, he heard humming, followed the sound to a shaded spot surrounded by Camelias and Magnolias in bloom. He found Polly floating there just above the gentle grass, adult sized, pinching one of her thick dark nipples and giggling. "Hey Henry!" She said. Henry smiled a goofy smile, walking toward her as he started tugging off his jersey.

As Henry approached the county line, enjoying the bike-generated breeze, Jacob arrived at the motel, saw Danny at the gas station across the county road, topping off his tank. He waited until the deputy moved the car over near the air pump, where he could watch the motel, then moved in.

He settled in the back seat, directly behind Danny, whose arms and legs promptly went numb. He started shivering, thinking this was Polly again. "Naw, not this time, but Polly, and that girl need your help. I saw you with that peckerwood, you know he gone kill her, and you helping 'em. Now, time to do the right thing." And with that, Jacob set his bag on the floor and took possession of the deputy, told him to cooperate and everything would be fine, then he got out of the car and walked quickly across the road to the motel, coming up behind the office through the driveway to the front, to room 106. He paused at the door, it took an extra second or two till he heard the door unlock itself, then he quickly

entered, found the two men going through plans for a night shoot.

Before they could react, the deputy put his finger to his lips. Shocked, they obeyed. He looked around the room, then pointed at the lamp on the dresser and gestured toward the bathroom. Once inside, he turned on the water, then spoke. "I know you looking for that girl. What they tell you?"

Roger stared at the deputy for a long moment, then decided to trust him. "Dr. Jenking said she recovered, checked out last week and went back to Atlanta. He didn't have a forwarding address."

"She escaped from the clinic last night with help. Her mind is intact, and she wants to tell her story, but she's about to get found. I know where she is, but I need your help to save her."

Roger and Harry looked at each other, both nodded once, then to the deputy. "Good. Give me a couple minutes, then drive around and leave out the back, meet me at the county road." the possessed Danny said. "One more thing. Take the batteries outta your mobile, they tracking you with that thing."

He left the bathroom, quickly moved to the motel door and was gone.

They took those minutes gathering their gear, and removing the large battery from the mobile, then went out to their car parked in front and casually drove around, exiting from the rear lot, meeting Danny on the county road out of view of the motel office. One of his hands was balled in a fist, as if he was carrying something, but he wasn't. He got in the back, told them it was straight ahead, through town and past the Quarters. They sped off.

Jacob, still wearing Danny like a suit, noted the time on the car's clock, 3:38pm. He relaxed a little, saving his strength for the next part. He had until they reached the county line.

A red pickup truck with a regulation gun rack and rebel flag decal on the tailgate was parked on the shoulder about 100 yards from the county line. Jesse was on foot just crossing the county line, carrying a rifle. His radio was turned low. "Keep going. They're on down, a little north of the road." Jesse veered left into the woods, the low grass and gentle hills. After a few minutes, he saw up ahead

the back end of a dark blue van, sticking out of a hill. Getting closer, he saw the hill had been dug out.

He approached the back door, rifle ready, eased up to the window. There she was, sleeping inside, alone. He smiled, backed away from the van and, scanning the area, whispered into the mike: "I got her, she's inside the vehicle, asleep. Don't see the target yet, but I'll report back after I'm done." He moved into the woods carefully listening for a telltale. After a few minutes he heard a female voice, slowly inched toward the sound.

The sedan was fast approaching the red truck on the road. Danny told Jacob that was Jesse's vehicle. From the back seat the two heard "They're here already. See that clearing up ahead on the left? Go through there. hurry." Jacob sent out a warning to Polly as they reached the clearing and veered off into the woods. A long minute later, they stopped at the hill. The possessed deputy jumped out, ran around to the van, flung open the double doors. The girl was sleeping, unharmed. Roger was right behind him, mic in hand. Harry had just finished initiating the live stream and left the laptop on the car's hood. He went live as he approached the van.

Jacob left them and quickly strode off into the woods, following his senses. He heard an anguished yelp coming from his right, presently came upon Jesse pinned against a tree, choking. "Put it down!" he heard Polly yelling. Jesse let go of the rifle. Henry was finishing pulling up his pants as he walked over to get the rifle and the deputy's gun. Polly let Jesse breathe again, looked over and saw Danny and started to smile, but she saw Jacob's angry glare reflected there. He walked over, ignored Henry and grabbed Jesse by the shirt and started dragging him back towards the van. "Danny, git your goddamned hands-" He looked at the deputy's face; that wasn't Danny looking back at him. He trembled in silence the rest of the way to the van, Polly going unseen and floating on ahead, Henry bringing up the rear.

Rebecca was startled awake by a noise, noticed the rear doors of the van were open, and was about to panic when she saw Roger Lowell of "The File Room" standing outside, holding a mic and talking, he'd just mentioned her name and looked her way, saw she was awake and smiled at her. She climbed out the back of the van as she saw a black Wainwright County sheriff's deputy dragging a white deputy toward the van. They stopped in front of Roger's cameraman, the black deputy held up the other one and said "tell 'em!"

Jesse, still trembling in terror, said “Ok, Yeah, I-I was sent to get the girl and k-kill anybody else with her.” “And who sent you?” “Uh, Sherriff-” “No. Who does Burt answer to?” “E-Ethan” “Ethan what? “I just know his first name-Ethan!” Jesse said, anguished, terrified. “And who does he answer to?” the black deputy said, his voice sounded strange, otherworldly. “I don’t know!” Jesse shouted, squeezing his eyes closed. Jacob, feeling much better now, quickly read the deputy, caught his anguish at spillin his guts on camera, wondering if he would live long enough to get out of town. Jacob dug out the name... “You do know, now I know. Lucas Jonesborough in Memphis, that name mean anything to you?” he asked Roger. His eyes widened in recognition; Xavier mentioned Lucas Jonesborough often, interfering with some research case back in February, because he was the Director of a Spectral lab, uh, 3, no, Spec4, in Memphis!

Danny let Jesse go, he stumbled off, away from the gathering, turned and ran through the woods back to the county road. Danny calmly left Roger’s side, walked toward the sedan and opened the rear door. Roger was focused on the camera, shifting into reporter mode, elaborating on the live confession streamed to thousands worldwide, proof that there was enough evidence for a genuine casefile, that a witness (gesturing to Rebecca) had been imprisoned and threatened with death, that those pursuing her had ties to ‘the Campus,’ specifically, to Spectral4, a research lab in Memphis, apparently not wanting anyone to investigate this ghost story...

Henry walked up to the van, stood next to Rebecca, who gave him a warm hug. Roger hadn’t seen him yet. Henry saw the camera pointed his way so he turned away. “Henry?” Polly whispered inside his head, “you and Rebecca get inside the van, and close your eyes.” He didn’t hesitate, he touched the girl on the arm, she’d heard Polly as well and nodded, together they climbed into the van, Roger noticed the strange man on the scene with the girl, thought he looked familiar, but he kept commenting on the case, as the two slowly brought the double doors closed, and landed prone on the mattress, face down. “Stay just like that till it’s over,” they both heard Polly whisper to them.

Outside, Danny had walked back in front of the camera, behind Roger. It looked like he was clutching something in his left hand, but it was empty, then suddenly, he was holding an old leather bag with a leather drawstring around the neck. He set the bag down and opened it, by then Roger had noticed Harry had focused on something behind him. He turned and noticed the deputy.

He reached into the bag, took out two small bones, and with one in each hand he plunged them back down, came out clutching the bones and two handfuls of sandy dirt. He took a deep breath, then, a small speck of light emerged from the bag, hovered chest-high, then two, then more, and more, until that spark of light was now as big as a tennis ball, glowing. Roger shielded his eyes, looked back to Harry. He was captivated by the light, stepped forward a few feet. zoomed in on it. Danny was sweating now, his breathing getting ragged, and the ball was getting brighter, and smaller, compacting until it became a brilliant spark. And in a thousand places across the globe, on computer screens in office cubicles from the west coast to Denver, in college dorm rooms and dens across the country, in isolated spots across Latin America, Europe, Japan, where some people had followed the live odyssey all day, a spark of light appeared, hovered in the air between the monitors and the equally captivated faces of the viewers. The light silently exploded, the people collapsed, fell back in their seats or to the floor, grunting, bodies twitching.

And at Basic Research in London, a lab rat trainee on evening scanner duty was also on the floor of a cubicle, twitching. On the monitor the van, was sideways, the camera on the soft, low grass, Roger, in a panic, calling Harry's name.

Chapter 14

Ethan stared at the darkened monitor on his table, extremely pissed. He turned it off as the first spark emerged from that damn leather bag. Lucas in Memphis almost fell victim to Jacob, but Ethan, screaming at him to turn off the monitor, got through to him in time. He was staring at the light, it pulled at him as he leaned toward the power switch. He hit it just as a spark seemed to come out of the screen, but it died along with the light. Lucas collapsed his bulk back into his plush leather chair, in shock, heart racing, gulping and sweating inside his air-conditioned sanctuary.

They both heard a muffled crash erupt from their computer speakers, then silence. Ethan stewed, while Lucas breathed heavily on his headset. “Goddammit! Goddamn dead spook nigger goddammit!” When Danny didn’t check in, he sent Lester over to kick Danny in his lazy ass. Jesse was already closing in, he wasn’t worried. Ten minutes later it all went to shit. Lester called back, said the room was empty and the car was gone, Danny too. Not a minute later, after sending Lester that way, that damn live camera was back on, and there was Jesse, singing like a goddamn bird to Danny, about everything. Said our names! Little chickenshit.

When Roger got back on and started insinuating and signifying, him and Lucas were arguing about what to do, they only half saw Danny come back on with that damn leather bag. Almost too late they realized, that wasn’t Danny...

Ethan was still shaking in rage at the level of damage the ghost inflicted. They were just getting the house going with regular clients, the new anti-ghost technology worked fine, and more goodies were coming from Memphis. It was perfect. Now, the families and Spectral4 were exposed, the unfortunate history of this county had been spread like dirty laundry, all over the world. Right now was the calm before the storm, but the storm was coming...

Lucas had two hours at best before the Campus agents showed up. Ethan had a little longer; time to get the equipment out. He started up at the ceiling, the dolls and charms hanging there. “Goddamn ghost. We beat yo’ ass fair and square, and you go over the edge...”

He waited another moment, then tried his monitor, stabbing at the power switch

and jerking back, swallowing as the screen came up. The camera was on the ground now, in the low grass, displaying a sideways view of the van's double doors. It was a dark blue Ford Econoline. Through the speakers was Roger Lowell, babbling. The feed was still live.

A light on the comm blinked. Lester. He switched over. "Yeah?" "Yeah, Ethan. I got Jesse up ahead, walking my way." "Good. Sit on his monkey lovin' ass and stand by. Goddamn canary."

The van doors opened. The girl, and a black guy in a bike riding outfit came out, looked around, saw the camera was still on, then quickly stepped out of view. Ethan slammed his hand on the table in frustration, then noticed the van's license plate. It didn't have Mississippi blue letters near the top; those were red, had to be from Louisiana, but it was a blur. He quickly switched the comm back over to Lucas. "Hey, turn your monitor back on. We got a license plate, but I can't make it out."

"Hold on," Lucas said, grunting as he got up and leaned over to the monitor on the left. Once the picture came back up, he made the image fill the screen, then switched his comm over to the Tech Office downstairs. "Hey Anderson, you people ok down there?" "Uh, yessir. We turned the monitor off in time, but it's still recording." "Good. We got a license plate onscreen, and we need that number. I want you on this personally." "Uh, yessir, chief."

Lucas stood at his desk, slowly looked around his office, HIS for the last ten years. He smiled, shook his head. When it's done, it's done, leave when it's time to leave. He pressed the button for the general intercom. "Attention, department heads. This is Lucas. Rabbit hole! I repeat, rabbit hole. You have one hour to transfer files, pack up the hybrid equipment, and wipe the Campus computers. If any of you can spare a couple hands, send them to help out Tech. Let's move people!" He buzzed his secretary to have the car brought around. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, took out a set of keys and a remote control, put them in his coat pocket, got the little box of wireless overrides from the top drawer, put them in the other.

He switched his comm back over to Ethan. "All right, we'll have that license plate in a few minutes. I'll see you later at the rabbit hole." "Ok, Lucas, talk to you later. Say hi to our guest for me."

Lucas turned off his computer; on Ethan's monitor the feed from Memphis switched over to the Tech room; the geeks were working at their computers. Ethan called the garage in Wainwright, told them to send over a mover, then went to begin breaking down the bunk beds.

Polly appeared inside the crook of the three ancient Red Maples and Jacob's juju tree, floating just above the ground, holding onto Jacob's unconscious form. She settled him within the dappled shadows of the bushy trees, next to his big juju bag, then put it back in the knothole. Polly was scared. This was worse than when she got knocked down rescuing Rebecca; Jacob was knocked out, breathing shallow, covered in sweat. She saw the whole terrible thing from inside the van. He'd never done nothing like this, using damn near the whole bag of collected charms at once. Afterwards, Danny fell backwards onto the grass, Jacob was just standing there, unseen, taking short shallow breaths, looking dead tired, then he fell forward. Polly flew from the van unseen, caught him in midfall, left him floating just above the leaves of grass. His eyes were barely open.

She got him and the leather bag back to the juju grove, her panic growing. She didn't know what was coming next, but she couldn't wait for him to get his wind. It could take hours, and she needed Jacob back on his feet now. She could feed him some of her strength, but it would take a little time, and meant leaving Rebecca and Henry alone. She couldn't bring 'em here, either; not a living soul in the county knew where the ghost twins slept and kept their juju, and that couldn't change, even now. She could hear Henry faintly calling. "Just give me five minutes," she whispered. She bit her lip and hoped she was doing the right thing.

Polly settled next to the unconscious Jacob, cradled him in her arms as she closed her eyes and concentrated. After a minute, she began to glow, an unseen brilliance in contrast to Jacob's ghostly pallor. Slowly, his skin began to catch, and reflect the unseen light, then absorb it. Just hang on Rebecca, she thought, as she continued to push, Henry's calls fading from her ears.

It won't be long.

Henry and Rebecca stepped out of the van, saw Harry on the ground, twitching slightly. Rebecca stared at him, winced a little, looked away. Roger was trying to bring Harry around, still in shock himself, stunned by what he just witnessed. He noticed the two as they rushed away from him, stopped near the black deputy who was out cold, his shirt soaked through, but he was breathing steady. Roger remembered a leather bag was at his feet, but it was gone, then he focused on the black man standing next to Rebecca. HE helped break her out, he's Xavier's little undercover spy! He looked familiar...

Henry had been silently calling out to Polly since emerging from the van. No answer. He noticed the birds had all quieted down around them in the afternoon heat. It was eerie. Roger was trying to pick up Harry, who outweighed him by at least a hundred pounds. Henry and Rebecca came over, helped put Harry in the back seat of the sedan. Roger noticed on the laptop the feed was still live. He killed it, stowed the camera and the computer gear. He got a better look at the stranger now. Yes, two, three years ago, Mid-west... no, East coast TV news. "Lionel, Lionel Perry, Action 7 News, New York! I remember. So, Xavier sent YOU down here to bottom feed and steal my story! For what, practice? You certainly don't need the money."

"It's Henry, and take it up with Xavier. Do you two even talk? And bite me," he said. "I don't give a damn about your story, or else I'd have a cameraman down here twitching on the - Ow!"

He felt nails digging into his left arm. It was Rebecca, staring at Harry laying in the back seat, her whole body shaking. He was puzzled for a moment, then realized, this is what happened to her. He grabbed her shoulder, broke her concentration. She looked at him, shell-shocked. Her grip eased, she wiped at her eyes. "I'm ok, really. The memories are just, so..."

"Will he be ok?"

"Well," she said, looking away, "from what Polly said, he could be out anywhere from 3 to 6 hours, depending on whose memory he caught. And did he get a taste of it, or take a, a, a ride."

"You said memories?"

"Of the slaves who worked LeChette and Wainwright plantations. Some of them are bad memories, some worse. Jacob keeps them in a big juju bag." Henry

shook at the thought of experiencing a slaves' bad day on the plantation.

And did he hear Roger say before they were broadcasting live over the net?

"Damn. Roger, you don't know what you've done, but you got your wish. This is YOUR story. In a few hours, I'm pretty sure everybody will know this is your story, and good luck with that. I did my favor for Xavier, and I'm gone."

He grabbed the bike from up front, brought it to the rear, laid it down inside, and closed the van doors. "You should get your guy to the hospital. Rebecca? You can stay here with Roger, you might even be safe now; a media crapfest is about to hit this place. Or, I can take you anywhere you'd feel safer."

She was about to answer, the opening word lost in the distant echo of a shotgun blast. It wasn't that distant.

"Never mind, we're outta here. Come on," Henry said, running to the driver side of the van. He stopped when he saw Jesse's rifle where he dropped it. He hesitated, then left it. Rebecca rushed past him, opened the door and climbed in, sliding over. Through the rear view mirror, she could see Roger just getting into the sedan. Henry climbed in, saw the keys were still in the ignition. He turned it over and was checking the rear-view to see if Roger had moved yet. He saw the car slowly backing away, then when it cleared the opening, Henry barrelled the van straight back until he had a clear view out the windshield. He saw Roger backing up, then the sedan turned right and headed back west toward the county road. Henry drove forward, to the left of the hollowed-out hill, driving east.

As they reached the clearing and slowly approached the road, Henry checked left for oncoming traffic. "Oh no!" Rebecca shouted. His head snapped around. Rebecca's head blocked his view as she rolled down the window. That's when he heard the echoed chorus of screeching tires and a 'crunch.'

Rebecca moved back, Henry could see through the passenger window, Roger's sedan sprawled across the road. Two patrol cars had run off - one skidded left into a patch of swamp, the other swerved right into the woods and hit a tree. Roger stumbled out of the car, doubled over, and vomited on the asphalt. "Damn, way to go Roger," Henry said. It wouldn't stop 'em long, though.

Henry gunned the engine, rolled up onto the asphalt. Time to put this nightmare behind me... "It wasn't all bad, was it Henry?" He heard Polly's sweet voice in his ear, felt unseen hands caress his chest. Polly appeared in his lap. Rebecca

saw, not the little girl she was accustomed to, but Polly in full adult form, barely covered by that completely unbuttoned tuxedo shirt. She quickly turned away and closed her eyes. Polly gave Henry a quick, deep kiss.

“Henry, thank you so much for all your help with Rebecca. You come back and visit, anytime.” She vanished from his lap. Rebecca then felt the little girl’s arms around her neck, then little Polly was sitting in her lap.

“Rebecca, you welcome anytime. You family now. After things get settled, you promise to come back and play?” “I promise,” Rebecca said, smiling and hugging the little girl tightly. “You take care now,” she said to the little ghost, who giggled back “Oh, me and Jacob gon’ be just fine. We got help comin-. Oh, ok, ok. Jacob’s calling me,” she said, passing through the front seat, running till she reached the rear doors, then turned and waved. “Bye Henry, bye Rebecca!” Then she was gone.

Through the rear window, Henry could see the patrol car in the swamp, its wheels spinning. He hit the gas and didn’t ease off until they were going 70. He had Rebecca turn on the police scanner and had one eye on the rear view mirror for at least 50 miles, before he was certain no patrol car was following. Then they relaxed, drove on until they reached Mobile.

During the ride, Rebecca said she wanted to talk to the people from Xavier’s agency. Yes, she was eager to tell her story, but there were innocent victims scattered across the planet. They all needed to be found and given medical care. The Campus would surely want to help...

So it was decided: In the morning, they would both fly to California and meet Xavier.

They diverted to Mobile Regional Airport as the sun streamed in through the van’s rear windows. They took two rooms at a nearby motel, Henry turned in the emptied-out van at the airport rental desk and bought two tickets to LA. He was tempted to stop for a drink at the airport bar, but, he didn’t need it. His assignment was done. “Childsplay,” he said to himself, laughing as he rode the bike back to the motel.

Henry never noticed the black SUV that discreetly followed him from the rental lot back to his motel, parked close enough to see which room he rolled the bike into.

“Yeah, he’s in room 107 at the Bama Inn. I’ll be babysitting till the morning.”

“Good. I’ll be there by then. See ya later Bobby.” “Ok Ethan.”

High above Alaska, Sylvia Cavendish lounged in the leather seat of the Campus jet, taking the Arctic route from Hawaii to Great Britain, enjoying a cup of camomile tea. Earlier, she received the second progress report from Xavier - his Mr. Smith had completed his tasks and was leaving the field. Good; now she only had to concern herself with the minor matter of Roger Lowell’s unscheduled and very unprofessional attempt at ‘field investigation.’ A few of the stuffier research lab directors on the Committee would grumble, but she could handle them...

Half an hour later, she received an urgent message from Basic in London. One of the ‘lab rat’ trainees was watching the “File Room” webcast, and was found in the Data Centre, in a coma. The doctor said it was strange. The young man was comatose, but he had the involuntary muscle spasms and rapid eye movement of a person experiencing a vivid dream. Ten minutes later, the Data Centre began picking up scattered reports from the isles and the continent, of people found in similar condition, in front of running computers, all with browsers open to the “File Room” website.

She hurriedly dialed Xavier’s phone. No answer. After three more attempts, she sent a helicopter from the agency’s private hangar out to the island. There were more calls to make, but for the moment she nestled the receiver back into its cradle and stared out at the thin clouds, feeling numb in her comfortable leather seat as the sleek jet passed from afternoon to early morning.

Chapter 15

The two ghosts were flying fast and unseen east over the Quarters, Jacob glanced down to his right, saw two patrol cars screaming down the highway. Heading right for the girl and them damn fools! Up ahead he saw Lester the hospital guard blowing a hole in Jesse's guts with a shotgun. his body landed off the shoulder of the road, not far from his red pickup. "I'll deal with yo' ass later," he said quietly to the dead man. Polly held on with little girl arms on Jacob's left, breathing in strength from the land, the trees, getting her own wind back after bringing Jacob around. They reached the hollowed-out hill as Roger was a step or two away from opening his car door. Polly split off and touched down, running towards the van, disappearing through the rear doors.

Jacob settled down in the drivers' seat as Roger opened the door. He sat down and immediately felt himself struggling with his own body. "Just stay calm, I'll be done in a minute," Roger heard inside his head. His body turned the engine over, shifted into reverse. Roger was fighting, but losing, as the car slowly backed clear of the van. The sensation of being possessed washed over him with a cottony, floating feel, ended with a mild, but numbing electric kick. Now he could only watch and breathe, trembling within. It was unexpected, exciting, and terrifying, everything Mareva said. But mostly terrifying. Roger started pouring out stark waves of fear, bringing a bitter taste to Jacob mouth. "Stop that shit!" the ghost snapped. "you'll be alright!" Jacob slipped it into drive and swung off to the right of the hill, then off through the sparse woods.

He stopped just short of the treeline, then extended his gaze above the trees. The two cars were just passing Lester's car and Jesse's truck and picking up speed. They just about...there. He pressed hard on the gas and brought his gaze back as Roger wailed inside. The big sedan shot forward, cleared the open ground in an instant, a foot above the grass, to a sudden stop dead across the county road.

Roger's view snapped to the right, out the passenger window, and then, Jacob was gone. With a start, he felt his body again, and in the same instant, registered the two cars barrelling toward him.

Jacob appeared outside the rear passenger door, standing tense with his arms chest high, hands almost touching, concentrating on the two fast approaching cars. Roger clenched his body tight as a fist, eyes locked on the cars for a long

two seconds, during which the deputy's seat belts tightened and the steering wheels turned themselves in opposite directions.

Jacob's arms split apart, and so did the cars, smoothly veering around the sedan. Roger watched the one in front flash past his windshield, missing his front bumper by inches. He saw it splash into the swamp as he heard a loud crunching thud to his left almost at once.

"See! All done!" Roger heard just behind his ear. He swung back around to see Jacob, sweat on his forehead, smiling from outside the passenger window, then vanishing into thin air. The whirling sensations overwhelmed him, he clutched at the door handle as his guts revolted. He managed to get outside and take a couple stumbling steps just as an orange spew erupted from his mouth onto the asphalt. Jacob floated up above the car unseen, surveying the damage as he got his wind back, down the road he saw Lester get in his car and start this way, then, he stopped, turned around and sped away west, barely missing Jesse's corpse beside the blacktop. Run on back to your hole, Jacob thought as he scanned the two patrol cars. The dark blue van rode up onto the county road and stopped. The two deputies were a little banged up and waterlogged, but they'd live. And the van was just sitting there. He quickly scanned it to see what the holdup was. Of course, Polly was saying her goodbyes "Dammit, Polly, hurry up, we ain't done yet." he told her silently, as Roger hurled up another load.

Jacob watched Jesse down a ways on the asphalt, next to his truck. Dumbass was still laying there with his body.

Polly joined him as the van took off, noticed the dead man in the road. "He's got a task to do first before I hand him over," Jacob said, "but I need you to take care of these two." He pointed down at the sedan, Roger hacking out a dry heave. "Take 'em to Garden Park in Gulfport, not Memorial Hospital. After they check him out, go hide and see what you can do to bring him around."

The little girl smiled and nodded, drifted down and into the car, settling onto the front passenger seat. She turned around to check on Harry, the slightly overweight man laying still in the back, except for his head, slightly twitching. She looked up suddenly, hearing the low painful groans from the two deputies, slowly coming to inside their wrecked cars. Time to get a move on.

Polly climbed over toward the driver's side as the window rolled itself down.

“Hey, mister! I think your friend is hurt. Mister!” Roger had finally straightened up, pulled a hankerchief from his back pocket and wiped his mouth. He turned, noticing the little girl, she meant Harry. Right, we have to get him to County... “No! You gotta go to Gulfport,” the little girl shouted, “I can take you. Please!” “Ok, Ok,” Roger said, getting in the car. She scampered back across the seat. He decided to concentrate on his friend, and do his best not to think about anything else, even that the little girl looked exactly the way people from both towns described the other ghost twin...

Jacob watched the sedan back up a few feet, then head east on the county road. A few miles down another county road will take ‘em south to Garden Park Medical Center, just north of Hwy 10 in Gulfport. They’d be safe for a day or so, long as they keep that camera off.

Jacob drifted back to the now empty hideout, checked on Danny, still passed out on the grass. He was sleeping peaceful, but he’d still be out here after dark. Jacob possessed Danny’s body and walked him to the back of the hollowed-out hill and laid him down comfortably, then walked back out to the late afternoon light and extended himself, back toward the Quarters, to a corner brownstone where a few of his people lived, a mother and two teenage sons, all at home. He touched their minds and spoke, showed ‘em Danny’s exact location and to come get him right now. And stay clear of the sherrif on the way over...

That done, he drifted through the woods, noted both deputies had crawled and stumbled their way out of the wrecks. He slowly flew back across the county line to the body that was Jesse, knelt down and grasped the gaping, eyes-wide face and shook it slightly. “Hey. This ain’t no dream. yo ass is dead, now git up!”

Slowly, the new spirit emerged from the corpse, ghostly clothes intact, stood up on unsteady new ghost legs, shaking before Jacob.

“We got work to do, and not much time, so just hang on,” Jacob said as he grabbed Jesse by his ghostly shoulders and launched them both into the air, heading straight to Wainwright.

Lester had just turned away from Jesse’s freshly smoking corpse, crossed the county road and walked casually to his car. He moved well off to the shoulder, watched the patrol cars coming hard, then shooting past, his car and Jesse’s truck

lightly shook in the wake. “Good, get this business settled by dinnertime,” he thought. As he reached the car he heard a muffled splash and thud behind him. He swung around, saw the first car in the swamp, didn’t have to see the other one to know it hit a tree. He recognized that goddamn Jacob standing outside the car, then vanishing. “Ethan, Ethan! That damn ghost took out the patrol cars! I see the dark van, come out of the woods. I’m in pursuit-” he shouted into the mic as he hurried into the car, fired it up and gave it the gas just as Ethan yapped at him through the engine roar. Lester stopped a few feet later. “What Ethan?”

“I said never mind them,” Ethan shouted, “I need you here at the bridge, not on his ground. I’ll call the hospital, you get back here right now.” Lester turned the mic off, grumbling, and swung the car around in a wide circle to the left, the front tire barely missing Jesse’s body on the shoulder, then he sped off west.

Ethan looked out the equipment room door, the two workmen had almost all the bunk bed pieces moved out and in the small moving truck parked just off the bridge, rear door open, a beatup old flatbed truck parked further down. The equipment room was cleared out, just the computer and comm on the table were left. Another ten minutes and we’re done, Ethan thought. He glanced at the curtain across the entrance to the den, crowned by the divan in the center. The den was not disturbed, would not be touched, we are coming back - and it’s been properly prepared...

Ethan called Dr. Jenkins on the comm, told him where to send the ambulance, then he sat back down and tapped his foot, waiting for the Spectral4 tech lab to send the license plate number to that damn van.

A couple minutes later, Anderson from Spectral4 called in and sent a image of the license, and the helpful knowledge that it was leased from Bayou Rental. As soon as Ethan acknowledged receipt Anderson hurriedly signed off and began shutting down his equipment. Ethan cut the Memphis link and opened up his email, sent out an alert to his contacts with the license plates to the van and the sedan, a Hertz rental. That done, Ethan smiled as he shut down the computer. His dogs were on ‘em now; he’d have ‘em back by morning.

The two workmen came back in, collected the remaining devices and handed Ethan the keys to the truck. They followed the old man out of the funny little underground compound with an extra \$500 each, more than enough to mind their own business where the families were concerned. They climbed up onto Old

Maison Road, got the moving truck squared away, then got in their old flatbed and headed back to town.

Five mintes later, Lester arrived. Ethan took his car keys, gave him the keys to the truck and directions to the 'rabbit hole.' "Report to Lucas first thing. You should be there by morning." Lester nodded, climbed in and started up the truck, drove south to North County Road, then right to Hwy. 49, swinging north to Memphis.

Ethan climbed in Lester's two-door pointed north, looked around at the late afternoon sky, just checking as he turned the key. The engine roared, he swung the car around, headed back to town to fill'er up and get some dinner. And wait for a call.

"Bring yo' spook ass on, Mister Jacob..."

Meanwhile, Anderson had finished up packing. A grandfatherly old man in overalls, the only other person remaining in the building, helped him carry his last boxes of components to his compact car outside. Once squared away, Anderson stood before him outside the building's entrance. He almost saluted, but stopped himself halfway, somberly shook hands with the old man, as if it were the last time.

"Go on with you now, I got work to do," he said, walking back inside the building. Anderson hurried around and got in his car, drove off through the nearly deserted streets of Bell Brook Industrial Park to E. Brooks Rd., heading west.

The old man went to the reception desk, opened a metal case sitting next to the phone. Inside were eight egg-sized black metallic globes. He took a remote from his pocket, pressed a couple buttons and a red light began blinking on each one. He smiled, closed the case and walked to the elevator, checking his watch.

Jacob and Jesse landed outside Jason Wexley's back door, unseen as they touched down within the full shade cast by the house. Jesse grunted as Jacob pulled him through the door. He left the novice ghost standing at the kitchen table and walked into the dining room. In the middle was an old oak dining table, To the left, Jason sat before his computer on a desk, back to the entrance.

He was printing out pictures from earlier today for his meeting with Aunt Aggie. His ears pricked up, he turned his head slightly.

“That you Jacob? Figured you’d drop by.” Jacob made himself seen and approached. He noticed the shots of the bridge on the desk, immediately recognized the voodoo signs on the concrete around the door. no wonder he couldn’t get through.

Jacob pointed to one sign in particular, just left of the door, an ornate circle with symbols inside and a cross in the center. “This one, can you give me a picture of this one?” he asked. “Sure,” Jason said, bringing up the pictures, zooming up a clear image of the sign, cropping and printing it out.

“I need something to draw with, and another piece of paper” Jacob said. Jason nodded and put the picture and a blank sheet on the dining room table and got a few pens from his desk, placing them beside the image. Jesse stood in the kitchen doorway, watched Jacob as he seemed to go tense all over, then he reached for a marker pen and picked it up.

“Show yourself. Just concentrate,” Jacob said. Jason heard a low grunt, saw Jesse, one of Sherrif Burt’s deputies, fade into view across the table, looking like he’d just squeezed out a large turd. “It only takes a little practice. Here, work on picking that up,” Jacob said, nodding to the blank sheet as he took the pen, blacked out the cross in the center and added some symbols of his own around the outside of the circle.

After a minute or so, Jason went back to his desk, he’d had enough of Jesse, dead Jesse. He was just another fresh reminder of how much danger he was in, and not just to his reputation in town. Jacob picked up on it as he watched Jesse struggle through slowly sliding the paper across the surface of the table to the edge.

“Jason, when you go to Mistress Agnes, just stay there till morning. Tell her I said so.” Jacob said, watching Jesse manage to lift a corner of the paper off the table, hold onto it for a full ten seconds.

“Good enough,” Jacob said, picking up his modified voodoo sign and directing Jesse toward the back door. “Talk to you after it’s over, Jason.” They both went unseen again as they reached the back door.

Jason shuddered a bit, Never get used to that, he thought. He finished up with the pictures, stowed them away in the backpack, then shut down his computer and printer and left the house, walked through downtown Wainwright to the coffee shop and bought a rhubarb pie for Agnes (everybody in town knew it was her favorite...)

West of Martin Luther King Riverside Park, just north of the Port of Memphis, a late model black Lexus and a white van cruised down Jack Carley Causeway to Channel Ave., turning left onto Wharf St., parking between the warehouse and a pair of open containers. Two men came out of the warehouse and got the doors. Lucas Jonesborough, his secretary and another staffer emerged from the Lexus, three staffers exited the van. They all removed boxes of gear and papers, then the two men drove the vehicles into a container. Lucas and the staffers carried their boxes toward a rather ordinary looking cargo barge tied up and floating in Lake McKellar, a channel just east of the Mississippi River. They boarded, following Lucas to a row of containers near the pilot house. He set down his box at a unit in the middle, took the remote from his pocket and entered a code on the keypad. A 'click,' and a hidden passenger-sized door opened. Inside was a wood paneled reception area with metal storage cabinets along the walls and doorways leading to containers on either side. A guard sat behind a bank of monitors at his desk, nodded to the group as they entered. At the far end, a short stairway led down to the cargo hold, converted into a dozen offices and labs.

The staffers from the van took their boxes downstairs to their respective offices. Lucas walked on, stopping at a door halfway down on the right. He punched a code into the keypad over the doorknob, then entered. On the right a lab tech was sitting at a table, bare except for a coffee machine, looking over medical records on a clipboard. "How's our guest?" he asked the tech, looking over at a glass cage on the left. Inside, an old black man was lying on a cot in the corner, hooked up to an IV, diagnostic equipment quietly beeping beside him. He looked asleep, only his eyes were wide open.

"He's doing Ok. His last dose was a couple hours ago," the tech said. "Good. We ain't done with him just yet. I'll check back later," Lucas said, leaving the room. The lab tech put the clipboard down and poured himself a fresh cup. The name on the medical records was John Porterhouse.

Lucas walked on down the hallway to his new office, feeling a little like a pirate. Hell, we sure as shit ain't Spectral4 anymore, he thought. He entered his office, pleased with the decor; it looked much like his old office, only smaller. He was glad they stepped up the conversion last year; he'd learned to trust his gut, and the funny feeling he got after the mess back in November, with Augustus Wainwright, and the girl, turned out well justified.

He took off his coat, eased his bulk into the leather chair behind his desk, and was taking various items out of the pockets when his secure cell phone chirped. "Yeah?"

"It's Alfred. All personnel have evacuated, I'm moving into position now," the grandfatherly old man reported, exiting the lobby and entering the office building across the street. "Fine and dandy. You have a 'go' to decommission the facility, once our friends arrive. Report back as soon as it's done," Lucas said, ending the call and smiling. That takes care of the back door...

He sat back in the soft red leather, nothing to do now but wait for his fellow pirates to arrive.

Three hours out from Heathrow Airport, Sylvia Cavendish felt utterly powerless. Even as she received intel and coordinated activities with senior staff, she felt like an observer, a bystander watching some terrible slow-motion tragedy on the telly.

And it was terrible - Just like the trainee in London, Xavier was found in the beach cabin, in a coma. He was flown to the nearest hospital, Maui Memorial Medical Center, where he was stable, but his brain activity was elevated, as if he were experiencing a vivid dream. And she wasn't there with him, he was going through this ordeal all alone. No, not alone, she thought. Reports had begun coming in from emergency rooms and trauma centers across the globe for the past two hours, a slow but steady drumbeat that had the same cadence, scores of people in comas who'd been watching the "File Room" webcast. No fatalities yet, but it was still early.

Basic Research prepared a summary and edited version of the last installment. Sylvia watched it twice, infuriated when Spectral4 and Lucas Jonesboro were directly implicated as accessories to kidnapping, attempted murder and

conspiracy, not to mention betraying the trust of the organization for years. Before she finished reading the summary, she dispatched a team of inspectors from the Basic Research regional facility in Chicago. They would arrive in Memphis shortly and take custody of the now disgraced research lab, then begin tracking the renegades. No matter where they'd gone to ground, they would be brought to account. Especially Mr. Jonesborough.

She fought off the image of Xavier, in hospital, as more emergency room reports came in on her computer.

Chapter 16

FBI Memphis Special Agent In Charge Hal Buckley stepped outside the open hangar, took in the changing sky at sunset, then checked his watch. 7:42pm. He slowly walked the few yards over to the small terminal of the General DeWitt Spain Airport, a small county-operated airfield 3 miles north of downtown. He had a man in the parking lot, currently full of SUVs, and six more personnel from the crime lab in the waiting room. All excited and anxious, anticipating the team of Campus Inspectors arriving any minute from Chicago.

Two hours ago. The field office, along with state and local law enforcement, received a global information alert directly from the Campus, to check hospitals and clinics for newly admitted coma cases. Within a half-hour they reported two dozen people in three different hospitals in town. All in comas, all admitted earlier today. 16 of them were students from Rhodes College, including the daughter of a colleague who worked ballistics. Then came the call from Director Sylvia Cavendish herself. After watching her video briefing on Spectral4, Buckley was eager to render whatever assistance he could. Weapons and dope smuggling and domestic terrorism was bad enough; these rat bastards were right under our noses, he thought. Acting with impunity. He suggested the airfield at her query of a discrete alternative to Memphis Int'l for a field command center. Since Spectral4's base was located near the city's main airport, it was considered compromised, at the very least. DeWitt Spain was perfect for her Inspectors' needs, she said. Buckley felt a rush of pride at pleasing her. 'Just lending a hand,' he thought to himself.

Before the Campus was outed to the world, operatives were only known as 'associates' of the Slattery Trust, a very privately held British investment firm. That's all one usually found out, and no agency really cared enough to dig deeper. "Always lend a hand to a Trusted man," Buckley heard that from more than one instructor during his training at Quantico - on the oft chance a young agent ever found him or herself ass deep in the impossible, a 'Trusted Man' or 'Trusted Lady,' was somehow always on scene or nearby, and once the supernatural danger was neutralized, they disappeared as quickly, melting away into a crowd, or fading back into the darkness, often before the agent could utter thanks. They never before asked for help, from anyone. Now they needed ours, he thought. Buckley took a deep breath and squared his shoulders as he

continued to scan the horizon.

At 7:51, two corporate jets appeared from the north, circled and landed within minutes of each other, taxiing to a stop outside the open hangar reserved for them. The doors opened and out came two squads of a dozen people in identical black suits, some in combat gear, some in slacks, none smiling, all unloading equipment from the cargo holds. The squad from the first plane took their gear inside the hangar to a group of tables set up. The other team headed straight for the parking lot, began loading their gear into three vehicles pointed out by Buckley's agent. Hal looked back to the planes and spotted the man he was waiting for, talking with the pilots. Tall, thin, in a suit with a black shirt, but his tie had a pin, of a little metal owl. He had a head full of dirty blonde hair and the beginnings of a hang-dog look. S.I. (Special Inspector) Colin Fitzpatrick. He looked better in the briefing photo, Hal thought. Fitzpatrick left the pilots and walked toward the hangar, pausing to acknowledge Agent Buckley. He smiled, waved him over, then went inside the hangar.

Buckley signaled to his people still inside the terminal and they quickly assembled outside, gathered themselves, though half of them had eyes fixed on the agents in the parking lot. Buckley led off, and they proceeded to the hangar.

Inside, Buckley was struck by the quiet efficiency of the agents, bustling about at the two tables along the right hand wall. On one table they'd already assembled a portable satellite link, and four laptops arrayed in front of a large flat screen were in varying stages of turning on. As Buckley and company approached, a second unit with a different kind of antenna was going up, along with another cluster of laptops on the other table. S.I. Fitzpatrick was on his cell phone. "-about three minutes. Right." Colin put the phone in his pocket, turned to face the Memphis FBI agents, smiled and shook hands with Buckley.

"Hello, agent Buckley? I'm Colin. Pleasure to meet you." Buckley introduced his crime lab people, who then quickly excused themselves and hurried out of the hangar toward the lot, to load up their equipment into the open vehicles, but mostly to hang out with real live Campus agents, inspectors!

In less than a minute, the agents were linked up with the away team, the Chicago office and Basic Research in London. A few minutes later, Director Cavendish came online. On the large flat screen she was wearing a dark business suit under a lab coat,, her hair in a neat bun, enjoying tea, muffins and jam in the rear of a

limousine with tinted windows.

“Good evening, everyone. Please excuse my having breakfast. Please proceed, Inspector.”

“Thank you ma’am. Our combined away team has the downloaded intel and is ready to deploy. We’re following standard renegade protocol.”

Colin turned to Buckley. “IF we can secure it, your crime lab will have full access to it. We don’t expect them to have left any clues to where they run off to, but any lead on our misguided colleagues, or Lucas Jonesborough, will be greatly appreciated.”

“Just glad to lend a hand,” Buckley said, as he and Colin nodded heads in recognition. “You get that from Stevens or Dickerson?” Colin asked.

“Dickerson. I had him for two years at Quantico -”

“Thank you gentlemen, I wouldn’t want to hold you up any longer. Colin, I’ll expect a progress report in one hour. Carry on Special Inspector, Special Agent in Charge.” and the picture snapped from her wry smile to a screenshot of the Earth from space. The two men laughed, then Fitzpatrick stepped over to the tables. One of the agents handed him two communications earpieces. He gave one to Buckley. “Right. Let’s go mount up, Special Agent In Charge.”

Colin introduced Buckley to his 6 member away team, then they all climbed into four SUVs and rolled out, heading south on N. 2nd St., making good time through the post-Rush hour traffic, till they reached the Hwy 40 overpass through downtown. At Market St. they turned left, then left again put them north on 3rd St. to the onramp a block up on the right. From the 40 they took the 240 heading south. Bellbrook Industrial Park was half an hour away at the most.

Jacob and Jesse arrived at the south end of the bridge 15 minutes after sundown - Jacob felt a lot better, back to full strength, now that it was night. “After you do this, you move on,” Jacob said. Jesse, still unsure and now filled with even more anxiety, just nodded his head. Jacob handed him the sheet of paper, He found it easier to hold now. Jacob pointed at the service steps. “Take this sign and hold it up against the door. It’ll only take a second.”

Jesse nodded again and slowly walked down the steps to the landing. “Hey, turn the sign around so it faces the door,” Jacob shouted. “Ok,” he heard back muffled, “Ok, it’s on the right-” as Jesse was drowned out by a low-pitched crackle and pop, a flash of black light from under the bridge. Jesse came flying up through the asphalt surface of the bridge, tumbling. He stopped about a hundred feet up, then started falling back. He figured out how to right himself about 20 feet above the tree tops, then drifted back down to the bridge, more than a little upset. Jacob just grinned as Jesse set back down next to him. “Didn’t say nothing would happen. Did you get burnt anywhere? Huh. okay then...” Jesse thought to snap back, but kept his mouth shut and just pouted.

“Well, this far as you go with me,” Jacob said, turning around to face south on Old Maison. “Hey, Samuel!”

Jesse’s apprehension crept back up his spine as he noticed the sky slowly changing from evening to bright, hot midday. The bridge and the old Kingston place fading, becoming a large cotton field, the plants barely knee-high, dozens of shadowy figures in silhouette stooped over the rows, chopping weeds from around the stalks. A plantation house lay off in the distance - Jesse couldn’t be sure, but it looked like the old LeChette House. One of the shadows in the cotton field straightened up and walked toward them, slowly gaining form. It was a young buck in a raggedy shirt and pants, in a decrepit pair of shoes.

“Lo Samuel.” “Hey Jacob,” the field hand said as they shook hands. Samuel regarded Jesse dispassionately, checking his skinny arms and soft hands, poking and squeezing, like he was horseflesh. Samuel’s hard, calloused hands felt like steel. Jesse shivered.

“It’s been awhile since one of y’all come to work the fields. You lucky - you only worked for the LeChettes, so the stain on your soul ain’t that big. You can work it off. How long that takes is up to you, but for today, you got a couple rows to hoe.” He turned around to say bye to Jacob, Jesse saw on the back of his neck peeking out of the collar, a little cratered scar with radiated lines twisting and curling out from the center. Jesse winced at it and gulped.

“Come on,” Samuel said. Jesse looked around to Jacob, saw him fade away. He hung his head and walked behind Samuel toward the fields.

Jacob watched the scene change back to the bridge at night, then walked down

the steps. At the landing, he noticed the voodoo signs were visible now, the door was open. With the outside juju broken he read the underground structure. It was empty, deserted, lots of stuff moved out of the smaller rooms, but the den was still blocked behind that curtain, still protected, left to mock him.

Well, no sense making it easy for 'em, he decided. By reflex he almost called to Polly, then caught himself and giggled. Gotta get it yourself... He flew quickly to his knothole tree, got the little juju bag, put in a couple bones and a few handfuls of goofer dust, put it in his pocket and flew back to the bridge.

The paper with the sign lay at the foot of the door. He picked it up, no longer smiling. Whatever they had waiting for him, it couldn't stop him. This is just the first task.

He made himself fully solid and entered the deserted house holding the paper in front of him, His foot brushed against a little doll, blackened and charred. There were more on the ceiling and floor on down the hallway, all more or less scorched and blackened. He stepped around them, checked the small rooms past the second door (no dolls in them, just the hallway), then paused at the entrance to the den. He took a deep ghostly breath and pushed aside the black curtain, walked in holding the sign.

The exit out to the cellar was open, but nothing in this room had been removed, least of which the divan, but the carpeting had been rolled up to one side of the room. The divan was sitting on bare smooth concrete, a large voodoo sign freshly painted on the floor under it. In here too, on the ceiling, more little damned dolls and charms. More old voodoo, Jacob thought, eyeing the ceiling warily.

He felt a tickle at the back of his neck, turned around to see another voodoo sign painted above the curtain. A bolt of black light shot from the sign to the paper in his hand and it burst in flames. It kicked him back a step, right onto the voodoo sign on the floor. Dark, inky chains shot up from the sign, wrapped around his hands and ankles, binding them together. He felt a quick chill sweep over him, then his hands, the skin of his wrists rubbing together, they felt like, meat hands, like he had a solid, flesh and blood body again. Shit.

A dark tentacle reached up from the floor, into his pocket, removed the little juju bag and flung it past the curtain and out of the room. He fell back onto the divan

as a chorus of little giggles broke out. The dolls above him were all dancing at the end of their strings. Little muh'fuckers, Jacob thought, you wait till I get loose...

He heard noises on the other side of the curtain, then saw the little dolls from the hallway coming in, even some of the burnt ones from the entrance.

A movement from the left caught Jacob's eye. In the corner, one of the dolls slowly detached from the ceiling and floated to the floor. It was a caricatured African witch doctor, no more than a foot tall, a puppet moving without strings. It came around to stand before Jacob, seeming to look at him from its roughly carved and painted head, and nasty smile. It started dancing, the sound of drums filled his ears. The doll pointed at the corners of the ceiling and the other dolls all detached and came down, slowly, gathering around him, giggling. One got a little too close, Jacob steadied himself, managed to boot it into the curtain. He laughed as a few rushed in, attacked his legs, biting and scratching. He knocked them off as best as he could, checked the cuts. They were small and beginning to close back up, but he was bleeding; iridescent fluid leaked from the wounds. Damn, he whispered, struggling harder against the dark chains binding him as they backed off, making their point.

A group of them were struggling with something behind a large pillow on the floor. It was a long sleeved workshirt and a pair of pants. This was getting serious now, he thought, trying to get up, not succeeding.

The witch doctor had them lay the clothes out on the floor in front of the divan, then they began climbing inside, filling them out. Once they were all in, the dolls at the head, hands and feet began to melt together into bubbling inky silhouettes. This wasn't good. Somebody showed these fools one way to get rid of a ghost that don't have a skeleton. Didn't matter no more how old it was, he had to do something before that abomination finished forming up...

Jason Wexley and Agnes Wainwright sat in the kitchen of her elegant old brownstone, enjoying chamomile tea and rhubarb pie. The files for the bridge work and the photos were spread out on the table between them. The house was otherwise empty; Agnes sent the maid out for the evening to keep Jason's visit confidential. She scanned the papers, softly shaking her head at the evidence of

the latest meadow house, the newest reminder of the shame that bound her family with the LeChettes. She noted the name of the current owner of the Kingston property, Bradford Wainwright's realty company. He was third-born son of her sister Beth-Ann. He and Stuart LeChette were thick as thieves, and with Stuart being the County Clerk, they slipped it right on past...

When Jacob finds out... "I'm gonna miss that boy," she said, letting a quiet sigh escape.

Jason looked up from his scanning the papers, nodding in sympathy. he didn't have to ask. Once he saw the realty company, he made a copy of the new deed. Bradford got the abandoned property for back taxes less than a month after Katrina hit. The construction project came soon after. He's involved all right, Jason thought.

He mentioned Jacob's visit shortly before he left home, and that one of Sherrif Burt's deputies was with him, as a ghost. "Not Polly?" she asked, becoming suddenly very concerned. "No ma'am," he said, "he just said to stay here tonight." "That's probably best," she said, as memories of '38 and '05 flooded in, memories Jacob burned into her brain so she would know that old family business completely. In '38, after he set that 'meadow house' ablaze, he threatened to light up the rest of Wainwright because the house was in town. Polly and her mama Esther barely stopped him. What would Jacob do with nobody there to reason with?

She was reaching for another bite of pie when she got a sudden blinding flash, found herself in a room with dolls all around her, dark hands and feet bound, a drum beating inside her head, and a witch doctor looking at her.

"Oh my Lord, Jacob!" she cried out, dropping the fork and pushing her chair back from the table. "We've got to go!" Jason sprang up from his seat, an icy shiver raced through him as she half jogged past, toward the front of the house, a look of anguish on her face. "What is it?" He said, following her, then, glanced back at the papers, and around him at the about-to-be-abandoned house. "No way" he said, grabbing them and his backpack, rushing through the house to catch up. He found her outside, wearing a sweater and carrying the keys to her old Cadillac parked in front. "Forget what Jacob told you, he needs our help. Right now." "Yes ma'am," he said, biting down on his fear as he pulled the door closed and followed her. Didn't matter how he felt, it was his duty to help her.

She was already seated and turning the car over as he got in and finished stuffing the papers in the bag and zipped it up. He fumbled with the seat belt as she hit the gas. The car went to the corner and turned right, tires squealing, sped down to Old Maison and cut left, barely slowing down. "We gotta hurry," she said, pushing the car to 60, both of 'em beginning to breathe hard as if running to the bridge.

Bellbrook Industrial Park was right off the 240/55 intersection. Fitzpatrick noted the sparse lighting in most of the buildings as the troupe of SUVs maneuvered their way south through the intersection, getting off the 55 at E. Brooks road, then took a right into the park. The heart of Bellbrook was an 18-building complex on Norbrook Dr. a few blocks in. Spectral4 took up floors 3, 4 and 5 of the Bellbrook Building itself. Another right turn at the light, past the guard shack and halfway up the street, the combined away team found themselves outside the building.

From the roof across the street, kindly old Alfred lay prone and watched the action, zooming in with night-vision binoculars on the inspectors as they emerged from the vehicles. He noticed they were still using type 2 earpieces. Smiling, he reached into the side pocket of a large gym bag, removed a small case holding different types of modified comm gear. He took out the type 2, switched off the mic and put it in, bringing up the volume until they came in loud and clear.

The FBI agents, who split up and rode with the team, got a rare look from their third seat perches at the unusual gear they had. The 'trackers' looked like pda's with a cluster of buttons beneath a small screen and a handle below. They said they contained portable neutron generators used to sniff out explosives, among other functions. They wore double shoulder holsters, one side already filled, the other weapons came out of a case. They called them 'stunners,' but they looked like toys - about the size of a Glock, but the grip had a joystick trigger, the clips were gleaming black slabs of crystal that clicked into the handles, and the barrell had what looked like a black marble lodged in the end.

Alfred surveyed the agents' faces as they gathered outside the building entrance, then on the remaining unfamiliar people still inside or milling about the two vehicles he could see into. Extra people, a small complication. He hadn't seen

the SI yet. “Which one of you are here, come on,” he said, shifting over to the two men emerging from the furthest SUV, focusing on the tall one with the mop of hair. “Colin.” Alfred looked up from the binoculars, a twinge of regret crossing his face. “They should’ve sent Haverly. Sorry lad.”

He scooted back from the ledge and put the binocs inside the gym bag, took out a slim metal briefcase and set it quietly beside him, then took out a Spectral4 modified mobile. He turned it on and the display split into six views from inside the darkened offices and the elevator.

Colin and the Campus inspectors were entering and checking their tracers, not picking up the wireless, shielded camera looking down at them from the ceiling, as they rode up to the 5th floor.

“Right,” Colin said over his earpiece. “Runyon and Bishop sweep 5, Gibson and Walcott take 4, Phillips and Flynn, you take 3. Check the fronts as well, and take your time.”

Alfred opened the case to reveal a broken-down sniper rifle and began to assemble it as he watched the agents leave the elevator, entering into a rare book store. Their trackers were silent. They walked slowly around to the book shelves in the back of the store, then carefully swept around the last bookcase, full of old paperbacks, against the rear wall.

“Ok Bishop, hit it,” Colin said. Bishop, standing at the sales counter in front, pressed the button underneath and the bookcase gently swung away from the wall an inch or so with a ‘click,’ revealing the entrance to Spectral4. Runyon eased the bookcase entrance wider, checking for trip wires, then gave the all clear and entered. “Right, standard protocol, neutralize the other two fronts, then sweep,” Colin said, holding the bookcase open for the rest of his agents.

Inside was a hallway with open entrances to a large room on either side, and a stairwell at the end leading down to the fourth and third floors. The four men assigned worked their way down the steps, Runyon and Bishop started checking the offices. Colin scanned the Director’s darkened office, past the secretary desk and inside, coming up on one of Alfred’s screens, as were the rest of his team. They checked the other two fronts - a psychiatrist’s office on 4, and a costume jewelry store on 3 - found them clean, and were now coming into view on the split screen.

Alfred finished screwing on a silencer and set the rifle down on the case, waiting for them to finish their sweep, satisfied that they completely missed detecting his planted pulse grenades. Seven minutes later, they were done and putting away the trackers; Flynn and Phillips on 3 left theirs on a worktable and began checking what was left of the Campus computers.

Colin alerted Buckley on the comm, waiting outside with the FBI Crime lab, giving him the all clear. Alfred had no feeling for Buckley or any of the FBI agents, though he had a twinge of disappointment that it was Fitzpatrick's team onsite. "Can't be helped," he thought, taking the pulse grenade remote from his pocket, setting it beside him.

He watched the Crime Lab members enter the building with their gear, then a noise in his ear brought him back to the mobile screen. One of the Campus agents in the Tech room slipped on something on the floor, stumbled against one of the metal equipment shelves, then landed on his ass. The shelf where he hid one of the grenades. Alfred's eyes narrowed as he saw the small black orb roll to the edge of the top shelf, then stop. The agent looked up from the floor, saw the shiny object and, curiosity peaked, got a nearby step stool and reached up for it.

"Shit!" Alfred mouthed and picked up the remote, reset the timer from 30 to 5 seconds. The FBI people were still fitting themselves inside the elevator. The damned agent was holding it in his hand and looking around, puzzled, at the other equipment on the shelves. Alfred was calm, finger poised, waiting for him to report to Colin, alternating between the tech room and the elevator, just passing the 1st floor. The inspector examined the shiny, clean object, a patch of dust only on the bottom, then started looking around the room as if searching for the camera. Just two more minutes, Alfred thought.

"Uh, SI? Phillips in the tech room. The motherboards were removed from the computers and there's other equipment missing, but I think we got a 'BC' happening." Phillips walked over to the worktable to get his tracker. "Time's up," Alfred thought, pressing the button. A red light on the shiny ball appeared and began to blink as the trackers on the worktable both screamed out. "This bogie's live!" Phillips shouted. "Shit," Buckley shouted, listening in on the earpiece. "We got trouble!"

Phillips backed away from the bogie on the table, then he and Flynn started for the staircase. Inside Jonesborough's office on 5, Colin's tracker squealed.

Infuriated, he bolted for the doorway. “Everybody, take cover, secure-”

Flynn was already up at the landing, looked back to see Phillips about eight feet behind him when the black ball threw off a silent pressure wave that deafened both men. Flynn stumbled back against the railing, saw Phillips on the floor and struggling to get back up, when a wall of crackling electricity came flying at them. As it swept over Phillips, a bolt of lightning shot from the bogie, striking Phillips in the back of the head as other bolts shot out to other metal objects on the nearest shelf and the computer case on the desk. The wave began to dissipate as it hit Flynn. He experienced a numbing shock that took his legs out. He stumbled to the landing, on hands and knees he couldn’t feel, watched the bogie silently explode. It was a small fireball, big enough to completely destroy it, enough to slam Flynn back against the railing, leaving him crumpled and moaning on the steps. On 4, Gibson and Walcott were both too close to the planted grenade in R&D, each took a bolt to the heart. Runyon and Bishop on 5 were both stunned, but otherwise ok. Colin was halfway out the door, motionless.

As the elevator passed 3, Buckley’s earpiece erupted with static and the lights in the elevator flickered. He took it out of his ear, and could swear he heard a muffled explosion as they approached 4. “We’re getting out here,” Buckley said, pressing 4 and stopping the elevator. The doors opened and the FBI agents exited into the reception area of a psychiatrist’s office. They walked through to the back, saw a water cooler against the wall, and a section of it open, They hurried through into the rooms on the right. They found Gibson and Walcott in a room with equipment on shelves, both with round burn marks on their chests. “Check the other floors,” Buckley said, heading for the stairwell and going up to 5.

He found Fitzpatrick in the doorway, out cold. Runyon and Bishop were conscious but shaky. He rushed down to 3, replaying Phillips’ last comments. saw a man being attended to by two of his agents. He was conscious and talking. Buckley knelt down till he was eye to eye with the young agent. “Are you Phillips?” “Flynn, sir. He’s down there.” Another FBI agent was checking Phillips, shook her head to answer Buckley. He turned back to Flynn. “Son, you got two more down, but Colin’s ok, just knocked out. Now, what does ‘BC’ mean?”

“It’s, it’s a ‘box canyon,’ code for a booby trap where they leave a man behind to mop up.”

The bogie didn't go off until Phillips reported finding something, they were under surveillance. The clean up man jumped the gun; he wanted us in here too, Buckley realized.

He rushed up to 4, yelling for anybody with their hands free to follow him. Three Crime Lab personnel entered the elevator with him. He checked the Campus comm unit. still registering only static. They had a hostile nearby, and their own radios were left in the SUVs. They needed backup. They all drew their service weapons, Glock 22s, checked the safety's. Alfred watched them in the last wireless camera working as he scooted back toward the ledge of the roof with the rifle in his arms, and waited.

The agents took the office doors on either side of the revolving door, readied themselves, then broke for the SUVs, eyes sweeping the dark street. The man beside Buckley caught a round through the head as a chunk of sidewalk kicked up at his foot. They all shifted eyes up to the building directly across as they reached the SUVs. The two agents at the other vehicle opened the third door and climbed in. two more shots were fired from the roof, striking the bulletproof glass and ricocheting off the armored roof. Buckley spotted the silencer on the end of the rifle barrel, on the roof.

The two agents exited the vehicle, keeping low, carrying extra clips. They darted over to Buckley's SUV. "Sumbitch is on the roof. Keep an eye on him," Buckley said as he reached into the vehicle, got the intercom handset off the dash, switched the radio to emergency channel. "Attention. this is a general alert. This is Special Agent Hal Buckley of the FBI, calling any and all units within the vicinity of Bellbrook Industrial Park. Officers down and taking fire. Repeat, officers down and taking fire. Any units, please respond." "Uh roger that Agent Buckley, MPD Air Unit two niner responding, ETA 5 min." "Uh, roger that Agent Buckley. One seven charlie proceeding from Memphis Int'l. Will arrive with the air support." "Much obliged. Be advised, We have a shooter on the roof." "Roger that Agent. Hang on," the radio answered.

Buckley eased back out of the door to the other agents, leaned back for a clear view of the roof. He saw the muzzleflash and just jerked his head down as the sidewalk behind him exploded in a richoched puff. "Cavalry's coming, let's keep him busy," Buckley said, firing off a few shots and drawing a short rain of rounds that pinged off the vehicle's roof.

A few minutes later and Buckley heard the faint sounds of the Air Unit, but didn't see them. That was diversion enough, he decided. "Ok, you two, I want that sumbitch alive if at all possible. Get ready, I'll cover you," Buckley said, aiming for the barrel in the clear dark night.

The two agents broke across the street. Alfred managed to get one off that missed, then a spotlight flared around him, the brick and concrete to his left exploded from two shots below. He scrambled, rolled onto his back, fired at the chopper. He didn't hit the light, but it fell back. He dropped the rifle, picked up the remote and the mobile, tossed them into the open gym bag and walked quickly to the metal steps at the rear of the building. he was halfway down the fire escape by the time the FBI was on the roof. One started down, the other ran to the front edge. "He's going down the back!" he shouted to Buckley, who climbed into the SUV and gunned it, driving down to the end of the block, making a right up onto the grass, gunned it to the back side of the block of buildings. Buckley switched on the high beams and saw 50 yards down the alleyway, a man with gray hair in overalls coming down the last flight of steps. The helicopter hovered above the roof line, light focused on the man. The agent was still two floors up.

The shooter jumped the last eight feet to the ground, landed behind a trash bin, two shots rang out and Buckley saw his man fall motionless at the third floor landing. Next thing Buckley knew the headlights of the vehicle were shot out. He scrambled out of the driver's side, ran down the now dark alley, the spotlight pointed at the trash bins. A shot pinged off the bottom of the Air Unit and it scrambled away, the spotlight suddenly sweeping toward Buckley. It flashed in his eyes, he blocked his eyes from the glare, then felt a boot to the chest that slammed him into the trash bins behind him. By the time he was back up and could see again, MPD one seven charlie had arrived, the officer in the passenger seat had gotten out to check Buckley, the car sped off toward the spotlight, now down at the channel that ran behind Bellbrook. Buckley heard more gunfire in the distance and through the officers' radio, then a small fireball erupted.

"What happened?" Buckley shouted running toward the channel. The officer radioed his partner. "Dan, what hapened?" "Uh suspect was attempting to escape in a motorboat tied up back here. He fired, took two rounds to the shoulder and arm, then produced a hand grenade and pulled the pin. We're attempting to put out the fire on the boat."

“Dammit.” Buckley’s trot slowed to a walk, then he stopped. The agent from the roof caught up with him, gave an update. An ambulance had arrived and medics were seeing to Colin and the other agents. His man Jeffries up on the fire escape, and Peters made two Crime Lab personnel down. Buckley acknowledged the sad news, added them to the three Campus agents down.

He glanced toward the channel, then back toward the buildings on Norbrook Dr. “Tell our people to begin processing the crime scene, that’s what it is now. Smith, I want you to take the roof. Officer, could you please go with Smith here. He’s gonna hand you an evidence kit to bring back. I’ll be down there,” He gestured toward the boat, its fire being extinguished.

He checked the Campus comm unit in his coat pocket, still only registering static. “Call our office, we need more people out here. And try to contact their base. Tell ‘em we ran into a box canyon.” Buckley said, turning to continue over the rough ground to the smoking remains down at the channel.

Agnes Wainwright skidded the Cadillac to a stop at the bridge, jumped out of the car without turning it off. Jason reached over, turned off the ignition and set the parking break. He got out of the car in time to see her going down the service steps. “Hurry up young man!” She shouted. He stepped up the pace, caught up with her as she entered the narrow passage. Beyond the door at the end they could hear noises.

Through the door, Jason saw a small leather bag on the floor. Agnes stepped right over it, not slowing down as she pushed past the black curtain at the end of the hall, the sounds of a struggle inside. Jason picked up the bag, paused to take a deep breath, then heard a dull thud against the wall and Agnes cried out, once.

He entered the room, saw Agnes out cold on the floor to his left, and Jacob, on the divan, looking like flesh and blood, and bleeding shimmering white drops of blood, being punched over and over by a hulking dark form in a work shirt and dark pants, black rocklike approximations for a head and hands. Jacob’s wrists and ankles were bound, he was pinned to the divan and trying to block some of the blows, but he wouldn’t last long like this.

Through the pummeling, Jacob recognized Jason, grateful he hadn’t just charged in like Aggie. He saw the boy was holding his juju bag as the abomination

punched him in the side with a fist that felt like stone. “Ja-Jason. Use the dust!” Jason looked at the bag, was about to ask Jacob a question, but the thing had Jacob by the neck and was slamming its fist into Jacob’s face. Not knowing what else to do, he reached in the bag, took out a handful of dust and threw it at the monster. The back of its head sizzled, the thing bellowed in anger, let go of Jacob and turned around to confront Jason. “Do it again,” Jacob shouted, and Jason plunged his hand in for another fistful as the faceless thing approached. He held it out in front of him, stopped the thing’s advance, made it back up a step. Jason, arm shaking, backed it up some more, away from Agnes, then toward the curtain. He was starting to enjoy the sudden upper hand a little when Jacob yelled “Watch it!”

Jason felt something grab at the bag, looked down to see a doll, a little witch doctor, clutching at it. He saw the thing coming at him as he yanked back on the bag, the doll coming with it. He threw the fistful of dust, got the hulking monster full in its featureless face, which immediately steamed and bubbled. He swung the bag at the howling thing as he lunged to the right. The doll bounced off the monster’s arm and fell to the floor. It was trying to get up when the creature fell forward, slammed it back to the concrete floor with a ‘crunch.’

“Bring that here,” Jacob said over the noise. Jason backed away from the monster, now howling in pain on the floor, brought the juju bag to Jacob. “Put some on the floor right here,” he pointed near his bare feet at the symbol. Jason put a handful of goofer dust on the voodoo sign. Jacob positioned his feet over the dust, then set a heel in it and rubbed it in. The inky bonds around his wrists and ankles crumbled. Jacob jumped up from the divan, took the juju bag, then stepped over to the abomination, struggling to get up.

“Get her out of here, Jason,” he said as he grabbed the thing and flipped it onto its back. The doll, still underneath, got flattened again with another satisfying ‘crunch.’ Jason was kneeling beside Agnes, hoping she didn’t have any broken bones as he gathered her up. “Omar, hurry up, help me hold it down,” Jacob shouted. Jason looked back toward Jacob. “Omar?” he wondered, then a tall, muscular black man in a dark suit burst through the curtain, quickly stepped around the divan and helped Jacob hold down the struggling thing.

Jacob reached into the bag, pulled out a handful of dust and forced his whole fist through the thing’s slit of a mouth, while reciting something Jason couldn’t quite make out, something in French. He stood up with Agnes in his arms and reached

the black curtain, turned around to see the two of them climbing off the monster as it sputtered and flailed about for a few more seconds, then it stopped moving. The solid black mass bubbled and melted, into a thick black goo, seeping out of the pants and shirtsleeves. I've seen enough, Jason thought, carrying Agnes through the short hallway, who moaned softly in his arms.

Jacob saw something was still moving under the shirt, the doll, crawling out from under, slimy from the black liquid, one of its legs broken off. Jacob grabbed it, broke off the remaining leg and both arms, held it by its wriggling torso. "You bring some fire?" he asked Omar, who produced a box of matches from a coat pocket. They retreated to the entrance, Jacob ripped down the curtain, felt a small breeze at the back of his neck. "Put one right in that goo," he said.

Omar lit a match, tossed it at a trail of black liquid that ran under the divan. The liquid whooshed like gasoline; in a few seconds the last stick of furniture from Jacob's meadow house was engulfed in flames. Smiling, the two left down the hallway and exited the underground compound.

They met Jason struggling to get Agnes up the narrow service steps. Jacob floated her up out of his arms, then disappeared, Jason dashed up the steps, saw her easing into the passenger side of the Cadillac. The door closed as he reached the car. Jacob appeared beside the door, closed it as Jason went around to the driver's side. "Take her to the hospital, not the clinic side. She'll be ok." Jason got behind the wheel, noticed the ghost holding the witch doctor doll, wriggling in his hand. "Stay with her till family shows up. If any of them bothers you, tell 'em what we found here. Tell 'em I ain't done cleaning house." Jason nodded, turned on the ignition. "You did good, Jason," the ghost said, backing away from the car. Jason nodded again, put the caddy in reverse, turned it around, and drove off down Old Maison to North County and the hospital.

Omar came up the steps, looking over towards the dilapidated Kingston house. Flames could be seen licking up from the cellar. "You too Omar, you did good. Now go on before somebody sees you, take the long way home." Omar nodded and smiled, walked over to the bushes, picked up a 10 speed bike that didn't look strong enough to carry him, and rode off north on Old Maison, across the bridge, disappearing into the dark stand of woods.

Jacob watched the flames become more visible inside the old farm house, a

satisfied smile on his face. The fire company would be here directly, he thought, just one last bit of business...

He floated up a few feet, then forward, east over the ground toward the house, nothing blocking him now. He held up the little witch doctor, still wriggling helplessly in his hand, and turned it around to see the house in flames. It went kinda limp then, its master acknowledging defeat. Jacob flew above the burning house, about to toss the doll in, then go pay a visit to County Clerk Stuart LeChette, when he heard a voice, faint but clear come from the doll. "Help me..."

Jacob brought it closer, becoming impatient now. "You got something to say?" "Help me..." Again, faint, but it was clearly an old man's voice. "Hoodoo man, I don't know who you are, but you want some help, show me!" Jacob said, floating away from the house, across the Biloxi river to the woods. "Hurry up," he said, concentrating on the doll, trying to read through it, peeling back layers until the veil between them suddenly dropped. He saw a...face. An old man, with tubes and wires stuck in him. He closed his eyes, got a better look at the man, lying on a cot, inside a glass box. Jacob looked around from inside the box, saw a room with wood paneling and a single chair and table. A man in a white coat sat looking at a folder. Jacob sent his vision drifting up out of the glass box, up through a metal ceiling, found himself floating above a cargo barge, the deck covered in large metal boxes. It was daylight in the vision, he looked over at a dock, a street sign zoomed up, read 'Wharf St.' Another sign rushed up at him, The International Port of Memphis, Lake McKellar. Then the veil came back, clouded over the vision.

Eyes open, Jacob's smile returned. "Hoodoo man, I know where you is. I'll help you all right, starting now, but this first step gon' sting a little." Jacob reared back and chunked the doll clear across the river and into the back window of the burning house. He imagined the old man on the cot, in a deep trance most likely, yelling out once as the flames separated him from the doll, then falling into a deep, peaceful sleep. Inside a glass box, hidden on a river barge at the Port of Memphis.

Jacob gritted his ghostly teeth and flew off to get his big juju bag. No tellin what he'd run into with these hoodoo-stealing people.

Chapter 17

Above the woods and countryside of the north edge of Wainwright county, a soundless, dark blur sliced through the cloudless night, headed north. Jacob was flying hard and silent, 100 feet up, his big juju bag clutched tight. Memphis was only about 300 miles away, but it would still take a full half hour before he reached the city, and the barge on Lake McKellar. He fully intended to go visit County Clerk Stuart LeChette after finishing off the meadow house, but Stuart could keep a little longer; these boys in Memphis were behind this dark voodoo, they brought it to the county, including that hawk-nosed peckerwood Ethan, he thought. These boys need to settle up. Besides, they were on the run, and the old hoodoo man could be in real danger.

He regretted not taking time to reach out to Polly, see how them two TV people were doing, but she had it under control, or he'd of heard from her, he decided. No reason to worry her about his being out of range awhile either. Things were moving along: the last remaining trace of the old house was smoke and ash, and tomorrow, some overdue sunlight was coming to Wainwright county. He thought of all those people watching Roger and Harry's TV show, who fell under his spell. They'd start waking up soon, all with a tale to tell and begin sharing their stories, and some of them will come to Old Maison road, bringing their own TV people...

Jacob grinned thinking about high and mighty Stuart LeChette being chased by reporters. That's almost as good as killing him, he thought. He clutched the big bag tighter and pushed on, his passage marked by a low fluttering whisper that faded as it reached the tops of the trees.

At that moment, the sedan was hiding in a shrouded spot among a line of trees behind the sprawling east wing of Crossroads Center, a huge shopping mall in Orange Grove, just north of Gulfport and 30 miles south of Wainwright. Polly was in the back of the big sedan, the little girl floating a couple inches above a still sleeping, but far less agitated, Harry, gently wiping the light sheen of sweat off his face. Roger sat quietly as they waited, not letting go of the wheel, drained from the experience of the past three or four hours, but alert. "It's just a little longer," he heard from the back. He could make out the top of Polly's head in the

rear-view mirror; that was better than turning around and reminding himself what she was.. No, he told himself, I promised to stop doing that. Ghosts have feelings, too. “Be careful what you wish for,” echoed from a dark corner of his mind as he shifted his gaze to the dimly lit row of buildings beyond the trees. He wanted to be the show’s very own field agent, and now he was strapped into a front-row seat and the ride isn’t over...

It took them two hours of taking back roads and hiding from the Wainwright and Harrison county police, until they reached Garden Park Medical Center. Polly had him park at the far end of the north lot. “I’ll be right back,” she said, then vanished. It made Roger jump, but he took a deep calming breath, shook it off and checked around the car. It was late afternoon, the sun hovering above the distant treeline on his right. The light shearing across the rear window made it hard to see, so he lowered the driver’s side windows and watched the parking lot, saw the medical center in the distance. It was 4 stories tall, and about as big as County Hospital. There were only a few people in the lot, medical staff and people in plain clothes going to their vehicles and driving off. One of them, a woman in blue scrubs and a smock with a stethoscope around her neck, caught his eye as she approached and quickly cut across, walking toward the cars parked to his right with keys in her hand. The low sun reflected off a car leaving the lot, cast a dim light inside the sedan, then the right rear door popped open and light flooded the back seat, followed by the woman in scrubs, climbing in.

“You promise?” he heard her say, then she noticed Roger and froze for a second. From the ID at her breast pocket, she was an ER nurse. He smiled, a nervous little curl of the lips, then she snapped out of it, said “OK, ok,” and moved closer to Harry, putting on her stethoscope. “Keep a look out for anybody coming, ok?” Roger heard in his head. “Ok.” By now, he’d gotten used to the little girl’s voice in his head, it took a little longer to deal with seeing her.

Earlier he’d freaked out, as they were hiding behind a garage from a Harrison county patrol car. Polly was sitting next to him in front, almost in his lap. The close contact kept triggering something an old man told him this morning, after his first live report in Wainwright Park, about the wild, unpredictable, deadly teenaged Polly, who could come out at any moment and destroy you. The fear coming off him was so thick it made the little girl react like she’d just eaten a bug. She turned to Roger, puzzled by his sudden terror. She read his waiting for her to become the monstrous crazy teenaged girl, to torture and kill him, even though he’d never seen her as the teen. The bad air he was giving off was

frustrating; she had to get him to focus. She did the only thing that worked in the short term. She began to cry, opened up her heart and shared her hurt with him. It cut through his fear, made him see through the ghost and recognize the little girl. She knew she reached him when a tear rolled down his cheek and he welcomed her into his arms like she was his baby girl, who's heart was breaking because he was scared of her. For ten long minutes behind that garage, she became a little girl for him, pushing the imagined terror out of his mind as he comforted her. His fear now reduced to mere unease, they proceeded roundabout to the hospital.

The sun had dropped below the trees, it was easier to see the whole parking lot now as Roger kept watch. The parking lot was quiet, but at the hospital entrance, another nurse and a doctor had come out and were standing there, obviously searching the mostly empty lot for their nurse, who was removing a blood pressure cuff from her pocket. She was about to position herself to lift Harry's left arm when it rose on its own, extended out and hovered, the fingers almost touching the back of the front seat. The woman didn't move, just stared at the floating arm, until she jerked forward like she'd been pinched. "All right!" she said, putting the cuff on the arm and continuing Harry's checkup. Roger saw the staffers go back in the hospital, and not ten seconds later, the cell phone in the nurse's pocket began beeping. She finished checking Harry's blood pressure, then checked her phone. The small screen displayed the number of the nurse's station. "I told you I couldn't be gone long. Anyway," she said, putting it back in her pocket, now addressing Roger, "your friend seems ok, but I can't do anything for him out here. You need to bring him inside." Roger gave her a weak 'I'm not the one in charge here' smile, then spotted a Harrison county patrol car pull up near the hospital entrance. The deputy went inside as her phone started beeping again.

"Shit, the cops," Roger muttered, turning back around in the front seat and starting the car, an icy wave of panic washing over him. A ragged intake of breath from the back made him stop and look around; the nurse was about to scream right into his ear, then her mouth clamped shut, squelching the scream and she froze, nothing moving but her eyes. "Let's go!" Polly yelled inside his head. He nodded, shifted the car into gear and drove forward, over the grass bordering the corner of the lot and through a break in the trees into a residential neighborhood. A couple blocks in, Polly told him to stop. He pulled over, expecting to hear sirens behind them, but only silence surrounded them. He turned around, saw the nurse remove the blood pressure cuff from Harry's arm while her face showed anything but calm. The rear passenger door opened and

she backed out, glaring at him as she struggled to open her mouth. He looked away as she exited and sat down awkwardly on the neatly trimmed lawn of a house, shaking with rage. "Sorry!" was all he could think to say as the door closed and he pulled away from the curb. As he turned right at the corner, Roger saw her spring up and unleash the bottled-up scream. "Go!" Polly shouted, once again in the front seat of the car.

After another hour or so of cat-and-mouse through the streets of Orange Grove and Gulfport, the sedan reached its hiding place behind Crossroads Center, where Roger sat and waited, bone weary but alert, scanning the darkness around them and the light activity at the loading dock straight ahead, grateful no one saw them. After 45 minutes, Polly said "it's time." Roger started the car up and eased it out of the trees and up onto the pavement behind Crossroads as she settled in the front seat. Feeling particularly naked and exposed now, Roger turned right and drove slowly past the long irregular row of loading docks and around the parked 18-wheelers, imagining a patrol car lying in wait behind any one of them. "Pull up in here," Polly said, pointing toward the darkened loading dock of a store closed for the evening.

There was an old blue and white SUV parked there. It looked empty, but as he pulled into the parking space, a young black man sat up in the driver's seat and got out. "Hey Malcolm," the little ghost said, waving as he approached. "Hi Polly, hello Mr. Lowell," he replied. He looked 18, wearing a baggy T-shirt, shorts and hi-tops. He opened the rear door of the sedan as Harry gently floated up from the back seat and out the door. "Ok Roger," Polly's voice sounded in his head, but he'd already scooted across the seat and collected the laptop bag and mobile from the floor. Once Harry was clear of the car, Malcolm and Polly steered the heavysset, floating man to the back of his vehicle. Roger put the items in the SUV's back seat, paused to watch them maneuver Harry into the rear, then hurried back to pop the sedan's trunk and get their camera gear and travel bags. Into the rear it went, then he got in the front passenger side, nodded to the young man, and sank back into the seat, anxiously clutching his hands.

"Ok Malcolm," Polly said, sitting next to Harry behind the back seat. Malcolm started up the old SUV and shifted it into drive. They slowly eased out of the sheltered dock; Roger kept watch on his side as they turned left, continued up past the last few quiet loading docks to the end, then another left brought them to the large parking lot facing the east wing of the mall. The north wing lay up ahead, another long row of big box stores. They continued that way, slowly

cruised across the wide expanse of the lightly occupied north lot, eyes peeled for patrol cars.

The mall exit led to an onramp to Hwy 49. Polly giggled and clapped her hands once they got on, headed south. "Interstate 10 is just up ahead," Malcolm said. "Next stop, New Orleans." Roger allowed himself to relax, just a little, as he looked back at Polly, his face softening into a weary, tentative smile. "Only a little while longer. He'll wake up 'fore we get there, and he can tell you all about it," she said, breaking into a lilting chorus of giggles echoed by Malcolm. It was so infectious Roger couldn't help but feel the worst of the nightmare was past.

Special Agent In Charge Hal Buckley stood silent and grim on the bank of the channel behind Bellbrook Industrial Park. A combined cadre of Memphis PD Crime Lab and three of his people carried out evidence recovery on the still-smoking remains and debris of the motorboat they pulled up onto the bank; he stood over the bloody, charred body of the shooter lying on a plastic tarp-covered gurney a dozen feet away. He fought to push aside thoughts of his two dead agents Jeffries and Peters as he examined the shattered corpse. Paul Jeffries was a new agent who'd only been with the regional office a couple months; Bernard Peters had three years with the Crime Lab and shared with Hal his best fishing spots in Kentucky Lake. Buckley shook it off and refocused on the shooter. A Memphis police officer stood opposite the gurney holding two large flashlights over the corpse. Its right hand and most of the arm was blown off, and the fingertips of the left hand were scarred smooth. the body had no identification, and the teams hadn't found anything useful on the boat so far.

"Agent Buckley?" Hal looked up from the body; the officer holding the lights nodded his head toward the industrial park. Colin Fitzpatrick and two of his inspectors were approaching. They all looked shell-shocked in the cacophany of red and white lights from patrol cars, EMTs and flashlights playing over the darkened grounds as people looked for clues.

"You Ok?" Buckley asked him. Colin nodded, then looked at the overalls-clad corpse and grimaced. "Baines." "You know the shooter?" "Yes. Alfred Baines. He was my firearms instructor when I was a 'lab rat'" "A what?" Buckley asked. "Never mind," Colin said. "Eighteen months ago he was caught in Kandahar attempting to sell Tech Lab weaponry to Al Quida. He was tried, found guilty,

and locked away in our Prague facility. Two months later, he escaped, with help, and disappeared. Killed a good friend of mine that day,” Colin said, suddenly looking away toward the ruined boat.

“How’s it going up there?” Buckley asked, nodding toward Bellbrook. Colin looked back that way, Norbrook street had its own carnival of police and ambulance lights playing on the buildings. “My people are recovering. So far, no clues to Spectral4’s whereabouts. You got a good crew, Agent Buckley. They may find something yet.” He stared at Baines’ corpse on the gurney. “You may as well, so I’ll let you get back to it. Excuse me,” he said, turning and walking over to the boat.

One of Buckley’s people came over, but she didn’t have anything promising to report. “We haven’t found anything significant yet, maybe not until morning, but we’ll continue to process the crime scene. I’m sorry for your loss,” she said. “We both lost people here tonight, but thank you,” Colin said. She went back to her work, as Colin thought back to his friend in Prague.

“SI?” His man Runyon came walking down from Norbrook street, along with Layton from the command center at the airport and a Memphis patrolman. “Layton brought replacement comm units, sir.” Runyon said, handing one to Fitzpatrick. “Thank you Layton,” Colin said, not putting it into his ear yet. He had nothing to report to Director Cavendish, only dead personnel and a dead end. “Thanks to our local constable here,” Higgins said, indicating the officer. “He sent a patrol car to our field ops and filled us in, and relayed messages until I got here.”

Colin turned to the officer, who was staring at the boat with a curious look. “Thank you for your assistance, officer...” The young officer, realizing he was being addressed, faced Colin and smiled. “Uh, Josh Monroe, sir. You’re very welcome,” he said, glancing again at the remains of the motorboat, then walking over to it. “I thought so. What the hell you doing here?” he said, more to himself than anyone else.

“Officer Monroe, you recognize this boat?” Colin asked, coming closer. “Uh, yessir. Over at the International Port. Well see, my brother Wade works over there and that’s part of my beat, so we eat lunch everyday. Well anyway, I seen this same boat tied up next to a barge off and on for the past two weeks, near Wharf St.” “You’re certain of this?” Colin said, not quite convinced of this

information falling into his lap. “Yessir. Same aqua blue paint job, and the safety rail on the port side up front is bent the exact same way.”

Colin looked at the channel, winding east and west from their position. “This waterway leads directly there?” “Yessir, the channel runs alongside the 55, ‘bout 3, 4 miles till it reaches big water. Go past Riverport Harbor and around Treasure Island, and the Port’s right there.”

Colin’s grim mask broke into a slow, wry smile. He put the fresh earpiece in his pocket, turned to Monroe and clapped him on the shoulder. “Thank you constable, thank you very much,” he said, turning to his colleagues. “Layton, you got your mobile? I need a map of the city.” The inspector produced it and pulled up a Google map of Memphis. Colin zoomed in on the industrial park and followed the channel to the Port, then scanned up to the main road in and out, Jack Carley Causeway, traced it up to the intersection of Carley and W. Trigg Ave. “Perfect. Layton, go back to the airport and inform the others, but tell them not to relay this new development to either Chicago or London. Tell ‘em we’re still processing the crime scene with no progress, then get Briggs and Johnson and meet us here. Runyon, round up whoever’s available down here and at the primary scene, and be ready to re-deploy in 20 minutes. Constable Monroe, tell your colleagues to spread the dead end story over the police channel, and to leave a skeleton crew here to continue evidence recovery, then join Runyon for the re-deploy. That is, if you’re up for catching some rogue spies?” Monroe’s eyes lit up, he nodded and trotted off to inform his fellow officers. Runyon and Layton hurried off to their tasks, and Colin, feeling revived in the cool night air, walked back over to Agent Buckley still puzzling over the dead shooter’s corpse.

“Agent Buckley? How’d you like to trade that dead traitor for a gang ‘o live ones?”

At that moment, in a thousand places across the globe, in hospital emergency rooms and makeshift coma wards, in isolated homes and apartments, in an old blue and white SUV tooling west on the I-10, sleepers began to break free of Jacob’s spell. Some awoke with a start, some broke into tears and anguished sobs, others frantically checked themselves for supposedly missing hands, feet, or genitals, and in a private room at Maui Memorial Hospital, Xavier Slattery, like a few, bolted upright in his bed, eyes wide, arms flailing, and screaming from the pit of his soul.

Chapter 18

Lucas Jonesborough poured himself a healthy shot of white lightning from a half-empty mason jar, paused to admire the clear liquid as he leaned back into his plush red leather chair, remembering the last drink he shared with Alfred Baines. They were sitting in his office at Bellbrook that morning, cracking open one of a half dozen, delivered straight from the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was Alfred's favorite.

After a good long sip, he lightly brushed his snow-white mustache with his left hand as he broke into a distinguished, crinkly smile. His kind, grandfatherly veneer hid well the weapons expert and assassin. He said he would stay behind to closeup the shop, then he told Lucas what the doctors discovered in Prague: he had a brain tumor, quietly and painlessly ticking down. He had a year left, at best. "Here's to you Alfred, and to the year you didn't get after all." He took a good long sip, then set the items down next to the pair of flat screens on his desk.

He got the news a short while ago from Anderson monitoring police traffic in the Tech Room. Officers on scene were reporting multiple incidents at Bellbrook Park. A suspected terrorist got in a gun battle with local MPD, "and other law enforcement officials," and blew himself up before they could take custody. Ambulance and emergency vehicles were also dispatched to that location to treat multiple casualties from a bombing in the Bellbrook Bldg. Two FBI agents were killed, but no mention of the other victims. His lip curled into a smirk; good, he took a few bastard Inspectors with him. But we need to move up the schedule...

The screen on the right displayed the slowly rotating view from a camera mounted atop the small wheelhouse of the barge. The Wharf St. entrance to the warehouse was sliding past, then some of Channel Ave and the facilities to the left of Wharf St., the murky waters of the lake interrupted by the wide spit of land called Treasure Island, then taking in the northern bend of Lake McKellar and the collection of storage and industrial buildings, narrow boardwalks and moored cargo barges winding two miles along the shore.

The camera panned across the warehouse door once again. It opened, four figures emerging: two personnel carrying metal cases, and a third escorting a middle-aged man in shabby clothes. They proceeded toward the barge as the

camera continued to pan left, three walking, one stumbling. Excellent, he thought, Two more doses of voodoo juice, and we still got one bum left.

A red light on the comm flashed as the flat screen on the left flickered on. The Wainwright police station was calling. Lucas switched the dial over as he watched Ethan lean back into the frame. He was sitting at an office desk in a small room, a keyboard visible at his elbow. Behind him a deputy sat at the dispatch desk with his back to the camera.

“Yeah Ethan, Whaddya got?” he asked. Ethan’s sour expression didn’t change. “What I got? The goddamn trap didn’t work, your voodoo witch doctor lost, shit. The house has burnt down, with the last of the family heirlooms inside, that’s what I got! Stuart ain’t gon’ like this. He’s coming over to the station house now looking for protection. I got our equipment out at least. It’ll be there by morning.”

“Well, we won’t be,” Lucas said, reaching for the glass of Blue Mountain. “We’re moving up the timetable, shoving off, oh...” He looked at his watch. It read 10:17. “In a few minutes. Tell your boy on the truck to divert to Vicksburg, we’ll be at the Waffle House tomorrow afternoon.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll tell ‘em,” Ethan said, gritting his teeth behind his calm face. Lucas casually ignoring the two families had a particularly sharp and cold edge, making the old man bite down more. He’d known them since he was 8. He used to come up from Gulfport to visit his own aunt in Wainwright and just fell in with them. The LeChettes and Wainwrights were his second family, they helped get him into the Citadel back in ‘62, where he and Lucas met. We were running the damn house for ‘em, and they’re not worth a mention? “Well, What do I tell Stuart?”

“Tell him whatever you like,” Lucas said. “He knew the ins and outs of doing business, and our business with him and the families is done. We’re all catching blowback, you remember that. So are you pulling out or what?” Lucas sat back and took another sip of the moonshine.

“Soon as Stuart gets here,” Ethan said, the shadow of a frown crossed his face. Lucas noticed. “Anyway, we lost the TV guys, but the girl and our mystery negro are in a motel in Mobile.”

Lucas grinned, thinking of the meddling pair from Xavier Slattery’s damned

“Media Lab.” Cameraman bit off a little more than expected, didn’t he?. “Huh, I suspect Xavier’s TV guys are in no shape to do another show, but we’ll find ‘em if they do. That girl puts us inside the facility and the clinic, and hell, mystery man could be another one of Xavier’s. Go get them, and meet us in Vicksburg, all right?”

“All right, see you later” Ethan said. He clutched the mouse, seeming to wrestle it as he moved it on the pad and clicked, and the screen went dark.

Lucas tossed back the remainder of the white lightning and stared at the blank screen. Ethan was actually steamed about the two families, he mused. The hell with the damn LeChettes and Wainwrights, I’d trade all of their sorry asses to have Baines back. He was a real friend and a professional, more valuable than any of those upstanding genteel perverts. The camera view from the other screen was back on Wharf St and tracking left. We haven’t gotten away yet, Lucas thought, the Campus Inspectors are here, and they’ve only been slowed down. They’re not in Wainwright County yet, but they will be, and they already know Ethan is one of my independent contractors. If he can’t keep his priorities straight, I’ll just have to remind him...

“Chief! Chief!” Anderson’s reedy voice barked from the interoffice comm. Lucas switched over to Tech Room. “Yeah?” “Sir, we got a hit on the scope. Spectral entities two miles south and closing.” Shit, the damn ghost twins, Lucas thought. A shudder ran through him; the few encounters he’d had with ghosts as a field agent were mild, and definitely non-lethal. The twins were another story. “All right. Y’all know the drill. Turn on the shielding and get the team in place with the splatter gun.”

“Right Chief. They’re on the other side of the lake. We’re reading one mobile spectral holding a large object. “Is that right?” Lucas said, relaxing and reaching for the jar to pour himself another two fingers. This was completely different; the spook was dumb enough to come alone, and he brought his juju with him. “How’s that doll coming?”

“We finished it a few minutes ago. It’s in the brig,” Anderson said. “Goood. I need another one in two minutes, and process them two fresh samples as soon as they come in. And tell the pilot be ready to cast off.” Lucas threw back the drink and smiled.

Jacob touched down on the east bank of Lake McKellar, behind a line of trees. The channel cut through the bank to his right, emptied out into the lake. Behind him was an empty parking lot and the dark office building for the refinery on the other side of the channel. He made himself seen and leaned against a tree in the darkness, setting the old leather bag down heavily, shaking and flexing his left arm. He took large, slow ghostly breaths to get some wind back, absorbing what strength he could of the nearby trees and the fish swimming nearby. He couldn't take too much from the fish - they were weak, like they were sick or poisoned. He took smaller breaths as he gazed across the bare, scruffy overgrown sandbar of Treasure Island to the docks half a mile over on the opposite bank. He could see the barge from here, tied up next to a short wooden pier, at the end of a long walkway back to the dock.

After a few minutes he flexed his arm, it felt better. He hefted the large bag, went unseen again and rose up above the trees. He drifted across the expanse toward the barge. The docks were quiet, nobody in sight near the Wharf St. warehouse, on the pier or walking around the barge. He stopped and hovered above the section the hoodoo man should be in. He tried to see inside the stacked block of container cars, but it was like watching shadows through frosted glass, the voices inside were all muffled. Something under the metal was blocking him. Jacob frowned as he set himself down and knelt beside the bag, placed a hand on the surface, and gently pushed.

He could get through, but he felt the barrier scrape around each finger and over the surface of his hand and wrist as he pushed through. He made himself seen, that made it a lot easier. He pulled the hand back up, leaned down and pushed his head through, saw the old man inside the glass box, sitting up on the cot with his head down. Jacob pushed himself completely through, landing outside the cell, in front of the clear door. He heard a low rumble beneath his feet, the barge was casting off. Hurry up, he told himself.

He turned the bolt lock on the door, eyes locked on the voodoo doll sitting on a table to his right, a twin to the one at the house. He quickly stepped inside and reached for the doll, then neatly snapped off its arms before attending to the hoodoo man.

Jacob touched the old man's shoulder. He looked up, half-asleep, but he was

coming around. Jacob picked him up by the upper arms, holding him steady until he got his legs under him. He looked a little more alert now. He was about to speak, but Jacob cut him off. "No time for talking. We gotta go." Jacob took a deep breath, tensed to leap up with the hoodoo man, and in the next instant he heard footsteps above him, then the cell door squeak, and a searing pain splattered against his back, a small shower of burning pinpricks settling on his shoulders and the back of his head. It burned like acid, froze him in a wrenching seizure. He could feel everything underneath the burning wave that flashed through him, and echoed as it faded - the hands separating him from the old man, carrying his limp, solid form from the cell, down a narrow hallway to another wood-paneled room, with computers and a long medical table. The hands set him on the table. He looked up, too weak to move, saw three men in white shirts and lab coats backing away from him. Two of them had placid faces he couldn't read, the other didn't bother hiding a nasty little smile on his face. Then, a large man entered the room, late 50s or so, built like a prizefighter gone to seed by at least 50 lbs. Full head of brown hair, and intense blue eyes. He smiled like a shark, bloodless.

Then Jacob saw his juju bag, brought in by another lab coat, set at the feet of this man. He couldn't read him, but he knew this was the man in charge, Lucas Jonesborough.

He picked up the bag, set it on the table between Jacob's legs. "You have no idea how happy I am that you came to call" Lucas said, opening the bag, and peering inside. "Yes, perfect. Now don't worry, I don't need any of your charms, just this," he reached in and pulled out a handful of Jacob's goofer dust. The indignity felt like the man had raked a claw across his chest. He made to reach for his bag, but he could barely move without aching...this acid made him feel muscles again and they screamed out in throbbing waves at any sudden moves.

"Hell, we were just gonna hide out, but now you are gonna help us clean up some loose ends, and re-direct this perfect little shitstorm you created. The story that's gonna come down on Wainwright County was gonna be about them pervert families and Spectral4, messing up the shiny reputation of The Campus, now, it's gonna be them pervert families and you and your goddamn curse," he said as he removed the charms a couple at a time into a plastic container brought by a lab coat. "The curse that got outta hand 'cause of that damn TV show, and killed so many innocent people, and the superspies didn't stop it. They even let the renegades escape. Well, they not even real criminals are they?" he asked, as

another lab coat handed him something the ghost couldn't see. "Naw, just a bunch of geek boys providing tech support, not running the whole operation for 'em. WE become a loose end, and YOU will become the center attraction, 'specially after you disappear and the Campus can't find you. They'll be so busy dealing with bad press they won't have time for us. And we'll be gone fishing." He smiled his sharktooth smile and held up the two scraps of cloth. Jacob's anger flared up, mixing with the undercurrent of pain. He recognized them instantly: from the pants he wore when Justin Wainwright and Lucien LeChette caught him, and the apron Sara Wexley had on when she tried to stop the lynching.

"Look familiar?" Lucas said, grinning. He brought close the neatly cut three inch squares of old cotton, both almost completely covered in dried blood. It was a dark red, but Jacob could see, beneath the flat surface of the stains, the blood glowed.

Lucas turned to another lab coat watching a computer screen to his right. A centrifuge was softly whirring beside the screen. "Anderson, how's it coming?" The young man turned away from the screen and checked his watch. "Uh, about another 30 seconds," he said. Presently, he turned it off and removed one of two test tubes half full of a viscous bright green liquid. He siphoned some off into a dropper, then into a syringe, then recapped the tube. Lucas took the dropper and the two squares and came back over to Jacob laying on the medical bed, smiling as he dripped the liquid onto both of them. After a second, they began to glow, a bright green, with little explosions of black within the glimmer. He carefully placed them inside the juju bag, then took the syringe from Anderson. He turned to scan the screen, and started. "Chief, we got more company. About a dozen people at the north end of the docks, approaching on foot. They ain't no work crew, either."

Lucas, visibly irritated, glanced at the screen. "How many people still in the warehouse?" "Two, cleaning up," Anderson said. "All right, tell 'em to gear up and keep our visitors busy." He turned back to the ghost, incapacitated for the next 20 minutes, plenty of time...He jammed the syringe into Jacob's shoulder, emptied it, yanked it out. He struggled against it, eyes squeezed shut, then he stopped fighting it, he relaxed, his eyes opened and they shined with a faint green. "Good, that's my nigger!" he said, noticing the fresh voodoo doll sitting next to the repaired doll from the cell, the broken arms superglued back together. He waited for Anderson to prepare another syringe, then directed two of the lab

coats to roll the medical bed out of the Tech Room.

Director Sylvia Cavendish sat alone in her office as her assistants waited outside. She'd just talked with the hospital in Maui. It was still late afternoon there, but Xavier had to be sedated to calm him. He's missing the sunset, she thought, and instantly she was back at the beach enjoying their last glorious carnal sunset together, and she was angry at herself for not staying, and not bringing in Basic, then they picked the information up anyway, along with the other people affected, out of the global emergency channels.

She could imagine the gossip sure to spread among the permanent staff, the 'lab rats' who actually ran the complex of buildings and departments that made up Basic Research. The woman who didn't have a personal life, who went for a weekend of 'quiet meditation' in Peru, was instead in Hawaii shagging the heir to the enterprise, laying the groundwork for some sort of powerplay with the full Committee no doubt. So juicy. Some would approve her relationship, some definitely not. And some of them were Committee members. She could already foresee a tense next meeting, which was only a few months away.

The sudden shift from a pleasant memory to inhouse political gamesmanship became bitter for a short moment. Xavier, forgotten in the gameplay, turned from lover to public pawn, what she feared most when this impetuous fling began. She sat down and gave herself one minute to let a small trickle of tears flow into a napkin, for herself and Xavier, for their perfect weekend.

A minute later, she emerged from her office, nodded to her assistants and proceeded from the Executive Tower to the stout monolith of a building that housed the Data Centre, a short walk through the predawn gloom of London. The sharp air helped her clear a path through the worry and uncertainty. This was just another extraordinary situation to be addressed and resolved, only the details and procedures varied. Extraordinary situations are our specialty. She marched on with an assured gait to the morning Incident update. Harcourt, one of the lead data techs, was standing beside the whiteboard and monitor, ready to begin.

"The developing situation remains very dynamic - there are simply too many primary contacts across the globe to manage, too many people who've been awake long enough to report their experiences to family members, hospital and

clinic staff, and local authorities. Each account is the same; the subjects either witnessed or experienced a variety of humiliating, degrading and violent incidents in the lives of individual slaves who toiled at the LeChette or Wainwright plantations in pre-Civil War Wainwright county, Miss. Internal media cross-chatter has been spotty but gathering in the US and Asia, more developed in Europe - within 48 hours we project a five fold increase in relevant search inquiries on all levels, and the first arrivals of in-country primary contacts and reporters to Wainwright county.”

“The most encouraging development so far is the complete absence of online video replaying the incident on YouTube or other outlets. Roger Lowell and his cameraman Harry Sims possess the original footage, but none so far has been posted on their program’s website. His man Harry falling under the spell was a helpful side effect in that respect. The Data Centre, of course, has a copy of the broadcast as well; all computer activity by ‘lab rat’ trainees is monitored and recorded for assessment. The dangerous nature of the footage itself was revealed when we first replayed it to prepare for the initial briefing. Even wearing filter shades, two of my boys barely managed to resist the spell and stop the replay in time. Field agents were then immediately advised to recheck any incident sites for equipment capable of recording a streaming broadcast, and deleting or securing any resulting files.” Harcourt paused. This was usually where Director Cavendish would gently upbraid said field agents for lack of diligence, but she didn’t this time.

Moving on, Sylvia approved and signed off on the remaining list of response options:

Field agents within 300 miles of the primary incident site were placed on alert to locate the two “File Room” personnel and secure the original broadcast footage. A team of Inspectors from the Boston regional office is enroute to Wainwright county. They should arrive before the media, but make no mistake: this investigation will take place in the middle of a circus, a global tabloid feeding frenzy. This is the first major public incident since our outing that explicitly calls for our expertise, and it turns out some of our own people are implicated as suspects? The repercussions could be tremendous. Leading the investigation on the ground, ‘showing the flag,’ as it were, can only help us get in front of the media damage caused by Spectral4 and bring this matter to resolution.

“We have agents checking medical facilities within the target area for Mr.

Lowell and Mr. Sims, and the grid is scanning for their computer, but we did discover a different equipment signal registered to Media 1, another computer, currently active and located in Mobile, Al. We have agents dspatched, expecting a report shortly.” Xavier’s friend, Sylvia thought, not betraying a hint at this additional loose end springing up in perfect bad timing. She just nodded, thoughtfully.

“Any news from Memphis?” She asked Harcourt. “Apparently they rigged and blew up their facility with agents inside. Baines stayed behind as sniper. He’s dead onscene, by the way.” “Taking the easy way out again I see,” she said, dismissing Baines at once to a scattering of chuckles from the senior lab rats. “Any leads on them?” she pressed. Harcourt shook his head. “Not yet, ma’am.”

“Right!” She got up from the conference table and squared her shoulders. “Thank you Harcourt. Carry on.” She strolled out of the conference room and the Data Centre, her assistants trailing. Her next stop was the Medical Bldg. Her trainee was awake, conscious and lucid. She intended a private conversation with the young man, to better understand even a fragment of what her Xavier’s gone through, is still suffering from. She caught herself, pushed the emotion aside, held it at bay. You had your minute to fall apart, stay on schedule, she told herself.

She walked on with purpose through the night air. She checked her watch. 4:52, London time. It’s a little before 6pm in Hawaii; it’s not even sunset yet...

Chapter 19

The shrouded silence along the dimly lit span of Jack Carley Causeway gave way to the asphalt murmur of three vehicles, two SUVs and an MPD cruiser, speeding south toward the International Port of Memphis, sirens and headlights off. Officer Josh Monroe and his buddies Jimmy and Matt lead the way toward the small city of shipping, processing, manufacturing and other industrial facilities. SI Colin Fitzpatrick, his agents Layton and Runyon, Special Agent Buckley and another FBI agent followed in the first SUV, Briggs and Johnson, and two more FBI agents rode in the second.

Layton and Briggs were shadowing each others' movements in the two vehicles, thumbs flying over the mobile's keypads as their respective trackers sat beside them, performing multi-spectrum sweeps of the area. After a minute or so of comparing readings, Layton gave Colin a 'thumbs up' sign. The caravan reached the end of Carley Causeway, entering the dark and quiet port through its northwest corner.

The Causeway split into Harbor and Channel Avenues. The vehicles took the portside exit left onto Channel. Colin glanced at the map of the port displayed on the GPS screen, then clicked the mic on his commpiece. "Officer Monroe? We're gonna need to stop up ahead at the first intersection." "Uh, ye...sir, yessir, that's, uh, that's Port Street," Monroe said, fumbling with the commpiece mic.

The intersection of Port and Channel saw dark warehouses on the right, and the dimly lit storage tanks of the ADM Riverport, the arrayed cylinders squatting or towering over a 600 by 800 foot lot on the left. Beyond the foundation line, the greenish-gray ground tapered off another 100 feet into a stunted fringe of shrubs before it succumbed to the pitch dark of the water. The vehicles pulled over on the left, into the margin of ground between Channel Ave. and a pair of railroad tracks.

Layton and Briggs deployed quickly, back up onto the empty stretch of asphalt to perform a full sweep. Runyon and Johnson brought the MPD and FBI members together at the rear hatch of the second SUV. Runyon lined 'em up while Johnson broke out the stunners and the power clips, and one-by-one, took a stunner, checked the safety switch so the members could see it, loaded each with a small gleaming slab of black crystal, then handed it off.

Runyon broke out an extra mobile for the FBI Crime Lab and coded it into their mission network, gave it to Sheila, an attractive 30s brunette who worked in the weapons lab, comfortable with everything from sidearms to heavy artillery, currently fighting to suppress her full-on hero-worship swooning over Runyon and the other Inspectors. They've all just been so strong and brave and steadfast and cute. And they all have wives and girlfriends and they're just so cute!

Shiela and Judy the techie dished while going over the mobile as fellow agents Brad and Terry stood aside and rolled their eyes.

Colin and Buckley, standing near the first SUV, were focused on Colin's mobile, a map of the port displayed. Their targets were clearly marked two blocks down, a bright red rotating circle and a dozen or so small faded red buttons flickering right next to it at the Wharf St. pier, two more little buttons blinking away at the warehouse entrance.

In the middle of the intersection, Briggs and Layton were standing about ten feet apart, their trackers pointed at each other, nodding silent agreement with the readings as Layton beamed them to Colin's mobile. They both put the trackers away in jumpsuit leg pockets and trotted back.

"All clear, sir. No active sensor traps or any other contraband tech detected, just that regulation radar source and those equipment markers they couldn't quite shield," Layton said, pointing at the mobile as he walked up.

"Very good, thank you Briggs," Colin said, then turned to the assembled strike force. "Ok, gather 'round." Briggs and Layton flanked Colin and Special Agent Buckley, both copying the SI's movements as he held out his mobile. After another moment, Sheila brought the other one and went back to the map. Everybody settled around the four screens, then Colin continued.

"We have two targets, the warehouse and the barge. They have standard issue radar, so they already know we're here, just not 'who' we are. We're gonna go straight down, and stop 'here'." Colin pointed at a spot on Channel Ave. 100 feet north of the intersection with Wharf St. A container yard sat there next to the warehouse.

"Agent Buckley and his people will take the warehouse. My group will take the barge. The stunners you have are defensive weapons, but three or more blasts in rapid succession will kill a human, keep that in mind. All right, final checks,"

Colin said, then nodded to Runyon, who lead the Inspectors back to the vehicles, then to Buckley, who nodded, then conferred with his agents and took the mobile.

Colin turned to Monroe and the two other MPD officers. “Constable Monroe, you and your officers have a very important role - you’re to hold at this location and monitor our progress, but be prepared to leave, fast.” Colin pressed a small green button on his mobile, tapped the screen then hit the button again and handed it to Monroe.

“This mobile is now recording map movements and comm traffic. If we fail our mission, that lot WILL be coming your way next and you’re not trained to handle ‘em. These people are terrorists, carrying short-range weapons of spiritual destruction as well as standard arms. Don’t waste time contacting us and don’t try to be heroes. Drive like hell itself is behind you till you’re outta the port, then get on your local police radio and report “code 10, SI Fitzgerald.” My people from the airport are monitoring and will respond; they have a little surprise waiting outta radar range, but that lot down there are monitoring the police band as well, and they won’t want you reporting anything. so get the hell out and you’ll stay alive long enough to give that to my men.”

“Uh, Constable?” Colin noted the brief frozen stare that gripped officer Josh Monroe’s face, then he blinked, nodded to the Chief Inspector. “Uh, yessir Inspector. We’ll do our best, right Jimmy, Matt?” Monroe’s buddies were equally unnerved by the Inspector, their faces looked even paler in the dim streetlight, and that was hard for Matt; he was a dark brown cornfed country boy, built like Mike Tyson when he was a champ. Well, they snapped out of it, nodding, sliding their game ‘police’ faces over their worried expressions. Still, Colin checked each officers’ comm, made sure the mics were off, then Matt and Jimmy went back to the patrol car.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it, and good luck,” Colin said to Monroe. He turned and went back over to the first SUV. Layton was behind the wheel, Runyon, Briggs and Johnson were inside. Agent Buckley and his three FBI agents from the Crime Lab were in the second SUV. He looked back at Monroe; the young officer hadn’t moved. From his distant stare, he was still processing the situation, the initial shift in his world view now veering from weird to potentially lethal. Monroe seemed to be holding it together, Colin thought, but he needed to pick up the pace.

Colin clicked the mic on his comm. “Constable, move your car into position first please,” he said into Monroe’s ear as he got in the SUV. The officer looked up, saw Colin’s patient expression. Embarrassment replacing the mask of fear, Monroe recovered and regained his own professional ‘police’ face. “Hey Jimmy, bring the car back here.” Monroe walked up onto the asphalt just north of the SUVs, slowly walked backwards as Jimmy started up the unit, swung it around in a neat right turn onto Channel and brought it to a stop in front of Monroe, engine idling, pointed north out of the port.

The SUVs both rumbled to life and rolled up side-by-side onto Channel. Jimmy and Matt got out of the MPD cruiser and, like Monroe, were watching the tail-end of the vehicles as Colin’s voice buzzed in their ears again. “Punch it!” Both vehicles rumbled away with nary a squeal, Jimmy and Matt got the worst of the exhaust that drifted back. Monroe looked down at the remote, saw the two groups of agents on the map represented by small bright red buttons with a big blinking white dot in the center. By the time Matt quit coughing, the SUVs had crossed the next intersection, Dock St. and were approaching the container yard. “All right, safety’s off, and watch yourselves,” Colin said in their ears, “we’re goin’ in hot!”

Matt ducked down into the rear, came up with night-vision binocs; Monroe zoomed in on the yard on the mobile. The scene darkened for a second, then the light level changed and it came in again, clear as day. And Monroe’s police mask slid off again...

The container yard was about 1000 feet to the water by 600 feet across, with a scraggly row of containers side-by-side marking a rough perimeter of the yard on the streetside half and a few scattered containers in the middle. Next to the yard squatted a small and a medium sized storage tank, and another 100 feet down the long, barn style warehouse sat. Few defensive positions and a lot of open ground to get caught in. The red blinking buttons began to move to the edge of the yard. This could get real ugly real fast, he thought. He looked up, saw Matt leaning against the open rear passenger well of the patrol car, peering down Channel Ave. Jimmy was slouched in the crook of the open driver door, staring at his stunner and shaking, looked like he wanted a drink, bad. An unbidden vision flashed before Monroe’s eyes - each of them a bloody smear on the asphalt and the cruiser in flames, exactly where they stood... He almost dropped the mobile, but he caught it, and himself, shook off the panic bubbling up his spine.

“Shit, Jimmy, you and Matt, c’mon, let’s get situated!” he said, rushing around to the front passenger seat. Matt didn’t move, Jimmy sat down, swung his legs in, but left the door open. Monroe sat down, closed the passenger door, “Matt get in!” Josh yelled out the window, trying to concentrate on the mobile, then he noticed the open driver door and Jimmy just sitting there, eyes closed, concentrating on the comm buzz in his ear.

“Jimmy! Ji-”

He was interrupted by the muffled, distant staccato of weapons fire followed immediately by two short, low-pitched crackles that echoed in the officers’ ears. On the mobile, Monroe saw four buttons had split off and were moving toward the storage tanks. “FBI’s making for the warehouse,” Matt shouted from outside. “Goddammit!” Monroe spat out, getting back out of the unit, slamming the door and marching around to the driver’s side. “Jimmy! Move over” Monroe said, shoving his friend across the seat as he tried to focus on the map. Jimmy didn’t make a sound, just kept staring at his stunner as he slid over. More gunfire and crackling blasts from the stunners sounded in their ears and echoed from the distance.

Monroe slammed the door and checked the vehicle, fighting the urge to go into shock right alongside Jimmy. He made sure it was in ‘Drive,’ took off the parking brake, the radio - 5 by 5, and Matt was still outside. Monroe rolled down the driver window. “Goddammit Matthew, if you don’t git yo’ chicken and biscuit-eatin’ ass in this car-”

“All right I’m coming, keep your damn sheet on!” Matt said, chuckling at his old friend. Damn, he’s skittish tonight, Matt thought. “They’ve all moved out of range anyway,” he said, squeezing his bulk into the back seat.

“I can see ‘em just fine,” Monroe said, “they’re moving on the barge. The other agents are almost inside the warehouse. Hey, the radar and the faded buttons all just went out-”

In the middle of the container yard on the map, a shimmering light flashed, a rippling circular wave rapidly shot out, made all the bright red buttons wink out for a second. Before Monroe could give a word of warning, the comm went static, a muffled “whoosh,” then a loud sharp wave of static crackled through their ears. All three men cringed in reaction, though Jimmy hardly moved. It

took a few seconds, but then the static faded and the voices of different agents began fading in, one saying “..put it in your other ear...”, along with another round of crackling fire. Monroe switched the bluetoothed-sized earpiece to his left ear, it sounded closer to normal, but it was suddenly silent, the comm registering a low white noise buzz, he noticed his right ear was slightly ringing. Then a pair of low-pitched ‘pops’ registered just above the white noise, followed by Colin shouting “Buckley, you lot take cover, shrikes!”

A different noise invaded the almost silence, a low chorus of eerie wails echoing from the bottomless depths. One came shrieking in, then a choked, garbled cry...

Monroe’s blood chilled as he saw the bright red buttons scramble back through the container yard as six faded buttons moved fast from the barge to the open ground, two split off for the warehouse entrance, accompanied by the renewed din of stunners firing, confusion, muffled explosions and wailing screams. Two of the bright red buttons stopped moving, then another, and another, then silence. More near silence, interrupted by the whisper of a motor revving and the four bright buttons in the warehouse suddenly stopped, then a flurry of stunner fire and two more low, ‘poof’ explosions. Two faded buttons were halfway across the yard, the final pair were efficiently moving to each of the downed agents, then the blinking white spots and the buttons themselves began to disappear as the sound of clicking static joined the noise over the comm. Another long moment of static, then new voices broke in, “...‘bout now? Yep, five by five.”

“All right, gimme that,” they heard muffled in the background. “Hello all of y’all out there, that’s better,” came a strange creepy friendly voice over the comm. “Thank you so much for the extra gear, it brings us all closer together, just like family, and makes up for y’all rudely interrupting my busy day.”

The two renegades were out of the yard and up on Channel Ave. “Oh shit no,” Monroe said. He dropped the mobile on the seat, grabbed the wheel and hit the gas. “Jimmy, hit the radio. Jimmy!” Monroe shouted. Over the engine noise, they heard. “I got ‘em, just local boys two blocks down and running.”

“Hey, they got a mobile. I’m trying to access it but it’s encrypted, the override’s having trouble.” Well then, let’s just fry it. Welcome to the show, boys...” and a single low-pitched ‘pop’ whispered through the comm. “Shit,” Matt shouted, twisting around in the seat, looking for the regular vision binocs, bracing himself as Monroe barrelled through the wide left turn back up onto Carley Causeway.

He found them on the floor, righted himself and spotted them without the binocs, less than a thousand yards back and gaining. He zoomed in; three glowing orbs of white-green diaphanous light the size of large beach balls partially inflated and undulating. Each had burning, enraged black eyes and a ragged, gaping black maw of a mouth. “Goddamn!” he murmured, feeling the car slow down as they took the much sharper right turn merge onto Carley and out of the port, then the car picked up again.

“Goddammit it Jimmy!” Monroe shouted at his near catatonic friend as he grabbed the radio, feeling more in control as they sped down the straightaway. “Code 10, SI Fitzgerald. I repeat, code 10, SI Fitzgerald at the International Port. We got shrikes on us!”

Monroe let go of the mic and the response cut in

“...code 10, roger, roger, Valdez here. We see you and the hostiles. Please proceed to...DeSoto Park. We’ll meet you on the way. And, uh, about the shrikes? The white ones are fatal, green and blue ones aren’t, usually, but don’t let them touch you, they shock.”

What color are they Matt?”

“Mutherfuckers is green!”

“Green, green shrikes. Code 10, code 10.”

Matt, still watching the advancing creatures, smiled, then shouted “Ok then. Roll down the back window for me, but we gotta go Josh!” From each one sprouted a pair of glowing appendages that ended in pincer-type claws. They were only a dozen yards behind, close enough to hear the chorus of low, screeching wails. The rear drivers’s side window slid down as the front window went up. “Yeah,” Matt shouted, quickly locking the door then poking his head and right arm out the window.

The patrol car shot past the intersection of Carley and W. Trigg; De Soto Pk was less than a mile away. “Ugly sumbitch,” Matt said, taking aim and squeezing down the trigger. He expected the crackling blast to be louder, but the effect was beautiful; the gun didn’t even kick, but the thing was on “rock and roll,” spitting out two balls of jagged energy at once, hitting the lead shrike dead-on. It screamed out in agony, so Matt put one more round in him. Sumbitch exploded

into fiery silent fragments that evaporated. “Yeah,” he shouted, turning his head for just a second, “it takes three shots-hey, where’d them other two-aahhh!” The shrikes moved fast when Matt looked away, both darted forward till they hovered over then rested on the roof of the car. The one over Matt raised its tentacle, claw open wide, then plunged it down and clamped onto Matt’s head. The pincers phased in through the short afro, not moving as Matt convulsed. It pulled away the claw; Matt fell silent and limp, head and right arm caught inside the window, the stunner coming to a rolling, clattering stop in the center lane.

Before Monroe could react, both front windows shattered and Jimmy screamed. Monroe ducked his head and jammed on the brakes in a panic, every orifice shut tight. The car was starting to skid to the right; he was bracing for the car to flip or one of those things getting him, but it slid to a screeching stop. He peeked, saw Jimmy was out cold. He started to his left; nothing was there. Twenty yards up ahead, he saw them. Two glowing green nightmares coming straight for him. He picked up his stunner, pointed it at them through the windshield with his left arm up to shield his face. He was about to pull the trigger when the shrikes suddenly froze in place, their claws forcefully pinned against their glowing bodies. Wailing in rage, they struggled as they drifted up and away from the hood, then two small rocket-like charges trailed a lazy arc toward the shrikes, seeming to come straight at the cruiser, then impacting the wailing shrikes. They exploded into a one-two flaming fireball that faded into the breeze.

It took a second or so longer for Monroe to register that it was over. He didn’t put down the stunner until he heard the distinctive noise of a helicopter above him. He got out of the unit and spotted it clearly, coming in to land in the open grass beside the causeway, just before the right turn that leads to Riverside Blvd. It was an MPD air support unit, a Bell Jet Ranger, with two oblong equipment cases attached to the struts between the footrests and something attached to the nose of the air unit. It looked like a shiny black plastic pimple. Two jumpsuited figures emerged from the chopper and ran to the car, one, a young man with a buzz cut and a med kit who quickly tended to Matt and Jimmy, checking life signs and placing a patch on their necks. The other, a tall woman in her late 20s, Latin, with long auburn hair in a neat bun, helped Monroe get Matt out of the rear door. Two more people left the helicopter and began working on the equipment cases.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Josh said after they got Matt comfortable in the back seat. “You’re welcome, officer...?” “Uh, Monroe, John Monroe, ma’am.” She smiled

at that. "Valdez is fine, but thank you," she said. She clicked the mic on the comm piece in her ear, asked the people in the chopper for an ETA on the ambulances, then nodded at the answer. "They'll be here in a couple minutes. Your friends were lucky, they'll regain consciousness in about two hours. Reynolds here will stay with them to help with their medical care. You should probably go with him too, to debrief, and to get checked out. You've been through a lot."

He smiled back, "No ma'..uh, Valdez, naw, I'm fine and I ain't done. I still want a piece of them sumbitches."

"Very well then, let's get going," she said. "Now, do you have a mobile for me?"

"Uh, yeah, it's in here," Monroe said, scrambling into the front seat to retrieve the device.

"Bring it," she said, striding back to the chopper as the engine began to throttle up. Monroe ran after her, handing over the mobile and checking in the stunner, then taking care not to step on the attached case as he climbed in to the rear. He barely sat down before the unit shot straight up and drifted south along Carley.

"Hold it, we got a stunner up ahead on the road. Deploying net," he heard from someone in front, then he heard a strange, but contained bass rumble from up front. He looked out the side, saw that they were hovering. About 10 seconds later, the stunner came gently floating up and in through the door being held open by the agent to Monroe's left.

A sudden flash up ahead caught everybody's attention. From 3 miles away, deep within the Port. Something had exploded and was burning. "Hurry up with that thing," Monroe heard Valdez shout through the chopper noise. "Ok, got it," from the agent sitting beside her. He clutched it out of the air and turned off the net device, which just looked like a fancy TV remote to Monroe. The door clamped shut, the chopper revved up and surged forward, toward the Port.

"We're picking up company equipment signals. It's gotta be Inspectors." Anderson said, watching the radar screen. Lucas Jonesborough shrugged. Figures, he thought, NOW these assholes decide to attack... "Couldn't give me another 10 minutes, could you?" he mumbled to no one in particular. He stopped

the two lab coats moving the medical bed before they were completely out the door, handing the nearest one the syringe full of green serum. "Fix up old John now. I want that witch doctor ready in five minutes."

He turned back to Anderson, monitoring the radar and conferring with the personnel outside. "Send all three teams out and finish this, quick."

Anderson relayed the commands; four men exited the center rear container door, joining the two already outside, one carrying short range heavy weapons. They were watching through the trees with night-vision scopes, as the two workman at the end of the warehouse traded weapons fire with company-issue stunners.

The lead man, Cutter, said into his ear piece, "Hey Anderson, turn off the comms and the radar and turn on the trap, I'm sending a sensor round," as he nodded to Bruce in back checking the range on a mortar set up on deck. "Ok, shutting off the comm, now" he heard a moment later, as his earpiece went dead. Cutter gave the signal, and the mortar fired quietly. A moment later, a muffled explosion from 600 feet away. "Ok, bring me that monster gun," he said, rounding the deck and stopping at the end of the pier for a better view of the container yard, still blocked by the line of trees bordering the bank. Bruce, close behind, gave him the modified grenade launcher.

The comm came back on as Cutter pointed the launcher over the trees. "How many charges in here Bruce?" "Three." Another round of sharp blasts from stunners and the gunfire ceased. "All right, move out!" he shouted as he fired twice. Two darkly glowing balls of light streamed out in a low arc, clearing the trees, then hovered, silently expanded and exploded into half a dozen green shrikes that immediately grew arms and screamed toward the five Inspectors caught in the open ground. The renegade company advanced down the long narrow boardwalk, drawing their own stunners as the Inspectors scrambled for cover, firing frantically.

Once on solid ground, Cutter sent the pair in front to the warehouse, then his and Bruce's team advanced through the gap firing, taking out the last two agents still standing, distracted by the shrikes, including the tall asshole with the curly hair. There were two shrikes left at the far end of the open field, who now turned their attention to the advancing agents. All four men opened up on them with stunners, clearing the field. "Get the mobiles, comms, and any other gear, but transmit the code first, hurry it up." he shouted to Bruce, who took his man to

the downed agents as Cutter and his man ran past up the open ground toward Channel Ave. Bruce got a mobile and a tracker from the first unconscious agent, then pulled an override from his pocket and plugged it into the the mobile as he walked to the other agent.

“Ok, turning on his comm,” he said to Anderson, as he squatted and clicked the mic in the agent’s ear and held it near the override, watched it kick in, switching to ‘monitor’ in the control options and downloading the comm frequency. Anderson clicked controls on the computer sitting next to the radar screen. “We’re sharing on channel 7, switching over...”

“Ok then, how ‘bout now?” Bruce said, removing the earpiece and straightening back up, fitting it into his own ear. “Yep, five by five” “All right, gimme that,” Lucas, watching the light get stronger inside the juju bag, turned to Anderson for the mic with a smile. “Hello all of y’all out there, that’s better. Thank you so much for the extra gear, it bring us all closer together, just like family, and makes up for y’all rudely interrupting my busy day.” He handed it back to Anderson, who continued downloading data from the mobile as Bruce’s team quickly finished their scavenging.

Cutter and his man reached the grassy curb of Channel Ave. behind the SUVs. Almost immediately after, they heard the distant squeal of tires as the MPD patrol car sped away. “I got ‘em, just local boys two blocks down and running.” He was little winded, but not breathing hard. Cutter, like his men were well trained for exactly these kind of field ops. Cutter was pissed that they ran like cowards to the ‘rabbit hole’ in the first place instead of taking on the Inspectors directly at Bellbrook. He’d been itching for some action, even a brief taste.

“Hey, they got a mobile,” Anderson said. “I’m trying to access it but it’s encrytped, the override’s having trouble.” Cutter cracked an evil, gap-toothed grin, “Well then, let’s just fry it. Welcome to the show, boys...” and he fired off the last charge at the fleeing vehicle.

“Ok, switching off 7....static in Cutter’s ear...ok, the comms are on our frequency,” Anderson said, then Jonesborough buzzed in his ear.

“Hey Cutter, c’mon so we can pull the decoy.” The two men trotted back through the center of the large yard. Bruce and his man were consolidating the two trackers, two mobiles, the remaining comms and five stunners into a drawstring

bag. The other team from the warehouse approached, carrying four stunners, four comms and a mobile.

“What about these bastards?” Cutter asked.

Lucas pondered...“Who’s the leader of that pack out there?”

“Colin Fitzpatrick. You could spot him from his hair.”

“Who’s in the warehouse?”

“Rodney, sir. They’re local FBI and the unit chief, Special Agent Buckley, all sleeping like babies. His ID is genuine. He’s even wearing a Christopher Grace suit, sir.”

“Hey,” Anderson broke in, “They’re on the police band calling a code 10, using the SI’s name.”

“Leave the FBI alone,” Lucas said, “they’re just support. Bring Fitzpatrick, him I can use. The others? Company assholes. Fuck ‘em, permanently. And get a move-on; we shove off soon as you’re back onboard.”

“Roger,” Cutter said calmly, reaching into the leg pocket of his pants, removing his personal weapon, a Glock 25 with a full clip. He handed the empty monster gun to his man, who also took the bag of new gear from Bruce and hurried off to the barge. The other four men hefted Colin’s dead weight and trotted off. Cutter efficiently brought up the rear, moving among the four remaining agents scattered across the yard, putting two rounds into each man’s head, back or front, the staccato echoes fading into the night. He zipped the gun back into the leg pocket and trotted back to the boardwalk.

The motor rumble increased, and the last line was cast off as Cutter reached the far end of the pier. The teams had Colin on deck and were carrying him inside. Once Cutter was onboard, the barge smoothly slid away from Wharf St., punching it up for a short stretch, then steering around the rightward bend and coasting until the barge reached Buoy St., two blocks away. The teams brought Colin into the Tech Room as Lucas stood behind Anderson and watched the view astern on the monitor. “Just strap him down, he’ll come to shortly.”

“Ok, we’re clear,” Cutter said over the intercom, standing at the barge’s stern.

Bruce handed him a small remote. It was a simple device, with three buttons on a bottom panel with indicator lights, a button with a timer in the center and a big button on top with a big blinking red light. "Pulling the decoy now." He pressed the big button and the light switched off. The water at the Wharf St. pier roiled from bubbles breaking the surface, then it swelled up and heaved as a large elongated and shiny bubble bobbed up. A close copy of the cargo barge hovered within. The bubble suddenly evaporated and the barge gently splashed down, bobbed away from the pier, then settled. There were two corpses dressed in military jumpsuits on the deck, looking freshly killed from multiple gunshots.

"Settin' charges," Cutter said, clicking the three buttons on, "and timer on." The timer display lit up, reading "3 minutes" and counting.

The smile returned to Jonesborough's face. "All right. Tell pilot to take us out, 15 knots, and turn on the camoflague," he told Anderson, then left the Tech Room for the brig.

The barge rumbled, the craft pushed forward through the still water and past the far end of the port, steering through the lazy shallow curve winding left out of the mouth of Lake McKellar and onto the broad dark river, cruising south. A cloud of clear smoke slowly formed around the barge as it joined the big muddy, from top to bottom, muffling the motor noise until even it faded away into the serene river night, which erupted into a trio of loud explosions lighting the sky over Lake McKellar.

Lucas arrived at the brig just before the satisfying muffled booms, the decommissioning of the rabbit hole. It served its purpose, just like big buck here, he thought, seeing the juiced-up ghost on the bed, the juju bag between his legs. The light within was no longer pulsing; it was a steady, strong green.

"Cloak at 100% and holding," Anderson buzzed over the brig intercom. Lucas reached back for the talk button. "Very good, Anderson, keep it up, and tell pilot I expect to be in Vicksburg by lunch. Jonesborough out."

The clear cage was to the left. Inside, the old hoodoo man was prone on the cot, face up with an IV drip in his arm and a lab coat watching a softly chirping heart monitor. The fluid inside the clear bag was tinted a light lime green, slowly dissolving into the saline. His facial features were moving in slow exaggerated motion. Lucas entered, patted the restored voodoo doll sitting on the table to his

right, waiting for showtime. “He ‘bout ready, uh, Ted?” he asked the lab coat. “Yessir,” Ted answered anxiously, “but we do have a problem...” He reached into a coat pocket, produced a 30 gram bottle containing a yellowish-white powder. There was barely enough inside to cover the bottom. “This is the last of our sodium thiopental. We have enough for maybe one more dose of serum variant3, but that will only keep Mr. Porterhouse sedated another day. He’ll recover consciousness fully two days after, and he WILL still have the serum in his system, so his abilities will remain enhanced. We won’t know the extent until-.”

“Thank you,” Lucas said calmly, holding his hand up. “Mr. Porterhouse won’t be a problem after tonight. Now,” he held out his thumb. “Stick me!”

Ted picked up a sterile finger pricker sitting on the table beside the doll, held the business end to Jonesborough’s thumb, and a second later a drop of blood sprouted, pooled and slowly dripped down the face of his thumb, down across the heel of his hand. A practiced move of his arm and the first drop landed square on the head on the witch doctor doll. He smeared his thumb against the doll’s forehead, till a drop ran down the doll’s face, then he lifted his hand, taking the alcohol-soaked wipe offered by Ted, rubbing and squeezing the thumb till it stopped bleeding.

“All right, fall in!” Lucas barked at the doll. It turned to look at the big man, then it sprang to attention on the table. “At ease, soldier,” Lucas said; the doll did its best imitation of parade rest as he picked it up by the waist and left the cage. He set the doll on the medical bed beside Jacob’s head. It unfroze from parade rest and steadied itself on the cushion as it placed both doll hands on Jacob’s head. “All right, you know what I want. Find that big goddamn spell he used earlier today.”

The doll looked over at him, nodded its head, then began to tremble as its hands pressed down on the ghost’s head. The little wood and cloth body jerked and shook until it found a rhythm, the little doll hips began thrusting against Jacob’s head in a pantomime of penetration, then it stopped, the shaking body seeming to reach climax, then it separated from the ghost, waving and undulating in a silent victory dance. “Very good, very good,” Jonesborough said, patting the doll’s head.

“Now, add the conjure.” The doll, facing the juju bag, raised its arms and

gestured. An arcane symbol drew itself into existence in the air over the glowing opening, shiny black and rippling as if aflame. Once fully formed, the conjure dropped into the bag. The green light inside intensified.

“Good. Now, you know what I want. Every last person he touched earlier today. Do it!”

The doll stood still on the bed, arms drawn close, head down as if gathering strength, then its head snapped up, arms flung out, the little witch doctor trembled as the light inside the bag grew even brighter. A gleaming speck of black light floated up from the juju bag, hovered there. It began to swell, growing larger, seeming to boil within, then gleaming black sparks shot straight up from the boiling mass, streaming through the ceiling as the gleaming ball contracted, becoming once again a speck of black light, hovering above the open juju bag, the light within dissipated. The spark flamed out silently, the doll slumped to its wooden knees, seeming out of breath, but it looked up at Lucas, who smiled and nodded.

And in a thousand places across the globe, in coma wards and trauma centers across the country, in hospital recovery rooms across Latin America, Europe, Japan, in the back of an old SUV approaching New Orleans and a hospital bed at Basic Research, a dark, shimmering, barely visible speck of light flew in through windows, air vents, doors, car roofs, hovering over the still sleeping as well as the newly awake, floating high above, until each one Jacob touched with that spell was counted for, then as one, the specks all plunged down into each soul. The people, some with a horrible sensation of recognition sweeping across their faces, collapsed, falling back into their beds, seats or to the floor, grunting, bodies twitching.

Chapter 20, Part 1

Two miles east of Mobile Regional Airport, a black SUV sat in the half empty back row of the Bama Inn parking lot along Airport Blvd., directly across from rooms 107 and 108. Bobby Tisdale sat in the dark, wearing headphones connected to a receiver with a small dish antenna. He could just make out the occasional low moan and higher-pitched echo beneath the TV noise in 107. Bobby stewed, sitting there in the dark. For the last hour and a half, he could only sit still, less than 50 feet away from this bitch he hadn't seen since high school, one of them who got away. Rebecca Sandiford, second-youngest

daughter of the Atlanta and Macon Sandifords. Popped her cute little brunette head out of 108 after her homeboy, whoever the hell he is, knocked on her door earlier with the big pizza dinner he ordered. SHE'S the mystery woman who got away from Ethan, he laughed to himself, watching her cute frame as she admitted him into her room. His smirk down-shifted into clenched jaw and throbbing vein. I'm only babysitting, he reminded himself, then he glanced at the crate in the back seat, full of gear. He turned back to the motel, a dirty smile spreading on his face.

Rebecca was the type who wouldn't give him the time of day. She never did when they attended North Atlanta High together, even after he joined the football team and made friends with her brother Christian, just to get close to her. Every time he tried to talk to her, she wore the look his sister had when 'the brothers' eyed her up and down or tried to talk to her. The fear and distaste, and looking down her nose like HE was the wrong goddamn color. It made him mad all over again, sitting there in the dark. Well anyway, that put her on his list, but he never got the chance to do her. First, she was too busy with her International Studies to notice him. Then in senior year Christian told him she was a lost cause. She'd spent the last couple summers down in Key West with Aunt Matty, who was a snooty damn liberal on top of living with a black bull dagger. Rebecca's probably the same damn way, Christian told him, but he didn't care, still wanted that piece.

He hadn't seen her in almost three years, not since Commencement. She went to some art school in San Francisco while Bobby went to The Citadel. He got kicked out last year 'cause of a stupid prank against one of the 'brown nosing' under cadets. 'Hell, it wasn't even a real noose,' he said at the time. Didn't help. Anyway, one of his fellow cadets had an uncle in the school administration, he referred Bobby to a fellow down in Gulfport named Ethan, who set up a sweet deal for him, made Bobby a civilian contractor with The Department of Homeland Security. He got a badge, a gun, and an assortment of "special monitoring and surveillance equipment."

It was his good luck to be the only free lancer in Mobile when the alert went out around five that afternoon. He was already at the airport, hanging out at the Carpe Diem Café talking to one of the girls at the register when his pda phone went off. It was an email alert from Ethan's people: An APB on two vehicles - a brown 4-door sedan driven by a Mr. Roger Lowell, and a dark blue van. Both vehicles were rentals with LA. plates. Inside the van are an unknown black male

and a white female mental patient escaped from Wainwright Clinic. Vehicles last seen half an hour ago heading east from Wainwright Co. If spotted, report in and maintain surveillance on the subjects. He was parked not far from the auto rental drop-offs, so he hurried downstairs and out to the lot. He didn't expect them this early, but he still took a quick walk through the whole lot, seeing only a brown 4-door with a different license and a cold engine. He got in the SUV, cranked down the window, turned on the radio and waited, as a Kenny Chesny tune filled the cab.

Around 5:30 the blue van came in alone, parked near the back, away from the terminal. A black male, mid to late 30's, average build, wearing a bicycle outfit, floppy fisherman's hat and shades, got out and walked fast through the lot and into the terminal. Bobby waited until the suspect entered, then he rushed from his vehicle to the van. He confirmed the license number, then peeked inside through the back window. The interior was bare except for a mountain bike. Bobby hustled back to his vehicle, got settled in and had Ethan's number displayed on his pda phone by the time the suspect came back out. He drove the van around to the rental drop-off; Bobby smiled as he dialed Ethan.

"Hey Ethan? Bobby here. I got a positive ID on your blue van at Mobile Regional Airport. Got one of the suspects, a black male. Right. Will call you back when he settles."

Bobby let him ride off and get some distance before he drove out of the airport lot to follow. His first guess was the Bama Inn, being only 2 miles from the airport, the rest were clustered around Hwy 65, and he didn't see this boy riding that far. He stayed a discreet 500 yards back down Airport Blvd. until the suspect stopped at the intersection across from the motel, then he drove ahead, joining the scattered herd of traffic trying to make the light while it was still green.

Bobby drove through as it went yellow, went down another hundred feet, then leisurely pulled over, waited for traffic to clear, then U-turned across the blvd., pulling onto the shoulder. The sun was now glaring in through the windshield. He dug the binocs out of the crate, clipped on dark lenses and zoomed in through his windshield. He could make out the suspect rolling his bike into a room on the ground floor in the middle of the block of rooms. Once the door closed he got the number, then called Ethan.

"Yeah, he's in room 107 at the Bama Inn. I'll be babysitting till the morning."

“Good. I’ll be there by then. See ya later Bobby.” “Ok Ethan.”

After a minute or so, watching the room curtains to see any movement, Bobby brought the vehicle back to the motel, drove slowly through the half empty lot and parked in prime birddog position. It was close to 6pm; from then till 8:30 it was a normal operation: he was content to sit there in the dark eating beef jerky and John Wayne bars, settle in for the night, until he saw who this mystery woman, escaped mental patient was. And she didn’t look crazy either. But, he was only babysitting - he wasn’t about to risk Ethan’s wrath just cause she’s a long lost filly he’s dying to catch hold of and break in...

He sat there for exactly 2 minutes before he reached back into the equipment crate for the right monitoring devices. He decided on the window bugs, a case containing a receiver complete with a small round dish antenna and headphones, and 4 black metallic disks the size of poker chips, with a small suction cup on one side, and a recessed button on the other. He checked them, picked out the two with mics on the cup side.

Bobby left his vehicle door open and ran as quietly as he could through the lot, watching for stray eyes as he reached the row of rooms. He checked again for stray eyes, then picked up the first disk by the edge and steadied it at the bottom corner of 108’s window. He watched the curtain as he lightly pressed the disk against the glass, easing off as it remained, then pressed the button. It blinked green twice - set. He smoothly stepped the few feet to 107’s window and repeated the procedure, then casually walked the long way back to the SUV, checking for stray eyes all the way.

The small control panel showed active signals in channels 1 and 3, glowing a steady red. Bobby clicked channel 3 open, heard a TV. Must be his room, he thought, clicking it off and hitting 1. A different TV show was in the background, and she was talking. It was muffled coming through the glass, but distinct. She was talking about high school. He turned it off. A wave of heat flashed through him, instantly became an icy chill that washed over his whole body. Was she talking about him? Telling that perfect black bastard stranger about her hard times at high school?

Bobby was pounding the dashboard, had shifted to the wheel and caught himself just as he was about to land on the horn. He stopped, gathered himself, checked for eyes on him, then picked the receiver up from his lap and clicked channel 1

open. They were talking about art now, abstract post-dada something. He gritted his teeth and took it for a few more minutes, then turned it back off. He played off and on like that for almost half an hour, until they finished dinner and homeboy threw out the trash and went back to his room. Bobby stayed on her now, listening intently to her making small noises, going in and coming out of the bathroom and apparently getting ready for bed. Or not. She was on the phone. He heard her saying "We never finished our conversation," then "Ok." She came out of 108 carrying her keycard and wearing just her sweatshirt. He just stared. He remembered those creamy thighs from the times he caught her at gym class, and that cute little butt barely covered by a little cotton. She tapped on 107; the door parted. She strolled in as he stood there grinning, and closed the door. He looked at the receiver, clicked off 1, dropped it into his lap and dug out a big piece of jerky from the package on the seat. "I'm babysitting, goddammit!" he said to himself, and bit off a hunk.

It was off and on again for more than an hour, Bobby listening in on snippets of conversation, sex noises, the suspect telling lame jokes, and back to sex noises. He'd taken off the headphones again, dropped them in his lap and reached for another John Wayne bar from the box on the seat. He had it half unwrapped when the pda phone laying on the dash went off. It was Ethan, just checking in. He calmed himself, then picked up the call.

"Bobby, we got change of plans. I won't be comin' there, I want you to take custody of them two and meet us in Vicksburg tomorrow afternoon. Bring 'em to the Waffle House on the south end." "Uh, Ethan, I ain't never been to Vicksburg," Bobby said with trepidation; it didn't take much to trip Ethan's short fuse and get your head bitten off.

"Goddammit boy, get a map, after you secure the suspects. I'm giving you back a night's sleep and sounds like you need it. Now listen, no...write this down!" Ethan shouted into Bobby's ear, made him jerk the phone away as he retrieved the notepad and pen from the breast pocket of his jeans jacket. He flipped to a blank page as "Hurry up!" barked from the phone.

"Ok, I'm ready," Bobby said, trying to keep his own mood out of his voice.

"Alright. The Waffle House is at the southern tip of Vicksburg, just south of the I-20 where it crosses the Mis'sippi. You can't miss it. Be there at 4 O'clock. You got all that?" "Yeah," Bobby answered, just finishing up writing '4pm' and

imagining ‘kiss my left nut’ was written under it.

“Alright. Get ‘er done, get some sleep and call me in the morning.”

Bobby put the phone back on the dash and shrugged off the call, read the directions again then put the notepad on the dash, looked down at the receiver in his lap, back up to room 107. He took a few deep, filling breaths, his smile returning as he felt the leash on him slip away. He checked his service weapon, then reached for a couple plastic ties and the shock stick in the equipment crate. It was black, eight inches long, with a pistol grip handle and electrode tips at the end. He took it out of its holster, checked the power level, then slipped it back into the black leather, clipped it onto his belt. He put the ties in his lap and got the last item he’d need: a dandy little bootlegged keycard override.

He eased out of his vehicle, softly closed the door and checked the lot and the motel for eyes, then quickly walked to 107. The card in his right hand, he held it over the door slot as he drew his weapon and paused to hear inside. They were just talking. He carefully slid the card into the slot, felt it touch bottom and waited for the soft “click.” He pushed down the handle and shoved open the door, feeling in charge again for the first time in hours as it banged against the wall. “Freeze!” he shouted from the doorway, gun leveled at the stunned pair in the bed to the left, both naked, her laying on top of him. He was pointing it at her ass until she looked back at him. “Bobby?”

The look she gave him, the shock of recognition, made his johnson twitch. I’m gonna enjoy this, he thought...

“Department of Homeland Security! You’re both under arr-” The word trailed off as Bobby felt something grip his upper body. In an instant he flew up and away from the doorway, head just missing the bottom of the second floor walkway. He bounced hard onto the hood of his SUV, lost the gun as he continued tumbling over the vehicle in a high arc, landing with a thud onto the grassy curb behind the lot.

Henry and Rebecca, staring frozen at the door, broke and scrambled out of bed. Rebecca, squealing, grabbed her sweatshirt and bolted for the bathroom. Henry got up, bunched the sheet around his waist and rushed the few steps to the door to close it, heart beating wildly. He reached for the doorknob with his left hand, spotted the strange card in the slot and yanked it out, then pulled the door closed

to a sliver with only his head peeking out into the night. There was no trace of the guy in the parking lot, no noises other than muffled traffic.

Just then quick footsteps from his right and the doorway filled with two men wearing captain's bars on blue coveralls and boots, one big and Nordic, the other big and black. Henry sprang back, dropped the keycard and landed half on the bed, wishing to God he'd put that damn grenade back in the computer after all. The two held up their arms and tried not to laugh. "Whoa! It's alright, Mr. Smith. You and Ms. Sandiford are safe now. Director Cavendish sent us," the white one said. They reached in their breast pockets and showed Henry their ID cards. Curt Boseman and Howard Mackris, Instructors, Naval Air Station in Pensacola. Henry caught his breath and wrapped the sheet tighter around his waist as he gave the cards back.

Curt, the big, Nordic-looking guy, said "Look, we have some cleanup to do outside, so how about we come back in 10 minutes and start fresh with you and Ms. Sandiford, Ok?" He helped Henry to his feet, picked up the strange keycard from the carpeted floor, then casually saluted as they both withdrew and trotted back through the parking lot.

Henry stood there another bewildered second, then remembered he was half naked. He closed the door and turned the lock, not feeling secure at all after the brief moment of terror. He threw the sheet back on the bed, took a few deep calming breaths while sliding on his briefs and jeans, then walked back to the bathroom and tapped the door. "Rebecca? It's safe to come out now. I think the cavalry is here."

The bathroom door cracked open, she peeked out. "The Campus found us. There are two agents outside waiting to talk to us, after we get dressed," he said, stepping back as she came out wearing her sweatshirt. He gave her room to pass by, but she went to him instead, embraced him tightly. She looked up at him, smiling; he could tell she was relieved, but still shaken.

He walked her to her room and stood barefoot at the door as she slipped her jeans back on, waited there watching the two men in the dimly lit parking lot. Mackris was inside a black SUV parked in the back row; Boseman was on a pda phone in front of the vehicle. Rebecca came out; they took notice and came over, following the pair into Henry's room. They sat back on the bed as the two men entered. Boseman sat with them; Mackris went straight to the laptop on the

dresser five feet away.

“We’re going to check in with Data Centre, then you’ll be debriefed, ok?” Boseman asked. The two nodded, watched Mackris tapping keys. In a minute or so he had a browser up with a full screen video link. He brought the laptop screen back to 90 degrees and turned it to face the bed. Onscreen was a brightly lit and busy conference room with clear walls. People in lab coats carrying tablet computers were streaming in and out from the left, conferring with a lab-coated trio sitting at the far end of the table. A whiteboard and monitor adorned the wall behind them. Outside the conference room, monolithic rows of equipment towers stood silently.

Mackris pressed three keys at once; a two-tone chime echoed from the screen as it sounded in the conference room. One of the trio got up and approached, passed from view, then the view swung to the right as he sat down and filled the screen. An old man whose lab coat was worn and rumpled, long white hair neatly tied back, a dignified Van Dyke and a librarian’s keen eyes behind specs, though they looked bloodshot, like he’d been up for a couple days. He seemed to look around the motel room, acknowledging Boseman and Mackris, then settled upon Rebecca and Henry with a faint smile.

“Hello Mr. Smith, Ms. Sandiford. Harcourt here. Director Cavendish sends her regards. She relayed to us the nature of your involvement in this matter, and, will be along shortly to discuss it with you, personally. Uh, gentlemen, do you have anything new to report?”

Boseman answered. “Sir, in monitoring the suspect, one Bobby Tisdale, in conversation with someone named Ethan-”

“Yes, Ethan Bedford, a subcontractor under Spectral4, and an associate of Lucas Jonesborough,” Harcourt said. “They attended the Citadel together. He’s based in Gulfport, but he hasn’t been seen in weeks.”

“Yes sir. Well, we learned of the location of a meeting tomorrow afternoon in Vicksburg. Tisdale is to call in tomorrow morning, then deliver these two as prisoners. We have enough of his voice to simulate for the call, and guarantee they stay on schedule.” Mackris had been quietly tapping the screen on his mobile as Boseman talked. After he finished, Mackris set the mobile down next to the laptop, tapped the screen once more and a light on the mobile and the

laptop blinked in unison. “Sir, sending you the relevant recorded passage and transcript, photos of Tisdale’s vehicle, and a list of contraband hardware contained within.”

Harcourt looked up to someone off screen, and in a moment was handed a tablet. “Thank you. Can we have that location onscreen?” he gestured to the right. After another moment, a small browser window popped up on the laptop, grew to fill half the screen. It was Google Earth, zooming in on the Delta region, where the broad river marked the upper LA / MS border. Vicksburg sat at the apex of the big eastward bend in the river’s twisting, undulating path. The map zoomed in further, to Vicksburg proper, then angled down to the southern tip of the small city where the river swept in from the west then turned sharply south. There were two bridges, an old iron, and a newer steel bridge to the south that carried the I 20. Just south of the bridge, on Old 61, a parking lot and two rectangular buildings, one with a blue roof, sat across from the off ramp. “The Waffle House, I presume. Very good. Please relay this information to the Inspector teams in Memphis, and inform the Denver office to prepare teams as well— ah, Director!” Harcourt’s hastily stood up, but “Please, carry on” sounded from off screen. He returned to view and the Google Earth window slid off screen to the left. The restored full view swung to the right, showed Director Cavendish now sitting next to Harcourt.

Henry, remembering her voice from before, didn’t expect her to look like a sexy librarian, even one who looked frayed around the edges.

“Ma’am, we have the location of a meeting tomorrow in Vicksburg. We could apprehend the lot,” Harcourt said, showing her the tablet. She smiled, grimly, nodded to Harcourt, then turned to face Henry and Rebecca.

“Hello Mr. Smith, Ms. Sandiford. Forgive me, but I must ask you both a delicate question: did you have sustained intimate contact with either of the spectrals when in solid physical form? Were you possessed, or did they physically touch you or allow themselves to be touched? This is very important.”

The two slowly nodded, Henry more reluctantly, feeling suspicious and embarrassed, as Polly’s juicy adult-sized breasts flashed before him. Cavendish gave him a quick smirk “I don’t care about THAT, Mr. Smith. Intimate physical contact leaves one with an imprint of sorts of a particular ghost’s nature. They share a part of themselves, their character. For example, do you ‘feel’ that the

spectral was basically good, or evil by nature?” “Well, I only got good vibes from Polly, but she was only a little girl with me,” Rebecca said, looking at Henry with her own smirk of reproach. Henry kept his face aimed at the laptop; he could still see her, and Mackris out the corner of his eye holding back a laugh. “Uh, yeah, good,” he said.

“Right. Now, do you ‘feel’ she would harm innocent people for no reason?”

“No,” Henry said. “According to the stories, she tries to protect innocents. I don’t feel either one are monsters.” Rebecca shook her head in agreement.

Cavendish smiled. “Thank you. Please forgive me, but the situation has taken a bad turn: one of our trainees, who fell victim to the previous spell, had recovered and was doing well, then a few minutes ago he relapsed back into a high-REM coma-like state. I’ve been informed that the same thing is happening again, worldwide, and Xavier-”

“Xavier?” Henry asked starting to feel ill. “You mean, he-” “Was also affected by the spell, and he emerged from it...” She paused a moment. “We were unable to debrief him.” Rebecca looked stricken; this is what happened to her, Henry thought, remembering her reaction to seeing Harry Sims twitching, remembering his last flippant words to his friend, sent by text.

“The earlier voodoo spell had signature readings consistent with New Orleans Creole, combined with a component from the lower Delta region of Mississippi, but this new spell has an additional African New Orleans and Gonaives Haiti signature imposed on top. We have a team onsite working to identify the specific hounngans and spells, but our real specialist in this area was lost in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We have yet to recover his remains.”

Sylvia looked up from the screen; someone handed her a tablet. Her eyes scanned it, betraying no emotion but for the wrinkling of her brow. She handed it back, addressed the group in Mobile with a stone face.

“Medical has just informed me that my trainee is beginning to run a fever. If he becomes critical, he’ll only have hours.” She took a sharp hard breath, blinked away something in her eye, then abruptly stood and left the view. “I’ll be in Medical,” she said, from a distance.

Harcourt watched the Director leave the room, then leveled his eyes back to the

screen, no longer hiding their weariness behind the specs. He slumped back into his seat. “If we don’t break this spell, soon, we’ll be adding mass murder to Spectral4’s list of charges.”

Chapter 20, Part 2

Harry Sims came to coughing and gasping for breath, arms flailing, in the rear of the blue and white SUV as it rolled west on the I-10, 30 miles out from New Orleans. Malcolm had the vehicle in the slow lane already; he pulled over onto the shoulder, but left the engine idling. He scanned the lightly-traveled highway behind the vehicle, saw no obvious tail on them, then hit the inside light. Roger, now in the back seat, had one of Harry’s arms and struggled to get the other. Polly had changed to teenage size and stretched out atop Harry, cradling his head and waiting for his eyes to roll back.

“It’s ok now, it’s all over. See, here’s your friend Roger!” Polly took a deep breath and lightly ‘pushed.’ A rush of calming warmth flowed through him. She drew it back in with another sharp intake of breath, causing her nipples and clit to contract into hard knobs, then she hit him again. She felt his penis spring to full erection beneath her thigh, then gently deflate. He stopped struggling and his arms went limp. He smiled up through half closed eyelids at the unfamiliar young woman coming into focus. He blinked in slow motion, then recognized Roger, holding his arm up.

“Roger, we gotta shoot this. We gotta...” Harry drifted off for a second, then, he noticed, and felt, the delightful female above him and his woodie came back. “Oh, hey pretty! Wanna-”

“You go on and sleep now,” Polly said, softly passing her hand over his eyes and putting him under. She climbed off the large man, then perched there on her knees, trembling a bit, cracking an evil grin as her shirt buttons undid themselves. “He’ll rest until we get to New Orleans, but he’ll be mighty hungry. I’m a little hungry myself,” she said, staring at Roger. Malcolm put a hand up to cover his wide country grin; Roger swallowed hard, staring at the exposed breath of flesh between the shirt’s parted folds. Polly slowly crawled the distance to the back seat, eased herself over, landed next to Roger, who’s very nervous erection grew at first glimpse of wispy hairs at the juncture of her honey-brown thighs.

Her gaze shifted to Malcolm, broke him from his admirtion of her nipples. “Let’s

go, baby,” she said, climbing into Roger’s lap. Malcolm killed the inside light and checked for traffic, then put the vehicle in gear and hit the gas, shifting over to the fast lane and punching it to 80. He turned the radio on to WWOZ-FM. John Coltrane’s “Favorite Things” filled the cab. He turned it up to give Roger a measure of audio privacy as he concentrated on the road.

At a minute to 10pm the SUV passed Sidwell, approaching the lake and the outskirts of New Orleans proper. The radio was off, Polly was back in the rear watching Harry, and Roger, once again buttoned and zipped up, was somewhat recovered from the wild ride she just gave him. Malcolm’s phone went off, so he pulled over at the mouth of the I-10 bridge and flipped it open.

“Hey Theo. We at the I-10 bridge now. Yeah, me too. Yeah...? Damn. Ok, we coming.”

Malcolm closed the phone and looked back at Polly, his mask of calm betrayed by his voice.

“Theo’s fixing us some plates from Easter dinner Sunday ‘fore last. He also said you two and Wainwright Co. is on the news, and the Campus is hopping mad about it and looking for y’all,” Malcolm said, nodding to Roger. “put a worldwide APB out on you, but N’Walins is where they starting, so we jus’ gon make a pit stop.”

The confirmation of Roger’s worse-case nightmare brought it all roaring back, raw and fresh: the afternoon’s ‘incident’ with Jacob, Lionel’s words, like a curse - ‘The whole world is gonna know this is your story...’ He’d managed to forget for almost a half hour, with Polly’s help, but the full impact of the blowback unleashed swept over the reporter in an icy, nauseous wave. He fought it back down as Malcolm put it in gear and drove on, across the bridge and through the New Orleans outskirts of Blind Lagoon and Turtle Bayou.

The highway curved along the southeast border of Lake Ponchartrain, through Littlewoods and Pines Village, all gloomy darkness on both sides of the highway and the miles of devastated city blocks south, with police and Blackwater patrols running random checkpoints, and open season on ‘coons and pheasants’ in Port Algiers south of the Quarter. Some called it ‘maintaining the neighborhoods.’

As they neared the Desire area, Polly shouted “Down!” She went unseen and Roger ducked down in the back seat, heart suddenly racing. Not a minute later, a

convoy of blacked-out SUV's, Hummers and two NOPD white cruisers rolled by, slowly, keeping pace. Malcolm felt eyes scanning him as he calmly drove in the fast lane, doing his best 'ordinary' look, until they pulled ahead and took the offramp to Franklin St. at the 610 turnoff. Malcolm let out a relieved breath.

"We ain't clear yet," Malcolm shouted over the noise. "We gettin' off in another couple minutes, in Mid City, northwest of the French Quarter. It only got a few feet of water in some spots, more wind damage in others, and no damn contractors patrolling."

Malcolm gave the all-clear as they got off the I 10 at Orleans. Harry grunted and sat up, clutching the rear seat with one hand and his stomach with the other. Roger sat up, looked at Harry with a pained smile. Polly, staying unseen, could feel his hunger, his whole body still weak, like he was hollowed out.

They cut over to Lafite and drove up a few long open country blocks to N. Rocheblave. A down-home, country convenience store, complete with plain brick walls and a hand-painted sign reading 'Stop and Shop,' sat on the corner, open for business. Two small houses stood close together to the right. Malcom's cousin Theo ran the store; his large family lived in both houses.

Malcolm drove across Rocheblave, stopped near the side entrance and kept the vehicle running. He popped the rear hatch as Roger got out and came back to help Harry, who slowly ambled out the back, looking hungover. Roger helped Harry clear the hatch. He closed it and the vehicle took off. Roger stood there a second, confused, then remembered his friend. Harry was half-walking onto the curb, his right arm draped over Polly's invisible support. Roger got his other side and helped maneuver them to the side door, which smoothly opened to admit them.

They shuffled into a medium sized stock room. A kitchen table and two dinette chairs sat in a corner to the left. The two guided Harry to the closest chair, which lightly creaked at his bulk. Harry's eyes were half closed, but at least focusing.

Polly reappeared behind the chair, smiled at Harry, then went past the stock shelves and through the door behind them, into the store. Roger sat down beside his friend, a mix of worry, relief, and burning curiosity swirling within him.

"Jesus Harry, you look like hell. How do you feel?"

Harry was rubbing his eyes, but didn't even break stride; his left arm came up slowly, sporting a one-finger salute.

"All right," Roger said. "Look, you're not the only one affected; people watching our last report fell under the same voodoo spell you did. You know how many that could be? On top of that, the Campus has an APB on us, and most likely agents already have Xavier in custody, and are crawling all over our studio. And we need to get back online now, and talk to the people who went through this with us. Our Campus computer is compromised, but that's all right; I have a backup."

Harry stopped rubbing his eyes, peered over at Roger. "You remember that green canvas bag in my suitcase? Inside it is a new pre-loaded MacBook Pro with a hotlink to our webcast. It's linked to a ghost net server I had a friend at CalTech set up for me three months ago, just in case the Campus decided to move on from screwing us at another arbitration to stopping one of my broadcasts. Xavier doesn't even know about this. It gives us up to 20 minutes of live feed per session before they can track us. That's long enough for us to get back in front of this story, and, you can share..."

Harry shook his head, "Uh uh..." He'd recovered enough to remember what he said to Roger, in an almost drunken haze, earlier. "No, man." Harry said, his voice dry and scratchy.

"Oh, come on," Roger pleaded. "They'll instantly identify with you, they want this experience validated, and after all, you're the one-"

"Who took the ride?" Polly said behind them, carrying a full plate and a bottle of beer she set on the table in front of Harry. He looked at the girl strangely, like he almost recognized her. She swooped in, gave him a big hug and a kiss that kicked his senses up a notch, the strongest being hunger.

"Hi, I'm Polly, and you need to eat. Malcolm will be back in a few minutes, then we gotta go," she said. She straightened up and stepped around Harry's chair till she stood between the two men. She lightly stroked Harry's shoulder as he grabbed the beer first, killed half of it, then dived into the plate - turkey and smoked ham, dressing and black-eyed peas.

"You wanna know what it was like?" she asked Roger. His face blanched in reaction.

“Oh, we don’t have time for that,” she said, lightly touching him on the shoulder, “but I can still show you...” She closed her eyes and lightly ‘pushed.’ Roger felt a sudden numbness wash over him, his body seized up and his eyes glazed over. He felt himself tumbling through darkness, then he saw Harry in the void, then he was seeing through Harry’s eyes...

Harry felt himself falling, then suddenly he was on the LeChette plantation, in a knee-high cotton field, bent over and chopping cotton with a short-handled hoe in the mid-morning sun. And he was a young buck named Joseph.

After five minutes it was hard to breathe in the heat and Harry’s back was killing him, but when Joseph straightened up, he saw a fine horse and buggy riding up, driven by Marie LeChette, at nineteen, the youngest daughter of Mistress Olivia. She wore a white button-up hoop style dress without the hoops; the billowy skirt settled and flowed around her legs. The bodice was prim, the collar was high and frilly, a match to her milky white skin. She stopped at the end of his row, then called him over.

“You there. Your name Joseph?” “Yes, ma’am.” “You come along with me,” she said, watching him with an intense smile as he approached, dropped the short hoe at the end of the row and climbed into the buggy. She gave him the reins and sat back to admire him as they rolled out of the fields, pushing a lock of curly, jet-black hair away from her penetrating gray eyes. Joseph tried not to notice her nipples poking out from the bodice. His eyes darted, he noticed the looks on two of his friends faces as they rode past; the flash of alarm, then they both turned away stone-faced ‘lest mistress Marie catch ‘em. The other field slaves got the hint and suddenly were too busy to see a buggy. Joseph’s memories of the LeChette women flooded into Harry’s mind, sent a sharp chill through his floating, trapped body:

Marie was much like her mother and older sister Josephine, in the study of voodoo, and in the way they abused their male slaves. There was a slave cabin they’d each use when in the mood for playing with a chosen buck. The strange noises heard those nights only added to the despair in the dark cabins nearby.

Joseph turned away himself once or twice last summer, when mistress Marie would take a friend away in that buggy. His friend Toby came back, spent three

weeks in that cabin, once with all three women in there. Still won't talk about it. His friend John Ox was never seen again. That's how it was with them. Joseph hadn't noticed them women eyeing him before, but he did get big since last summer and was nicely filled out now. Big enough to be a target, Harry thought, riding the same wave of anxiety as the young field hand. The buggy rode up onto Maison Road, turned north in to town.

Along the way she mentioned overhearing two female slaves talking about seeing him at the river swimming buck naked, how very handsome, and well endowed Joseph was. She stared at his crotch, then Harry looked down and the picture was clear - the large lump inside the worn pants was gaining definition. The thing was still mostly limp, and it was at least 9" long. Who knew having a big dick could ever be a liability, Harry thought, sharing Joseph's downright fear of this woman. She grabbed the reins from him and made the short ride to Wainwright even faster. She stopped at a beautiful little woodframe house in town, was inside only a minute, and comes back out carrying a little canvas bag. She put it on a folded blanket beside a picnic basket in the carry space behind the seat, climbed in and drove them north out of town then east, clear across the county into the woods, to a spot Josephine told her about: a secluded, shady patch near a creek.

She made Joseph strip while she spread the blanket under the airy shade of a magnolia tree, then she followed, her smile growing more feral by the minute as she undid the last buttons at the waist, letting the dress fall away. Marie had a lovely late teenager's body, the breasts were on the small side, but the nipples were prominent. She had a strange symbol painted on her belly between her navel and the beginning wisps of black pubic hair. Joseph just saw a circle and letters he couldn't read. She drew him down to the blanket, staring at his body like she would genuinely eat him up, bite down, rip flesh and consume him, starting with his penis, now fully, nervously engorged at eleven inches.

Marie explored all manner of lovemaking with the virgin field slave, called him her 'special boy,' let him spank her, let him use the strange toys - including a knife - on her creamy skin, him nervously brushing the tip against her nipples as she jerked and spasmed beneath him, mumbling strange words in Creole French. She even begged him to put his thing in her butt! And each time he came near to spilling his seed, she stopped, let him cool down and take a swig or two from the bottle of wine she brought "just for you," she said. When she did let him climax, two times in all, it was only into her mouth, both times she saved a portion that

went into a small porcelain jar, with more Creole spoken softly over it before closing the lid.

She finished with Joseph late in the afternoon, in between picnic breaks. She slipped on her dress, beaming at her special boy laying there, dark and glorious, covered in a light sheen of sweat from his last efforts, breathing heavy and feeling good from the wine. Harry, a bit in shock from Marie's sexual kinks, was still stuck back at the session with the knife. He was starting to get into it; now, it was leaving a bad taste in his mouth.

She picked up the picnic basket and took him for a walk near the creek, guiding him by the hand. He followed unsteadily. She made him promise not to talk about this to anyone "when we get back," as they entered an area where the path forked off. He shook his head 'no' with a dreamy, sleepy smile. She led him toward what looked like a dead end. Joseph, not as scared as Harry, was smiling, thinking about himself and mistress Marie in that cabin, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad. She stopped at the mouth of a small clearing surrounded by Red Maples. She embraced him, helped steady him as they danced around on the trail. She got the wine bottle from the basket and handed it to him. "Go ahead and finish this, you deserve it," she said, brushing the back of her hand against his low hanging member.

He held the bottle up to the afternoon sun; it had a third still in it. He stood with his back to the clearing and tipped the bottle up for a healthy swallow. He felt her hands on his chest as he brought it back down. Marie had dropped the picnic basket, come in close, sought out his mouth, kissed him tenderly. "My special boy," she said, low. He smiled, weaving like a stalk in a light breeze. He tipped the bottle back to finish it. Marie set herself, placed her hands square on his chest and shoved. Joseph fell backward, landed with a muffled, muddy splash into a patch of quicksand. His head went under and he sputtered, choking on the quick mixing with the wine in his mouth. His head came back up, but the thick muck pulled at his lower body as he struggled to wipe the muck from his eyes. His legs felt so heavy. He was up to his shoulders by the time he focused on Marie, standing on solid ground, smiling.

"You are so very special, Joseph," she said, smiling, "your essence is unique and precious, much too special to ever share with my sister and mother. They would have used you up. Now you will be all mine, perfect, forever."

“You go to sleep now, I’ll call on you later,” Marie said. She picked up the picnic basket, gazed at Joseph’s frantic yelping with a loving smile, then turned to leave, the low sun partly shining through her long white dress, as the quicksand consumed him.

Polly opened her eyes and released Roger from his brief freeze. She took a deep cleansing breath as he emerged with a shudder, coughing and choking. Harry, unaffected, had moved on from the turkey to a bite of ham, pausing only to look Roger’s way. Polly pulled Roger to his feet. “Come on, you can get a sandwich and help me with the plates,” she said, leading him on unsteady legs out of the room.

Malcolm arrived as Harry finished off the dressing. He stayed just long enough for a pitstop and a ham sandwich, then the four of them piled back into the SUV, pointed south on Lafite. Roger carried the shopping bag containing three foil-wrapped plates to the rear hatch as Harry moved the travel bags to the rear, left the green canvas bag in the back seat. Roger closed the hatch, feeling some control returning as he got in and took the laptop out of the bag. Harry looked on with a nod of approval; Roger actually did have a backup.

Malcolm started the vehicle as Polly appeared in the front seat. “Ok, we ain’t going north; City Park is crawling with heat. How about back to Orleans?” he asked Polly. She closed her eyes as her vision swept south.

“Oh. No. There’s a accident blocking up the intersection. Sorry,” she said.

“Ok, how about near the medical center?” Malcolm asked. Her gaze swept west down the highway, toward the complex of buildings that made up Louisiana State University Hospital and Medical Center. After another few seconds, she nodded ok. He drove fast down the block and took a right onto Glavez St.

Roger’s laptop finished booting up as they approached Canal St. He clicked a skull-and-bones icon named “Jolly Roger” on the desktop, opening a small program window. A message box popped up:

Server - Active, Feed Trace - 0%.

Roger smiled, then began shutting the computer back down. “We’re good to go.

Once we're out of town, we can record a new episode teaser and upload it. Then we go on the offensive," Roger said with a smile.

The SUV crossed Tulane Ave. doing 50 as Polly's gaze kept watch around them. Malcolm suddenly slowed and stopped at the empty intersection of Glavez and Perdido before taking a left. The vehicle passed a large church on the first block, doing 20 instead of hauling ass, the hospital slowly approaching from the left.

"Uh," Roger was about to inquire, but Malcolm cut him off. "Never drive fast past a church or a hospital, not in this town." Roger stared up at the large dimly lit building sliding past, feeling chasened.

They took a quick right onto Bertrand, another onto Poydras, and a minute later the SUV was back to hauling ass on a wide open Hwy 10. Polly swept the highway fore and aft, then gave Malcolm the all-clear. He turned WWOZ back on as the ghost settled back into the seat, relaxed and smiling.

They were two miles past Louis Armstrong Int'l Airport when Polly suddenly sat up with a frightened gasp, just as a gleaming spark of dark light plunged through the roof and into Harry's body. She let out a sharp yelp, winced as if she'd been struck, twisted around in the seat and stared at Harry, doubled over, jerking and trembling in the back. Roger was stunned speechless, Malcolm almost skidded the vehicle but kept in control as he pulled onto the shoulder, trying not to stare at Polly; the look of terror on her face chilled his blood.

Chapter 20, Part 3

For a second or two, nobody inside the SUV moved, save for Harry, face clenched in a grimace, his body thrashing in a seizure from the dark spell. Roger stared helplessly at his friend, then at Polly, who scrambled over the front seat, landing between them. She touched him lightly, flinched as if he were red hot, then cradled Harry's head in her hands, her face a mask of concentration.

"Damn. I can't read him, not strong enough," she said, backing off the unconscious cameraman. Polly turned to Roger, pressed against the driver's side rear door. She climbed into his lap, embraced him tightly, whispered "Forgive me" into his ear, then kissed him, hard, as she 'pushed.' Roger felt his head spin, then a warm, cottony heaviness settled over him as she began to glow. She disengaged from Roger; his head lolled back against the seat, body limp, breathing shallow. The glow faded as the light from a passing car flashed

through the SUV.

She shifted back to Harry, placed a hand on his trembling forehead. It came in clear now. “Oh my Lord, this is Jacob’s juju, but this ain’t his spell,” she said. She closed her eyes and tried to enter the spell, her face registered her frustration. “Still not enough,” she said to herself. Polly turned to Malcolm with a look of regret, moved closer to the young man.

“I’m sorry baby, but I’m gonna need some of your strength too. Don’t worry, you’ll only be asleep for a little while, ok?” she said, cradling Malcolm’s head in her hands. He shook his head. “Ok.” He took a couple deep breaths and turned around in the seat. She embraced him, kissed him hard, again glowed from within as his eyes closed and he slumped against the seat. The second charge of energy rippled through her, and brought with it an unusual sensation - she felt and saw weak rainbow colored ripples in the ghostly ether, very slow motion, shallow waves that invaded the vehicle from the rear and passed around and bounced back from her a few feet. A church bell echoed in concert with the waves. The next rippling echo came 20 seconds later.

Polly quickly extended her sight toward the source of the disturbance, followed it back 2 miles east to the airport they passed. It came from inside a small plane hangar, a number of people in black suits working on laptop computers, sitting at a table around a large TV screen that had a map of the city on it. There were 3 radar circles on the map; at the Lower Ninth Ward, with a dozen glowing dots of various intensity within it, at City Hall Park, containing 5, and around the airport, showing one glowing dot on the I-10, faint but growing stronger. Shit!

Polly snapped her eyes open and returned to Harry, laid hands on his body and tried not to think about those people who could see her, who would surely come her way when she became the brightest light on that map. She had to do it this time...

Polly began to glow a bright ghostly white as she clutched Harry tighter to her bosom. Her face went from determined to strained to a grimace. Another ghostly wave approached; this one barely touched the SUV before it bounced back in a strong, brightly colored echo and loud ghostly report of the bell. Polly didn’t hear it; she began to fade inside the light, till only an outline was left, then the light winked out.

Polly found herself floating high above Wexley House, the first Wexley House, on Maison Road. It was night, felt like only a little after sundown. She looked down and saw a young and innocent-looking Jacob running across the yard toward the Wexley smokehouse. The truth of the spell hit her with a ghostly wave of nausea: it was the day Jacob ran off in 1832, over twenty years after her death. Jacob was lynched and Mistress Sara Wexley disappeared, and thousands of other men and women were dragged along for this ride.

He showed it to her just once; she was glad it wasn't one of the bones in his juju bag...

The day Jacob escaped from the 'meadow house,' he woke up alone and unchained in the living quarters, something that never happened before. There were always three or four young ones here at any given time, and they were usually tethered to their beds every night. He knew he was about to get sold or put down, and he didn't wake up riding in the covered carriage that brought new playthings to the house and took away troublemakers. They were gonna come kill me, or they were outside waiting for me to run, give 'em a fun little coon hunt, he thought.

By that afternoon he was hungry enough to venture outside the unlocked door of the building - a small one-story house in the woods on the far side of LeChette land. Since they were gonna kill him anyway, he decided to set fire to the elegant furniture and curtains in the big playroom before leaving. He worked his way through the woods up to the Wexley plantation and hid till sundown, then he made a beeline to the smokehouse. He helped himself to one of the smaller cured hams inside and snuck to the barn to hide for the night. Mistress Sara Wexley was in the kitchen at the time and saw what looked like one of her darkies sneaking from the smokehouse toward the barn. She smiled wryly and shook her head, picked up a broom leaning near the back door and exited into the yard, walking calmly to the barn...

Sara Wexley was a practical 17 year old Philadelphia banker's daughter when she met Albert Wexley, a handsome and charming 42 year old planter during one of his business trips. Though she didn't approve of his line of business, he didn't fit the awful image of a typical slavemaster often described in the pages of 'The Emancipator;' she felt she could improve on that and married him.

Unfortunately, Albert died of a heart attack, in bed, the night of their first anniversary. He did give her a son in that short span, Albert Jr., and left her with three dozen slaves to run the plantation, modest in relation to the LeChettes and the Wainwrights.

One of the first things she did after putting Albert in the ground was fire the overseer, then she increased the weekly meat allowance to the slaves. Over the next dozen years, Mistress Sara became the talk of three counties for treating her slaves more like family, only using a switch or a broom to correct bad behavior, throwing barbecues more often than the other two houses, and she was suspected of being a secret abolitionist and harboring more than one LeChette or Wainwright runaway on their way north, her coming from Pennsylvania and all.

Mistress Sara entered the barn ready to swat the little thief, found Jacob up in the hay loft with two thirds of a cured ham. She raised the broom to start in on him, but he didn't even flinch; he set the ham aside and lifted up his shirt, rolled over onto the hay, exposing the light crosshatching of scars down and across his back.

"Go ahead," he said. It stopped her cold; she'd never seen anything like this, or his matter-of-fact submission to this kind of beating. He was obviously a runaway from one of the other plantations, and a handsome one at that. Sara, widowed and lonely for so long, practically ostracized from local plantation society, had noticed a few of her male bucks in the field, and felt her body responding in need of quenching a primal thirst. She could never with one of her own slaves, but this was a runaway...

Sara took pity on him, told him she wouldn't turn him in, and asked him what happened. He told her about growing up in the meadow house on LeChette land, and about the other children there, and the two other houses from other plantations he'd been to over the years, and him getting too old to keep around, so he run off. She made the bold decision to shelter him, made him stay in the hay loft until it was good and dark, then snuck him inside Wexley House, hiding him in her bedroom. Part of her mind shamefully focused on the image of being used for sex by some plantation mistresses.

She kept him safe for two days, during which time the upstairs girls were barred from Mistress' bedroom.

The first day, Lucien LeChette offered a whole side of bacon to any slave on any

plantation who turned in a runaway. It got two other young men before sundown - one heading north, the other, southwest to New Orleans.

Sara resisted giving in to her desires that night, though she could see in Jacob's eyes as he stood at the foot of the bed - he knew she wanted him. Instead, Sara sent him to the corner, and she slept fitfully, seeing first him and Olivia LeChette having primal, rutting sex in that terrible 'meadow house,' then herself, making love to the beautiful stranger. It woke her up. She sat up in bed, flushed and aroused. She looked for the handsome young buck, saw him standing naked at the foot of the bed with a half-hard on, calmly waiting for her. Sara's resistance burned away; she crawled to the foot of the bed, staring at the growing erection till she almost touched it, then she straightened up and gave him a long hard, desert-thirsty kiss before pulling him into her bed. Before they were done, she had to bite down on a pillow to keep her cries of passion inside the bedroom.

The second night, Sara's cries reached the ears of one of the snooping upstairs girls, who was overheard gossiping by young Albert Jr., who suspected his Northern mother of many things, including helping runaways.

The third day Albert Jr. went to LeChette House after lunch looking for Lucien. He often talked plantation business with Lucien, and couldn't wait to gain his majority and take over running the plantation, HIS family's business. One of the LeChette upstairs girls happened to overhear Albert Jr. telling on his mother. She liked Mistress Sara, so straightaway she sent one of the field boys to Wexley House to warn Mistress. Sara had planned to ferry Jacob out that night, but they had to leave right then, in daylight. She had the buggy brought around from the carriage house and took the reins herself after they got in, driving hard and fast north on Maison Road.

They got halfway to Jackson when the buggy threw a wheel; Lucien and Justin Wainwright soon caught up with them, both riding the one horse. Jacob fought 'em for a good five minutes until a wagon and more men on horses arrived, trying to make them kill him if he couldn't get free, but they weren't gonna do that. Justin put a bullet in his leg as the wagon got near; it slowed Jacob up enough to get wrestled down by the extra men.

Jacob and Sara's hands and feet were chained, she was gagged and bundled into the wagon; before they gagged him, Jacob asked loudly "Did I burn it down?" Justin slugged him in the gut for that; the playroom and half the house was

consumed before they put out that fire. when Jacob straightened back up, he was smiling. "Burn the next one down too," he said. They gagged him and threw him in the back of the wagon, then rode back to LeChette land, to the creek in back of the smoldering blackened remains of the meadow house. They had wood for a fire and a noose already hanging from the high limb of a magnolia tree.

They made Sara watch from the wagon as they got to work on Jacob - he yelled out more curses on the house and the two firstborn sons when the gag came off, so they cut out his tongue, then castrated him, then stretched his neck, then burned his body till it was charred ash and bones dumped into the creek. Lucien sent Jacob's worn jeans to his mother Olivia, then instructed his men to take Sara to 'Madame DeBre' in New Orleans after they had their fun with her. "Just bring back the dress," he told them.

After a few weeks Wainwright county went back to normal. Albert Jr. spread the story that Sara had run off with a handsome buck that night and gone back north, and with Lucien's help he gained legal title and control of the plantation. Junior's first order of business was hiring a new overseer.

And repairs began on the meadow house in the woods.

Polly shook off the memory as she watched Jacob enter the smokehouse, then went unseen and flew down through the roof. She was determined to hijack this dream and break the spell, and this moment was her best chance. Polly waited until his back was turned then appeared at the door. When he turned back around holding a small cured ham, she held her finger to her lips and peeked through a crack in the door. She saw Mistress Sara Wexley in the kitchen, looking out into the yard a moment, then she left into the main house. Polly cracked open the door and looked for any other eyes on them, then led him from the smokehouse to the barn.

Polly knew she'd need a little more strength to break the dark spell and find Jacob. She couldn't pull any from nature - the trees and animals here were only a backdrop within the memory, and she didn't have time to collect from enough people on the fringes of the spell, but there was one place, the slave cemetery out back of the vegetable patch the Wainwright slaves kept. Her old bones were buried there, beneath an old piece of tombstone with her name chiseled on it. Polly told Jacob she was coming right back, and to be quiet eating that ham. She climbed down from the hayloft out of his view, then she vanished and flew

south.

Polly's teenaged form appeared over the cemetery, floated down until she sat in front of her gravestone. "I don't know if you hear me old voodoo woman, but you are a part of this thing now, cause I'm here, and Jacob needs my help, all the people trapped in here..." She stopped, fought vainly against a sudden rush of ghostly tears, then placed both hands on the worn stone with eyes closed, probing for any spark of presence. Slowly she began to detect, something, waking up or taking interest.

Polly sensed the resonance growing within, she felt warm, then it became a ghostly updraft of energy, flowing up from the grass into her body. Polly glowed brightly and briefly once again, though this one had her skin tingling. "Thank you, old woman, thank you," Polly whispered. She left the cemetery, clearing the tree line, then flew back toward Wexley House.

Polly floated above the modest mansion, seeking out Mistress Sara, spotted her upstairs going to her bedroom. She quickly descended, entering unseen, waited until Sara closed the door and turned toward the room. Polly was happy to see the look of confusion on Sara's face, her standing there, not knowing what to do next. Good, she thought, though she still felt a little bad about attacking Sara, even a memory of her...

Mistress Sara suddenly felt a pair of soft hands clasp her face, soft lips pressed against her mouth in a hungry kiss. Sara's hands flew up to her head, but they soon fell back down as her eyes closed. A slow steady stream of dark sparkles of light began to flow from Sara's body, swirling and gathering before her, forming into the darkly glittering shape of a teenaged girl. Polly made herself fully seen as the last few dozen sparks flowed into her. She carried the unconscious woman to her bed, laid her down and prepared to leave when she felt a surge of energy from within, all the women, thousands of them, none younger than 20, coming in sync with their new host, making her glow with a brighter intensity than before. She fought to rein it back in, tamp it down till the glow faded, then she went unseen and flew from the house. I'm running out of time to do this, she thought.

Polly arrived back in the barn, then went seen climbing the ladder back up to the young, flesh and blood shadow of Jacob, who had consumed almost all of the cured ham. She sat close to the young runaway and got him to put the meat down. "C'mon. It's not safe here, but I got a place nobody will look. You got to

close your eyes now, OK?” she asked him. He hesitated, but let her put her hand over his eyes. Polly concentrated, and they quickly faded from the hayloft.

Polly removed her hand and Jacob took in his new surroundings with barely more than a odd frown that didn't interrupt his eating. He recognized the rough wooden walls of a slave cabin, but this one had an actual wood floor, along with the maple plantation bed they were both sitting on. This was Olivia LeChette's personal slave cabin, found locked and empty by Polly earlier. He didn't remember walking here, but 'I been here before...' was all that crossed his mind.

Jacob consumed the last bite as his interest turned toward the strange but beautiful young slave girl. In the meadow house, his only contact with slave girls around his age was during a performance for patrons, who would join in afterwards. He'd never been with a girl just by himself and herself. He knew many positions and techniques, but he didn't exactly know how to begin with her, so he sat there licking his fingers and stealing glances at her. Polly gave him a shy smile and moved closer to make the next move, though she felt just as hesitant, even with the urgency of the task pressing her on.

Polly and Jacob had always had an unspoken agreement about that - he had the LeChette and Wainwright women, and she had the Park, the Quarters, and the occasional Wexley male. It never occurred to her to see Jacob this way, even after he showed her this memory so long ago. She could already sense this Jacob's slowly rising interest, amplified by the growing number of males reflecting back waves of awakened lust, that would only get stronger when the women inside her joined in. It would overload the memory and brake the spell, she wasn't sure what it would do to her....

Polly kissed Jacob, took his hands and guided them inside her shirt as she shrugged it off. He kissed back and lightly squeezed her breasts, tweaking the plump nipples with his thumbs until they were rigid. His mouth followed, trying but not quite able to fit both of them in. She undid his jeans and he let go of her long enough to kick them off and follow her onto the bed. She crawled up to the head, rolled onto the pillow and smiled a fake nervous smile at the young and innocent Jacob, who'd raised her legs and began kissing and teasing the backs of her knees. Polly legs quivered in response, her eyes closed and the sensation blossomed in intensity. It felt like floating on an ocean of tingling arousal that threatened to pull her in, overwhelm her.

Her legs parted, drawing him down to the soft dark curls framing her puffy outer lips. He lightly sucked Polly's clit into his mouth. It threw her headlong into that ocean as the storm surged. She fought to stay on top of it as waves of women joined in. With each blink of her eyes, she felt the pull of dozens of nipples growing hard, scores of clits swelling as they danced with Jacob's tongue.

She forced her eyes open, stared at Jacob as he lightly nipped her clit with his teeth. It sent delicious shocks through her ghostly body, but she kept her eyes forced open this time. Polly felt again the growing wave of arousal, but this time she floated above the storm, in complete control. She counted a little over a thousand women now, but it wasn't even a third. I gotta hurry this up, she thought, as the SUV, left alone on the highway flashed before her.

Polly squirmed away from Jacob's lips, got the pillow from behind her and placed it under her round, honey brown ass, then spread her thighs, glistening from the lamplight. "C'mon baby," she said in a low whisper and moaned as she lay back and pinched her nipples. "C'mon..."

Jacob moved between her legs and rubbed the head of his thick erection against her moist opening. Polly strained to keep her eyes open and focused on Jacob. He entered and filled her. A rippling wave of ecstasy overcame her as he began long-stroking, pulled her back under. Polly senses were assualted by a multitude of cocks, the cascade of sizes and lenghts increasing the intensity of the storm within her. A hundred pairs of fingers pinched a thousand throbbing clits, loins all around her struggled to find a rhythm. She felt like a rag doll pitched and tossed amid the sensual overload; she couldn't even distinguish her own hips, thrusting in time with Jacob's.

A small wave of orgasms washed over Polly. It broke her loose and her eyes snapped open. She was back in control of the passion as more and more women were swept into the lovemaking. Now it was over half the women and men engaged. Polly, sweating and breathing hard along with Jacob, let him roll her over onto his back. She straddled him and began to grind in time with his matching thrusts. Their eyes locked onto each other; Polly felt the storm swelling again, but now it was like being in balance with the waves, riding the surface. The pace of their rutting increased, the sensations intensified. She could feel the energy building, the tempest boiling within her, close to the level she'd need. She could see in Jacob's eyes the reflected faces of thousands of combined couples fucking with abandon. Her senses reeled, but she stayed focused on

Jacob's eyes.

Meanwhile, in hospital wards and emergency rooms across the globe, the men and women under the thrall of the dark spell began to register increased heartbeat and respiration, then began moving around, displaying obvious signs of arousal, nipples and penises growing erect, the antiseptic wards filling with the moans and squeals of raw sex, the women humping the air with spread legs, the men tenting bedsheets, all bumping and grinding in rhythm.

Awash within the barely contained storm building to its climax, Polly could tell enough of them were now engaged to break the spell. She let loose, grinding on Jacob with loud abandon. she could feel, within the surging waves of sex, one enormous, rippling, slow motion eruption of orgasm, Her ghostly body began to tingle, then blaze from the energy filling her.

The thundering sounds of sex roaring in her ears, Polly barely made out her own voice amidst the din as she went over the edge, screaming out in passion, her eyes locked with Jacob's, one image desperately held onto, Jacob's big juju bag filled with goofer dust. "Bring me to Jacob," her only thought as explosions of pleasure wracked her ghostly body, now emanating a blinding light that overwhelmed the bed, the cabin, the dark dream.

At that moment, hospital wards and emergency rooms, filled with shocked and amused medical personnel observing their patients somehow sharing the same loud sex dream, erupted in a chorus as they all came to climax together, ejaculating and squirting. Then, almost in unison, they awoke in a start and sat up, looking around at each other in shock, then in smiling, grinning, laughing recognition. The doctors and nurses hurried to the patients to help them remove the tubes and wires as they struggled to leave their beds, reaching out to each other. Once freed they all rushed to hug, laughing and shedding tears.

On the I-10, a yellow VW minibus was nearing the old SUV parked along the shoulder as it suddenly glowed from within. The glow got brighter and the VW slowed down, but then sped upon past. An MPD Police unit and an SUV full of Inspectors were close behind, driving up fast with lights and sirens off. They pulled off and parked about 20 feet back of the old SUV. Four Inspectors rushed past the police unit, all brandishing scanners. The two cops stayed sitting; they had no intention of going near that thing.

One of the Inspectors tapped his ear as they walked up to the vehicle, and the faint noise of a helicopter appeared in the night sky, hovering 100 feet above, drenching the SUV in a spotlight. Less than 5 minutes before, that one little glowing dot went off the scale at the Campus field base, sending a small detail to check before the main search team arrived.

The bright glow inside the SUV suddenly blazed, then it winked out with a low-pitched whoosh. It blew back the agents as the spotlight veered away. The chopper bobbed and weaved a moment, then the light steadied again on the vehicle. One agent who was knocked on his ass brushed himself off and checked his scanner, the others pulled out small flashlights and tried the doors. The passenger side front was unlocked. They found an unconscious driver and passenger in the seats, and one sitting up and breathing heavy, wearing the disoriented look of someone who just woke up.

Polly came tumbling out of the memory into the warm night air over the broad, dark, lazy Mississippi, south of Memphis. Floating below her was a cargo barge beneath a shroud that made it kinda unseen, but she saw it just fine in the moonless night.

Polly breathed in a strong shot of fresh strength from the river itself, the rushing strength of its flow, the life swimming within its embrace, adding to the electric tingling coursing through her. It was incredible; she could clearly see Jacob through the barge's anti-ghost shields, lying on a medical bed with the juju bag between his legs, in a room with an active voodoo doll, a puppet who's spirit strings wound back to an old man inside a glass cage hooked up to hospital machines. She recognized him, Mr. John Porterhouse, seen him around town before, been a New Orleans hoodoo man for over 50 years. She'd never had dealings with him, but she knew of him. He was a good, decent man. He looked near death lying in that cage, most likely being used against his will, she thought. I'm fixing this right now...

She went unseen and floated down to the barge, punching a crackling hole in the shroud and shorting it out as she hovered over the steel above the old man, then lightly floated down through the roof to settle beside him.

Chapter 20, Part 4

The Bell Jet Ranger flew fast toward the blazing wreck floating in the channel. Inspector Valdez sat between the pilot and agent Bunsen in front, Hendrix and Slater shared back seat with MPD Officer Josh Monroe. He didn't have a headset and was drowning in prop noise. The agents had trackers out scanning the yard and warehouse near the barge. The mobile he brought was on, but wouldn't light up; he gave it to Slater, who found a small discoloration on a corner of the screen. "Look's like the shrike got it," Monroe barely heard him say over the noise. Valdez turned back, said something. Slater nodded, then reached under the seat for a large square duffle bag, put the fried mobile inside a side pocket. Monroe saw a similar duffle bag under his side of the bench seat.

The copter came to hover over the container yard as the agents watched their screens. They all showed the same thing: six blinking lights inside the warehouse, and four unmoving dimmed lights in the yard near the rows of containers. Runyon, Layton, Briggs and Johnson.

The air unit set down and they all piled out - Hendrix and Slater sprinted toward the warehouse, Valdez and Bunsen ran toward the containers. Monroe exited the chopper and it flew away to hover over the barge, its spotlight coming on and sweeping toward the blaze. The walkie-talkie clipped to Valdez' belt barked with the pilot communicating with the Port station as a fire engine came screaming down Channel Ave. and turned at Wharf St., followed by an EMT unit. Monroe ran after Valdez, catching up with her as they stopped a few feet away from the bodies on the ground, the backs of their heads glistening in the flickering glow.

Valdez tapped the comm in her ear and turned around, sorrow and rage reflected back in the light. "Yes? All right. Hendrix, assist the EMT's and stay with them until one of them can talk. Slater, I want you on the barge. Scan for the SI and keep me updated," she said, hard and quiet. Valdez turned to the cop, her face forced calm and professional. "Officer Monroe, could you please help Hendrix in the warehouse?" He nodded and trotted off toward the long building. Two firefighters were boarding the barge as they attacked the flames on deck. Valdez waited until he was far enough away, then sank to her knees beside the prone body of agent Benjamin Layton, a member of her personal squad. "We were going to Wrigley today, to eat hotdogs and watch the Cubs play the Marlins. Our third official date," she said quietly to no one.

Agent Bunsen moved a few yards away and busied himself with the tracker to give her a measure of privacy and tamp down his own rage at Spec4. He had the

tracker set to wide spectrum, running a general scan when the screen filled with light. “Agent Valdez! Edie! We got a sustained spectral discharge, off the scale,” he shouted, rushing back to her side. Valdez got to her feet and tried to wipe composure back to her face as Bunsen punched buttons and scowled. “I can’t localize it. The signal is being dispersed,” he said.

“Slater, you seeing this?” she said, clicking a button that turned her tracker screen white. “Triangulating,” Slater said in her ear. “Damn, it’s not working. Recording.” Thirty seconds later the light faded, then died. Bunsen ran down to scan the barge as Slater worked on the recorded signal.

Fifteen minutes later, Slater was no closer to localizing the signal. Inspector Valdez stood in the middle of the yard staring at the smoking hulk of the barge, a second MPD helicopter hovering beside her donated police air unit with spotlights on. Two members of the FBI Crime Lab were with the dead Inspectors, keeping themselves busy looking for trace evidence as they worked with stunned sad faces. Special Agent Buckley was still recovering and these two had nothing additional to report.

They’re so close I can smell them, she thought. Fitzpatrick wasn’t among the charred bodies on the barge or pulled out of the channel, and the dead Inspectors’ gear was gone. The Spec4 renegades have the SI and are laughing at us from under a very good blanket...

She contacted the command center at Dewitt-Spain and got more frustrating news - The techs at Basic still wouldn’t relinquish the mission satellite over North America. “Did you explain to them we’re trying to locate the SI?” she said. “They said sorry, the satellite is assisting New Orleans for the next twenty minutes, Memphis can’t get it any sooner.”

Dammit!” Her jaw clenched in the darkness as she fumed. The SI and a nest of bastard traitors is more important than chasing a pissant little TV host playing Field Agent!

Just then Slater broke through her silent cursing of Basic. His tracker interrupted its scanning, another screen popped up, blinking strongly. “Whoa! Massive spectral emanation, This one’s different, something big just came through. And localizing...six miles south, in the middle of the river! Ectoplasm at 100%. We’re getting a secondary signal. Faint, but it’s our tech. Damn, it went off,” he

said.

“Everybody, regroup to my position,” Valdez shouted through the comm, running back toward the bodies to give the aircraft room. She unclipped the walkie-talkie from her belt. “Air unit One, come get us, MPD Air Seven, we need you too, please. We have suspects located six miles south.” Both helicopter pilots responded “Roger agent Valdez,” and broke off from the barge, their spotlights catching Bunsen and Slater as they ran underneath, then lights off as the choppers landed.

“Hendrix, we’ll need the Mark Two’s please. We’re taking them all alive,” Valdez said as she climbed in front. Munroe got in back as Hendrix pulled two gun cases from one of the duffel bags under the seat and handed them to Slater and Bunsen, who ran to the second MPD unit. Valdez belted up, removed her comm piece and slipped on the headset. “Seatbelts everybody, we’re going in hot! Turning on the bubble,” she said, looking back to the officer, who was strapped in and adjusting the headset. He nodded with a determined gaze.

The copter took off, joining the MPD unit already up and flying south. Hendrix opened two more gun cases from the duffel bags and handed one of the new weapons to Valdez. “The Mark Two Field Tagger. Rated for humans and creatures up to 1200 lbs.,” Hendrix told Munroe, “a coherent nano-charged laser and non-lethal motor-response stunner.” Hendrix pointed to the safety switch, which also had settings for the two functions. “You use the laser first,” he said. It had a large gleaming black marble at the end of a barrel twice normal size. Munroe smiled at the Tagger; let’s get these sumbitches, he thought.

Polly, brimming with tingling energy, lightly floated down through the barge roof, settled unseen beside Mr. John Porterhouse. The lights inside flickered, but remained on. She saw in the room next door crackling, sparking chaos as equipment and computers shorted out, a man in a lab coat getting frantic and yelling “shield is down. Computer’s down. We’re exposed!” The old man lay prone on a cot inside the glass cage, hooked up to an IV drip and a hospital machine maintaining his heartbeat. It took a small effort to protect the machine, but she hardly felt it.

Polly stroked the old man’s forehead gently, then entered his mind. She found

Porterhouse laying on a large waist-high slab of marble in a dark wooded clearing, tied down and nearly buried under scores of wet green vines that gave off a sickly licorice smell. She took a vine in both hands, felt the energy within surge through her. The vine began to lose color and scent, shriveling to grayness then dust. Polly began ripping at the vines, freeing the hoodoo man in a couple minutes. The tingling was gone, but she still felt strong. He sat up and climbed off the altar, looking more alive and vital in here than outside.

“Mr. Porterhouse, I come to get you and Jacob while I got this extra wind,” the ghost said. The old man smiled and took the teenager by the hand. “No Polly, I appreciate the effort, but I’m too used up on this side and you don’t have much wind left. I do need you to get the blood off the voodoo doll’s head, then I can help you save Jacob. Ok sweetie?” The ghost gave him a pained sad smile, but shook her head yes; she knew what he asked and deferred to his judgement, didn’t make her feel better...

“It’s ok, we both got help coming in another minute. Go on, baby,” he said gently. Polly gave him a big sorrowfull hug and a kiss on the cheek, then backed away and faded from the scene. Porterhouse leaned back against the marble altar, closed his eyes and prepared himself.

Meanwhile in the barge... “The shield box is down, computer motherboard is fried!” Anderson shouted over the speaker. “Switching to one of the trackers-”

“That’s not getting my goddammed shield back up!” Jonesborough shouted into the comm next to the speaker. “Is the radar working?” “No sir, that’s what the tracker is for. All we got is lights, comm and the motor right now. Ok, reading two craft closing, it’s them sir,” Anderson said. Shit, Jonesborough muttered, staring at the glass cage. Did you do this old man, he thought. He only had a moment to muse; the female ghost Polly emerged in the room beside her partner laying on the medical bed, her back to Lucas. She reached for the voodoo doll standing at Jacob’s head. Lucas caught on quick and sprang for the girl, grabbing her by the wrists.

That last move, appearing seen in the room, left Polly a little weak, but she had a job to do. She saw the voodoo doll standing there but not moving and went to reach for it when she felt the greasy clammy grasp of hamhocks on her wrists from behind. She struggled to get free from the big man, feeling no stronger than a normal girl. Another lab coat entered the room, froze at the doorway. “Get the

splatter gun!” he yelled at the guy who vanished from the door. Jonesborough managed to wrestle Polly around till she was facing the door. The lab coat emerged holding a weapon that looked like a big paintball gun, fired a round that hit Polly square in the chest, just above the swells of her breasts.

The flying blob of liquid splattered and burned, the acid spray seared the tops of her breasts. She felt a wave of fatigue spreading from her chest outward as Jonesborough spun her around in his arms, regarded her with a dismissive sneer, then tossed her weak form over Jacob’s bed. She slammed against the opposite wall and crumpled to the floor, breathing hard, arms and legs beginning to tremble. Lucas took the splatter gun and set it on the table. “Tell Anderson to prep my pony bottle, and bring me the ecto-burn,” he told the tech and sent him on. Lucas leaned heavily against the wall and stared at the comm. Gotta decommission the goddamn barge now...

Polly heard a rush of footsteps outside the room, then, the faint whirr of helicopters from above. She looked up and saw the voodoo doll walking slowly, stiffly toward the edge of the bed, arms pinned to its sides, the doll’s head twisted back, silently mimicking a desperate scream to Jonesborough, who was otherwise occupied, yelling at the speaker on the wall.

The two air units closed in on the cargo barge, a twin to the ruined craft at the Port. “I’m reading six hostiles, three in the pilot house, the rest hiding at the other end,” Hendrix said.

“Air Seven, hang back until we finish targeting,” Valdez said, switching the tagger to laser and nodding to Hendrix to do the same. Air Unit One moved closer, rotating until the right side faced the pilot house, chopper doors open. Cutter and two gunmen hunkered behind the pilot house jumped out and opened up with side arms and stunners. Munroe flinched in reflex, then saw the rounds and energy charges dissipate and flatten against the air, blossoming in gleaming ripples a foot away from the open door. Valdez and Hendrix fired the lasers, catching the trio on their chests and arms. “Air Seven, the pilot house is painted, they’re all yours. Proceeding to the next group,” Valdez said, as the chopper drifted to the front of the barge, painting the remaining shooters as they scrambled for cover.

The three at the pilot house were continuing fire at the helicopter moving away, shooting at the blades and tail, but the form-fitting bubble enveloped the entire

craft. One noticed the squiggled pattern the laser made across his flak jacket and left arm; it was still there, spreading like a glowing ink stain. “Fuck! Lose the gear and get overboard, hurry up!” he shouted, pulling ammo from his pockets and clawing at the body armor. He got the jacket halfway off when he saw three glowing energy charges stream from the other chopper. They arched over the barge, hovering, then swooped down toward the gunmen. The charges hit the trio with a small crackling noise. They fell hard, muffled booming echoes onto the steel roof, fully conscious and groaning but unable to move. The three on deck were tagged running toward the stern. One gunman was struck trying to dodge the charge. His momentum carried him over the side, his face frozen in terror as he fell into the river and disappeared beneath the barge’s wake.

“Slater, do you still have the net?” Valdez asked. “Roger that,” he said through the headset. “We have one hostile to fish out of the water. Try to get him before he drowns,” she said, handing her tagger back to Officer Munroe and retrieving her stunner. “Pilot, can you bring us down level to that exit?” she said, pointing at the small metal door in the center of the front row of containers. Pilot nodded. “Get ready to light up the interior,” she said to Hendrix and Munroe, who aimed the taggers at the door. Valdez squeezed the trigger and held it; a rapid stream of charges hit the upper hinge, blowing it off in a shower of sparks. The lower hinge was fried, then a final stunner blast took out the door lock and the scorched slab of metal rattled loudly to the deck.

Hendrix and Munroe fired the lasers into the darkened interior as shots and stunner charges came flying out. A barrage of tagger charges invaded the interior, illuminating the space inside as gunmen and renegades wearing lab coats were hit and brought down.

“I got him,” Slater said, as the sopping wet and choking gunman emerged from the water and floated toward the barge, settled on deck as Air Seven caught up with the craft and hovered near the pilot house. Valdez motioned her pilot to shine the spotlight into the darkened passageway and move closer to the barge. “Everyone, switch back to stunners and prepare to board,” she said, seeing no one inside standing or holding a weapon.

Slater and Bunsen climbed down the struts and jumped off, landing on the roof next to the three gunmen. The MPD chopper pulled up and away and focused its spotlight on the downed renegades. The two agents climbed down to the deck and were making their way up to the front entrance when a loud, tearing metal

screech erupted from the barge roof. The agents saw a large rough chunk of steel shoot up, caught for a second in the spotlight as it flew into the night, splashing down far behind them.

Polly heard gunfire and muffled electrical noises joining with the helicopter above the room as she stared at the voodoo doll, who took one final step over the edge and off the medical bed, clattered to the floor. She held her breath, stared at the pair of legs across the room for a sign the man heard the noise. He didn't turn around. She struggled to move her arms, hands shaking as she reached for the doll.

"Anderson! Anderson! Where's the damn ecto-burn?" Jonesborough shouted at the comm. He opened the door, heard gunfire now issuing from outside the barge to the right. The rest of the Tech geeks and staff were positioned in the hallway, weapons ready and pointed at the closed metal door. Anderson wasn't among them. Little bastard better not be gone, he thought. He opened the door to go get the ecto-burn himself, glanced back, and noticed that the voodoo doll wasn't standing next to Jacob's head. The loud muffled thud of a metal door was accompanied by a barrage of gunfire in the hallway, quickly followed by crackling, and silence, broken here and there by pained moaning. "Shit," he yelled, rushed around the medical bed and saw the little bitch ghost laying there with the doll's head in her mouth like it was candy.

"No!" he shouted, reached down to grab it, but she released the voodoo doll and it skittered fast across the floor and in through the open cage door. The doll reached up its wooden stick arms at the old man's chest, made a yanking motion and the wires were jerked out. The voodoo doll stood there looking up at Jonesborough, his blood no longer staining its face. The machine maintaining Porterhouse's heart went to flatline. A moment later the doll fell lifeless to the floor.

Lucas backed away from the glass cage, turned to flee the room and confronted the towering and angry presence of a much younger John Porterhouse. Both man and newly freed ghost looked at the splatter gun, which flew from the table to shatter against the far wall. The ghost grabbed the big man by the neck and hand, the hand that smeared blood on the voodoo doll. Jonesborough made an unearthly squeal as Porterhouse slowly crushed the hand. The ghost glanced up at the ceiling, a big chunk of it ripped loose and flew up into the night, leaving a large jagged hole. Porterhouse and Jonesborough slowly drifted up through it,

Lucas' ass scraped painfully against the jagged edge on the way up. Lucas gurgled out in pain and struggled to hang on with his other hand.

Anderson, following mission protocol, stuffed papers and a tracker into a watertight bag and ignored Jonesborough calling for the ecto-burn. This part of the operation was going to shit; somebody had to get to Vicksburg and alert the rest of the company. He cracked the Tech Room door, waited for the firefight in the hallway to end, then ran the other way down the hall, up the steps and into the reception area at the barge's rear, carrying the bag and a small pony bottle air tank with mouthpiece. He closed and locked that door behind him, just escaping the sweep of a spotlight, hurried to the control pad for the recessed door at the rear. He took a deep, hard breath and clicked the door open. There was no one outside on deck, the choppers were up front. He nervously, quietly eased himself over the side, slipped in the mouthpiece, then disappeared under the murky waves.

Valdez, the agents and Officer Munroe saw the pair floating above the barge. She recognized Lucas Jonesborough, but the other one, the spectral entity, looked like one of the voodoo houngans she met last year in New Orleans... "John Porterhouse?" she whispered. Porterhouse, distracted for the moment, deciding what to break next on this peckerwood, heard her. He looked over, saw Miss Edie Valdez looking very impressive in her battle gear, come to save the day. He smiled, genuinely happy to see her.

"Miss Valdez! Well, ain't you something, leading the cavalry and all. It's so good to see you again."

"Please, Mr. Porterhouse, please don't kill him. He's got a lot to answer for."

The ghost gave a big bellowing laugh. "Oh, he surely does, all right. He deserves it too, but you can have him." Porterhouse flung Jonesborough into the river beside the barge, "Ok, go on 'head and do your thing, baby," the ghost said, floating back down the jagged hole.

Valdez had Slater fish the soggy, sputtering renegade Lab Director out of the river as she and the others searched the rooms inside, locating S.I. Fitzpatrick bound and unconscious in the Tech Room. Valdez entered the brig, saw the old man's body inside the glass cage. The much younger looking ghost was putting pieces of cloth and wood into a large old leather bag sitting on a medical bed. A

young black man lay on the bed, his skin casting a dull green light. Porterhouse then helped an almost naked teenaged girl to her feet. She could barely stand on her own and leaned heavily onto him.

The ghostly voodoo man closed up the leather bag and held it in one hand, took the young man's and girl's hands in the other. "I have to take care of these two now, but it's been real good seeing you again Miss Valdez."

The Inspector nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "Goodbye, Mr. Porterhouse."

He smiled. "Oh, don't be like that. It ain't goodbye, just goodbye for now," he said, as the three spirits slowly vanished.

Chapter 20, Part 5

A little after 9am, Ethan Bedford, whose snow-white flattop buzzcut perfectly complemented his wrinkled hawk's beak of a nose, wearing a pair of old black ropers, jeans, a denim shirt and a faded olive green field jacket, was just leaving the Wendy's on New Richton Rd. in Petal, MS., just east of Hattiesburg, about to get back on the road inside Lester's pride and joy - his 1957 Ford Fairlane Sunliner Convertible. Starmist Blue/Colonial White with gold trim, matching two-tone vinyl interior. Sweet little ride. He reached into the left hand pocket, took out a small dark metallic egg with buttons, a small power light that was on and a display screen on one end. He clicked the display button; it glowed a bright green. Ethan turned the device off and put it back, smiling. Good meal, he thought.

At that moment, in Henry Smith's room at the Bama Inn in Mobile, Agent and NAS Captain Curt Boseman was making a final test of the vocal simulator program on Henry's laptop before dialing Ethan's number. Boseman's main concern was whether they were calling too late in the morning. He decided to play Bobby as just waking up and as little conversation as possible. He adjusted the headset mike, opened a pop-up window with a phone dialer inside, and made the call.

Ethan's cell phone rang as he sat behind the wheel. He pulled a .380 from a rear holster and set it on the seat next to a small carryall.

"Uh, Bobby here," Boseman said, lazily.

Ethan frowned. “Boy you sound half asleep. Are you ready to go? Did you at least get a map?”

“Uh, yeah. Highway map, and a city map of Vicksburg.”

“Well get it out and follow along,” Ethan snapped. Boseman smiled as he opened the highway map. Gotcha...

“Take US 98 from Mobile to Hattiesburg, take US 49 to Jackson, take The I-20 west to Vicksburg. See that?” Ethan asked.

“Uh yessir.” “Good. Now get the city map. See the Washington St. exit?” “Uh yessir.” “Which way do you turn?” “Uh, left,” Boseman said.

“Good. I want you on the road in half an hour and in Vicksburg by 2 o’clock, run the siren if you have to, and don’t call me again ‘less it’s an emergency,” he said, hanging up.

Boseman’s smile became a grin. He turned off the phone and the simulator, then opened up the window to Harcourt at Data Centre, who’d been monitoring the call. He nodded and smiled. “Well done Boseman. Tell the Denver team he’s coming,” he told a person offscreen.

Ethan tried to call Lucas, but his cell wasn’t answering. No word since last night, but this was standard protocol when an ‘op’ went to hell - split up, go silent, meet at the secondary rendezvous. Ethan followed protocol by removing the battery from his phone and placing the items in the right hand cargo pocket.

He started up the Sunliner and dropped it’s top, staring out at the empty ribbon of asphalt as the mechanism whirred away, the road stretching west in the bright promise of morning. For a fleeting moment he considered not meeting Lucas, considered going back toward Mobile, meeting Bobby on the way and tying up the loose end personally, then finding his own rock to hide under. The top settled into the rear space and the whirring stopped, breaking his concentration. He shook the notion off and refocused on the road. “Follow protocol,” he said to himself; “it’s too early to go all pussy.” He motored onto the empty stretch of asphalt and got back to running.

Lester arrived at the rendezvous at 11:32. The squat little building was classic Waffle House - a low skirt of red brick topped with big steel-framed plate glass windows on three sides under a narrow awning, topped by a shiny yellow crown proudly displaying the brand name. The entrance was down the walk on the left. He parked up front in the narrow lot to the left of the building, entered the restaurant behind a guy in a leather motorcycle jacket and took the booth up front with a clear view of the truck and Old Highway 61. His hospital guard uniform was replaced by a XL red checkered shirt and blue jeans bought at a Goodwill store in Jackson. His hospital-issue 9mm was tucked behind his back. "Don't show up wearing that damn uniform," Ethan told him last night when he called to divert him from Memphis to Vicksburg.

The small restaurant had about two dozen patrons in for lunch: travelers, people from the LaQuinta Motor Lodge across the way, good ole boys coming back from Bass fishing. He ordered lunch from a cute brunette as another waitress, a blonde whose nametag read "Betty," smiled as she walked past. Back in the kitchen and out of sight, the guy in the leather jacket and Lester's faces appeared on a mobile held by a male whose nametag read "Archie." He was dressed as a cook, but he had military written all over him. A couple of the teenage girls would occasionally glance his way and giggle; it was exciting to have people from the Campus doing a stake-out!

A dozen members from the Inspectors' Denver office were on scene inside their Field Ops Center - a 24 ft. U-Haul moving truck parked at the far corner of the motel lot, less than 100 ft. from the restaurant. The second face was a hit: Lester Hickey, Wainwright Co. Hospital employee. He's not a big fish, so the agents settled in, along with Lester.

Around 1pm an eight-man road crew in safety vests came bustling in, taking up two booths near the Bass boys, still no sign of Ethan's people. Lester took out his cell phone to call Ethan but the number just rang. He remembered what the old man told him last night: "Don't call me 'less it's an emergency."

Around 1:35, Ethan Bedford was at the undulating western edge of Mississippi, cruising west on the I-20 with the wind gently ruffling the edge of his flattop as the Sunliner passed Hall's Ferry Rd. The Washington St. exit was another mile up. The fleeting notion returned; to keep straight, stay on the interstate and disappear into Louisiana. Ethan took the exit, pausing at the stop light to put the .380 back into its rear holster, then turned left onto Washington and drove on to

the Waffle House as the road changed it's name from Washington to Old 61.

Lester was enjoying a fresh slice of pecan pie when he saw the Sunliner drive past, then exit the highway onto the service road and approach from the right, parking in the short section up front, away from the truck.

Ethan stared at the moving truck, still sitting there. Shit, he thought, taking the egg from his pocket. He turned the power on and looked up and around the area while the device charged up, caught Lester's eye as he thought of starting the car again and driving off. When it was powered up he clicked the display. The little screen glowed green, with a band of orange pushing in from the left, taking up half the little screen. The look on Ethan's face was starting to concern Lester, then the old man remembered the truck. It has Campus equipment inside, giving off the same kind of energy signals the egg is designed to pick up. He relaxed, turned the egg off and put it away, then got out of the car and stretched, smiling at the sky.

"Sabrina," at station 2 noticed him sitting there looking around nervously before getting out. She zoomed in and hit record on the old man's face as he walked to the entrance, getting a brief profile shot before the moving truck blocked her view. She backed up the footage to the best image of the old man and took a screenshot pic.

"Oh Mr. Weatherbee?" Sabrina said, smiling at the older male standing over "Veronica" at station 1, with a stunner, a walke-talkie, and an equipment cased clipped to his belt. When he glowered back she swallowed the pleasant face and turned back to the screen. The SI, Paul Harrod, apparently wasn't a fan of mission alias protocol, or Archie comics.

"Uh, SI, This could be him just going in, Caucasian male, 50's to 60's, white hair, military cut," she said. Harrod took a studied look. "Could be. Let's just see."

Ethan entered the restaurant, unzipped his jacket, sat down at the booth and gave the place a casual once over, Betty was behind the counter with her back turned. She slipped the comm piece from her left ear to her skirt pocket, then checked her button cam. Ethan set Lester's car keys on the table. Lester followed suit with the truck keys. Betty turned around and placed a napkin holder on the counter and casually surveyed the dining area as her button cam zoomed in on

the old man's face. 'Ok, count to ten,' she thought, looking everywhere but at the booth. At 'ten,' she turned and made her way left to the back, joining the young man in the kitchen working on the Mobile.

"ID confirmed, Ethan Bedford," Archie whispered to Betty, then clicked his comm piece as she put hers back in her left ear. What's our next move, Mr. Weather-?"

"For the moment we continue monitoring, Bravo one," Harrod replied. "He's considered armed, dangerous, and paranoid, and we don't know how many more weapons are in there. Bedford's waiting for another associate to arrive at 2pm. When he doesn't show, Bedford is gonna leave on his own and we take him then. Bravo two, you're clear to move into position." Three men dressed as LaQuinta employees ("Reggie," "Moose," and "Jughead") left the motel and crossed the mostly empty lot to the back of the Waffle House, staying at the rear corner, well back from the door. "Bravo Two in position," Reggie said.

Ethan ordered a BLT and Chili Combo, then asked Lester what time he arrived. "I got here at 11:30, had lunch, just waiting on Lulabelle so I can hit the road," he said, pointing the fork at his sweet ride.

"Where you off to?" the old man said.

"Texas. Got some friends there."

"Well, hang on a little longer. I may have to go to Texas with you," Ethan said.

After he polished off the chili, Ethan took the cell phone and the battery back out of his pocket, hooked it up and dialed Lucas, noting the time - 1:58. Betty came back in the dining area, keeping watch from the back doorway at the far end of the room. Ethan heard the line just ringing, as he watched the light traffic on Old 61.

He turned the phone back off, removed the battery with a sour expression, and put both items back in the right hand pocket. He looked around the dining room again, seeing how small and cagelike it was. He casually reached into his left pocket, took out the egg, clicked the charge button and set it behind the napkin dispenser out of view. No harm checking again, he thought, watching it signal primed. He clicked the display button; the little screen glowed green, then shifted orange, then shifted red. Shit!

The old man slowly swiveled around, eyes scanning the far side of the dining room and the doorway to the back section, saw among the faces one of the waitresses staring at the cute blonde propped in the back doorway, and the blonde staring at him before glancing away. He came back to her after a few seconds, caught her staring again before her eyes shifted, not blinking. She's watching me, he thought. And it looks like she got a communicator she's trying to hide in her left ear...

Betty was frozen at the doorway, felt the old man's eyes burning into her, as if 'newbie Inspector' were plastered all over her. Inside the Field Ops Center, Sabrina at station 2 was watching the button cam feed at station 1. The old man's cold hard stare drew her in, mesmerizing, reptilian, chilling...

An old beat up Chevy pickup drove up and screeched to a haphazard stop directly outside and inches from Lulabelle, breaking the spell as Ethan and Lester both turned toward the window.

Anderson stumbled out of the cab, looking like he hadn't slept. He leaned against the dusty hood then surveyed the area with weary nervous eyes.

Inside the Ops Center, Sabrina snapped out of the spell and was getting back to business, which included running the latest face to appear at the restaurant. The Campus ID that popped up almost immediately was a surprise: Tate Anderson, from Spectral4, Tech Dept. She looked up at the live picture and noticed him staring directly at the roof of the truck's cab, where a surveillance camera and antenna would normally be placed on this type of vehicle for a field op. "Uh, SI?" she announced, pointing at the screen. His sour look didn't improve.

"Shit. Bravo Two, hang back. That's another suspect from Spec4. Don't move on him unless he makes you," SI said, watching Anderson walk between the moving truck and the U-Haul, then under the awning, still staring back at the U-Haul truck as he neared the door. The trio of motel workers near the back of the building stopped and seemed to be having a conversation and fussing with their clothes in the bright sunlight. It didn't stop Anderson from noticing them, then seeing Ethan inside the dining room.

Ethan recognized the kid; Anderson, one of Spec4's computer geeks. The look on his face was confirmation enough - shoulda kept riding west...

Ethan pulled a \$20 from his shirt pocket and dropped it on the table, put Lester's

car keys back in his right pocket and casually palmed the egg in the left, then got up from the booth. He felt the .380 at his back and the Glock under his armpit as he stood up and watched Anderson, standing near the entrance staring at him and pointing past the door toward the rear of the building. A glowing ball of energy zipped past his head as Anderson ducked and scrambled behind a minivan.

“Shit,” Lester said, pulling his 9mm from under his checkered shirt. He clicked off the safety but kept the gun hidden in front as he got up and followed Ethan to the entrance, eyes watching the whole room around them.

“Dammit. Bravo one, take ‘em now, take ‘em now!” Harrod buzzed in Archie and Betty’s ears. The waitress up front gave a start as the blonde pair came bursting into the dining room with stunners drawn.

Lester turned toward her, his gun up and leveled in her direction. He noticed the agents just in time to receive a crackling blast from Archie’s stunner.

Ethan didn’t even break stride, just spun around and raised both hands into the air as Archie and Betty both came into full view with stunners pointed at him. They noticed the device in Ethan’s hand as he pressed the second button.

A low whine erupted from the metallic egg. The two agents earpieces began to emit a muffled resonating whine that dropped them to the floor, bodies gripped in a seizure. Inside the Ops Center, Harrod, Sabrina, ‘Veronica’ and ‘Dilton,’ in the deep well of the U-Haul, were able to remove their comm pieces. ‘Hot Dog,’ ‘Midge’ and ‘Clayton,’ the three agents at the mouth of the U-Haul, needed help removing theirs. Outside the restaurant, Anderson peeked from behind the minivan, saw the three men on the ground thrashing, then they stopped moving.

Anderson rushed over to the nearest one, bleeding from the ear holding the comm piece, and pulled a stunner from his limp hand. A movement out the corner of his eye made him look left; two agents at the rear of the big U-Haul truck were pointing stunners at him while holding a sore ear. Anderson just barely dodged an energy blast, fired twice, dropped one agent, then two loud low shots reverberated from inside the restaurant and Ethan came through the door holding his Glock. He saw Anderson shooting at the big truck and ducked behind the minivan. The device in his hand was drained, but the old man smiled and put it away. Anderson’s next shot nailed the other agent, then he made his way over, as Ethan considered the distance to the car and kept watch on the

Waffle House, now looking empty with everyone inside hugging the floor.

“Anderson, one of the geek boys right?” Ethan said, gesturing ‘down’ with the Glock at one the dumbass fishermen peeking his head up.

“Uh, yessir,” he said, aiming stunner blasts at the top of the truck’s cab, zapping a set of antennas. “That cuts off their link to base.”

“Ok then, c’mon!” Ethan said. They made their way up behind the cars in the lot with an eye on the big truck until they cleared the building.

Anderson emerged into the open space first, standing between the truck and the car, stunner cradled in both hands. The other side of the U-Haul was visible now, and two more agents were waiting, each holding a shotgun with a gleaming black golf ball sized marble at the end of a huge single barrell, an instrument panel on the stock, and a laser on top. Anderson knew that weapon well - a Mark Four Field Tagger, rated for ‘creatures and entities in the 5-to-20 ton range.’ One blast from that thing in the wrong place could kill a grown man.

Through reflex he fired first but he saw the laser flash from both weapons. He tagged one agent on the arm and they ducked back behind the truck’s corner. “We gotta go sir, they’re trying to kill us,” Anderson yelled to Ethan, who was just getting into the car and inserting the key.

Anderson started backing up to the car as the motor revved up, then he looked down at his t-shirt. There was a large bright red spot on the shirt, glowing and spreading out like an inkstain at his left shoulder. “Fuck! Sir? You gotta go without me,” he said, turning around to show Ethan the glowing red spot. “I’ll try to slow ‘em down, but watch out for that laser,” Anderson said. Ethan nodded his head and put the car in reverse. “All right. Good luck, son.”

Anderson came around the back of his Chevy, firing the stunner to keep them behind the U-Haul as he clawed at the t-shirt to get it off, then ran flat out toward the big U-Haul. He knew what was coming next. One of the Mark Four’s fired a screaming sizzling ball of energy straight up from behind the truck. Ethan saw it as he backed out and cleared the truck, and waited. He had to drive past the U-Haul to get back up onto Hwy 61, so he watched that thing go up about 500 feet and hover, then it began to drift, then fall, then scream back down, arcing toward Anderson, who had stopped firing and was now standing at the truck’s cab. The agents holding the Mark Four’s peeked around in time to see him stuff the t-shirt

into the open gas tank lid and bolt away.

Anderson got about a dozen feet when the charge hit. The explosion blew him toward the moving truck; he landed full body smack on the asphalt and skidded to a stop. The cab and the front wall of the truck were burning, a small trickle of smoke began to pour from the back, followed by four people stumbling and falling out. Anderson, groaning, rolled onto his back, struggled to get up, got to his feet in time to see an agent standing beside the row of cars to his left, pointing a stunner and a Mark Four at him. His eyes locked onto the huge weapon, but the agent dropped him instead with a stunner blast.

Ethan gunned the car toward the driveway, saw the agent not ten feet away as he flashed the laser, catching Ethan full on the right side of his head. Ethan fired twice, the second bullet caught the agent dead center in his forehead. He got off three more rounds at the burning U-Haul as he approached, driving back the few agents that still had some fight in 'em. Sabrina had scrambled under the truck and behind the tires with a Mark Four; as the car rounded up left onto the highway she painted the rear license plate with the laser, then watched it complete the wild leftward arc and drive off.

Harrod helped Sabrina up and took the weapon. "Good work. I'll take it from here, and get that fire out," he said. He pressed the highest charge setting on the stock, ran up to the highway, staring at the fleeing vehicle for a long moment, then took a short fast run toward the big Waffle House sign in the rear parking lot. He saw the mile-wide span of the steel bridge through a gap in the trees, caught his breath as he switched the trigger to 'fire,' aimed the Mark Four high and fired two rapid shots, then a third screaming blast into the air.

Ethan hit the westbound highway onramp doing 60, almost sideswiping an SUV as he merged in, cutting through the light traffic until he had clear road ahead. Through the underpass and the big beautiful I-20 bridge lay open and inviting. Then he heard that noise, that high-pitched, screaming whine from that weapon Anderson mentioned. He looked around and behind, didn't see it, then it got louder and he realized it was above him. "Kiss my red-" The next instant his head and the Sunliner's rear end were both ablaze. The car swerved then exploded, sending the burning Starmist Blue/Colonial White heap careening against the cagelike girders of the bridge, coming down spinning and shedding flaming debris, skidding to a popping, hissing stop in the middle of the bridge.

The SI, watching through binoculars, saw the burning wreck in the distance, nodded and put the binocs away, then walked back to the Ops Center, handing the weapon to Clayton at the truck's rear. Midge had the last of the fire out inside the truck; Sabrina had the front wall outside doused and was battling the burning cab. Harrod watched people beginning to come out of the restaurant as he walked toward it, pausing to collect 'Veronica' who was crying over agent 'Dilton' laying dead next to the unconscious Anderson. She gave him the full tally: Bravo One and Two were all dead. No civilians harmed.

Harrod sent the remaining people out and closed the restaurant, sent Veronica out with the moving truck keys to open that up, put cuffs on Lester and bound his ankles together with a plastic tie, then took a minute longer to process privately the loss of six agents. He unclipped the walkie-talkie from his belt.

"This is Weatherbee at the Field Ops Center, calling Patrol 17 at Vicksburg Airport, come on?"

"Yeah, 17. Is your operation successful, then? Over."

"It's done. Be advised there's been a single-vehicle accident on the I-20 bridge, and we need the county coroner at our location. We have multiple casualties. Over."

"Uh, yeah, roger that Weatherbee. We'll have units at your location in a few minutes, the coroner will take a bit longer, over."

"Acknowledged. Tell him no hurry, 17. Weatherbee out."

The SI put the walkie talkie back on his belt, then hefted the unconscious henchman over his shoulder and hauled him to the Ops Center, passing Sabrina, Midge and Clayton putting out the cab fire. He set Lester down on the floor of the U-Haul on the left, then did the same with Anderson, on the right side. Veronica had already found a couple interesting contraband items inside the truck, had them sitting on the asphalt. 'Hot Dog' had recovered from the stunner blast and was setting up the backup antenna.

Sabrina brought Harrod a fresh comm piece, her face a tearful mask of despair. Here it comes, he thought.

"Sir? We have to report this."

“Sabrina...”

“Sir, we violated protocol! Chad... I mean, Dilton, tagged his face. Right then we were restricted to stunners only. I’m not accusing you, sir; I’m just as guilty.”

“I didn’t see that. Do you have it on video?” She was about to argue further, but saw it was pointless. “Don’t act like a newbie, Inspector. Bedford WAS armed and extremely dangerous, and wouldn’t be taken. We have a co-conspirator and a rogue agent in custody and recovered contraband equipment, that’s all Cavendish cares about,” Harrod said, as the sound of Highway Patrol units approached. “Tell the pilot at the airport to prep the jet and contact Memphis Int’l. We’re sending these two direct to London,” he said, then left the U-Haul for the restaurant. He waited near the Waffle House lot, standing next to Dilton’s body as the first Patrol units rolled into the lot.

Chapter 21

Xavier Slattery awoke to the alarm clock buzzing beside his bed. He groped to turn it off and checked the time - 2:49am. He shuffled through the dark beach cabin into the kitchen, the muffled whisper of surf behind him, partially drowned out by his huge loud yawn. Ten minutes later, refreshed and somewhat awake after a tea and toast, he was back in the room, now brightly lit from his laptop on the night table by the bed, bringing up the live 9:00am East Coast feed of the network morning show.

He felt a dull ache in his arms, legs and back as he sat back in bed, a reminder of his first encounter with the ghost spells, nicknamed “Jacob’s Ride” by the media within the larger story of the “Rouge House Affair.” Xavier found himself inside a young ginger-colored runaway buck named ‘Little Red’ who knocked Justin Wainwright’s younger brother Edwin off his horse when they caught him on the road to New Orleans. They tied a rope around his ankles and dragged him behind Edwin’s horse for a few miles, then made him limp the rest of the way back with the rope around his neck. At Wainwright House, they hung Little Red by his wrists in the smokehouse for three hours, till his hands were swollen and numb, then Edwin gave him 50 lashes and dragged him some more. Xavier could still feel Little Red’s hips and shoulders against the dry scrub grass, the dirt road scouring his bare torso.

The second spell was an amazing experience. He was engulfed in and embraced by a rolling and pulsating wave of combined love and lust, the sensual chaos of simultaneous lovemaking with scores of women, each coupling experienced intimately. He was in bliss, lost in the wild ride, and then it ended abruptly and Xavier found himself in a hospital room, surrounded by doctors and nurses. There was semen on the bed sheets and his stomach, and the last of the dream euphoria was replaced with a quick and crushing isolation.

He was starved to reconnect, to touch someone from the dream, hold them tight and keep the transcendent intoxication going. He was dimly aware of hands on his body, muffled and artificial, spinning him around and around the room. Xavier was sedated as the medical staff cleaned him up, Director Cavendish back in London was informed, then he was hustled out of the Medical Center to a waiting helicopter. He slept through the next day and a half in the beach cabin with Campus Medical next door.

Three hours after the engagement in Vicksburg, the Campus held a 'global public debriefing' where they went full disclosure with the case, designated an 'unscheduled red-file inquiry,' with Xavier, Roger and Harry, and Lionel made the official 'mission field agents' and the heroes at the center of the adventure. The names of the Inspectors who died in Memphis and Vicksburg were released, and Spec4's Director, Lucas Jonesborough, sat in solitary at Basic's London facility, as Spec4's activities and the history of Wainwright County were breathlessly echoed on cable news shows.

During the 'debriefing,' Silvia herself "accidentally" disclosed her and Xavier's discreet relationship. This turned him a hot TMZ item - young heir to the family business, the boytoy of the Director of the agency. The media followed suit by dispatching a flotilla of paparazzi offshore with telephoto lenses pointed at the beach cabin.

It was exceedingly embarrassing to wake up to the full-blown and expanding "Rouge House Affair," the only story across the globe it seemed, but he didn't care at the moment; he was waiting to see Sylvia for the first time since recovering. The headline news segment began.

The lead story was the overnite roundup of terrorists in DC and Virginia; a cell planning an attack at the Quantico training grounds. After the headlines and weather were covered, the show hosts returned with an angle on the main story.

"There's speculation that the terror cell list came from the files of "Rouge House" Spectral4, another revelation from the 'File Room' investigation. And with more on that side of the story, let's go to Valerie."

"Thanks, Sam, and speaking of the show, we're going to the source!" Valerie said, smiling a plastic smile over her shoulder, then shifting into serious journalist mode as she faced her camera with a large monitor hanging on the prop wall over her shoulder. "Let's go now to the Liberty Plains, MS., town square, where the Campus and the 'File Room' are conducting another global debriefing, led by two of the heroes of the "Rouge House Affair," Roger X. Lowell and Harry Sims."

Roger and Harry both waved from a roped-off area in the town square, then Harry went back to work, camera aimed at three people in director's chairs on set. Roger turned back to introduce them and Xavier saw Sylvia Cavendish,

looking resplendent in a peach jumpsuit underneath a fresh lab coat. Beside her sat a young woman introduced by Roger as Rebecca Sandiford, and an older black woman, Mae Ella Jemson. Outside the ropes, the town square overflowed with TV crews and a crowd of fellow “Jacob’s Riders” being interviewed or milling about. Most of them were greeting each other as lovers and partners, some with tender, some with passionate hugs and kisses. A few people at the fringes near Dottie’s Cafe brought guitars and drums and were playing a rhythmic jam with a slow and steady primal beat, bringing a party atmosphere to the scene.

Xavier recognized a few of the women in the crowd and blushed, but he forgot them as the network camera closed in on Sylvia, aching to be with her.

Valerie asked Director Cavendish to address the terror cell rumor. Xavier finished his tea and raised the computer’s volume.

Sylvia smiled. “I can neither confirm nor deny. I can disclose, however, that we did have a subsequent meeting with the national security representatives of a number of governments, including Homeland Security. We are nonetheless, pleased, if any intelligence shared aided, in any way, in the capture.”

Valerie smiled a knowing smile. “Ok, we’ll leave it there. Let’s move on to a different side of this story, Rebecca Sandiford, the young woman who was rescued, by of all people, Lionel Perry!” Valerie said, turning to Rebecca with a gleam in her eye. This should be worth a touching moment or two, she thought.

Rebecca discussed her first encounter with Jacob, then being trapped within the spell, witnessing Annie’s rape and murder, then she gave thanks to “the man I call Henry, who happened to be driving by when Jacob and Polly helped me escape, and kept me safe until the people from The Campus came. I don’t know if he’s watching, but I say ‘thank you’ to God everyday for putting him there.”

Valerie slid into her concerned face for the next question: “How did you feel when you learned of his troubled history as a local news correspondent here in New York?” Rebecca felt a flash of angry heat across the back of her head at the talking head, completely dismissing her Henry in order to bring up their Lionel.

Valerie went on, not waiting for an answer: “His involvement in the death of little Ahora Trujillo-”

“Look, I saw the report you all did about what he was like before, but that’s not the man I knew. He was my angel. He saved my life,” Rebecca said, wiping an errant tear from her eye. Valerie smiled inside; those genuine tears were all made out of gold.

Valerie moved on to Roger Lowell to cut off the pathos - “Roger, you worked in New York during the time Lionel was here. Is he a different person now, no longer reckless?”

Roger took a moment before answering. “Yes, the old Lionel was a TV news star in a hurry, who took too many shortcuts and one of them got a person killed. But Lionel didn’t pull that trigger, a gangbanger did. Lionel was also cursed. Many people made jokes about him being cursed by Mrs. Trujillo, and he actually was, and he bore it. Even after he discovered that his friend Xavier was part of an agency that actually lifts curses, he didn’t come in to have it removed. The old Lionel would have done it the very day. He can use whatever name he prefers; Henry is a different person. He’s become a different person.”

Valerie was already getting bored with Henry, let’s try one last Lionel angle, she thought. “Well, we’d all like to meet the new Henry, but has he really gone back underground. or is this the start of his rehabilitation campaign?”

“I can answer that,” Sylvia said. “Mr. Perry, at great personal risk, provided valuable assistance at more than one crucial juncture in our joint inquiry. I’d say more than one life was spared due to his efforts, along with that of Mr. Lowell and Mr. Sims. Our agency arranged for the Trujillo family to communicate with their departed daughter, who persuaded her mother to lift the curse. Mr. Perry didn’t ask us to do this; it’s a gesture on our part. He told me personally he had no interest in publicity and wasn’t planning a comeback, but he has my gratitude, along with a standing offer to join the agency as a member of ‘The File Room’ staff, with the approval of the show’s producer, of course.”

Valerie smiled at the new twist, something light to end on. “I’m sure you can ask Xavier Slattery that yourself,” the host said. “we’re all dying to know, what’s the latest on his condition?”

“Last report has him fully recovered and resting in Hawaii, and if he knows what’s good for him, he’s asleep right now; It’s the middle of the night there, after all,” Sylvia said, staring through the screen as if looking right at him in the

middle of another yawn. Valerie laughed. "Well Xavier, if you're watching, you heard her, go back to bed!" Xavier chuckled, but dutifully turned off the laptop and went back to bed. He drifted off to sleep, knowing he would awaken to see her, smiling.

Later that day, a white Ford Econoline van with a blue driver-side door drove west along Beach Street in Santa Cruz, past Beach Boardwalk amusement park and turning left onto W. Cliff Dr. Henry Smith felt butterflies at this point mixing with fatigued arms and legs; Lighthouse Point Park was a mile or so ahead. Sunny was waiting.

The morning after the Campus debriefing at the Bama Inn in Mobile, Henry, under a full hairpiece and mustache, watched agent Boseman work the suspect Ethan Bedford, keeping him headed for Vicksburg. He left the heavy weight of Rebecca Sandiford and the Campus equipment in their more than capable hands. They dropped him off at Mobile Regional Airport and after one last tearful goodbye with Rebecca, he left the field of operations.

Henry waited until he arrived at DFW to try Sunny's hotel and home phone again; the desk clerk said she checked out the day before, and her home number just rang. The three hour layover was excruciating. He arrived in Vegas just before sunset and was met by Adam, the big man from Mercury Executive Couriers, who escorted Henry to his van. Not until he checked out of the Matador Hotel and put the lights of the city behind him did he feel completely free again.

He drove on through the night along the 95, arrived at his Slab City berth late and slept fitfully in the back, thinking of Sunny and trying to remember her scent.

He woke up late and drove into Niland for breakfast and one last phone attempt. The TV was full of news reports about the Campus and a bloody confrontation the day before in Vicksburg. He got his food and left, not wanting to hear any of it. He only wanted to think about Sunny. If he didn't get through this time, he had nowhere else to go but back to the desert, nothing more to do than spend the day, the remainder of the week wasted.

Her line picked up, sent a nervous thrill through his body. It was a recorded

message: “Hi. This is Meredith. I had a great time at the convention in Las Vegas, but I’m still on vacation, attempting to finish my Lighthouse Point masterpiece. Harold and Sandy, no slacking off, and Petersen, try not to sprain anything this week, ok? Later sweeties!” The beep caught him by surprise; he moved to hang up, but heard “Hello? don’t hang up!” through the receiver. a nervous ripple coursed through him.

“Sunny?”

“Is this Henry?”

“Yes,” the nervous warble in his voice pained him.

“Henry! I’m so glad you called. I’m on my way out, but we need to talk. Can you come to the point tomorrow? I’ll be there all afternoon.”

“Ok,” he said, heart pounding, the frog in his throat feeling like a brick.

“Wonderful. I’ll see you then!”

He hung up, walked back to the van on shaky legs, drove back to Slab City and spent the rest of the day working off his anxious energy cleaning up the van. He went to bed early, woke up with the sun and drove north.

The van arrived at Lighthouse Point Park a little before 4pm. He found a space in the lot in front of the small lighthouse. He sat in the van, hands gripping the wheel, staring out the passenger window at the grassy strip just beyond the lot. Sunny was there with paints and a canvas, looking more beautiful than he remembered. He left the van and approached slowly, still wearing the fishing hat, mustache and big shades but she recognized him almost immediately and waved. He passed a couple walking to their car. It seemed like they recognized him as well, but only smiled as they walked past. That felt strange; he hadn’t been smiled at in a long time.

Sunny gave him a big hug, pulled his shades and fake mustache off and gave him a kiss that left him spinning. “It’s so good to see you again Lionel,” she said. That caught him flat. He opened his mouth to speak but she stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“It’s ok; You’ve been all over the news since yesterday. I’m so proud of you.”

Sunny filled him in on the Campus debriefing, Director Cavendish calling him into a hero who saved a young woman's life and aided in the capture of rogue spies. The Director getting the Trujillo curse lifted was another surprise; she really did it, he thought.

"You can be Henry if you want, but I like you better as Lionel," Sunny said, beaming at him with that smile that shot warmth all through him.

"You're gonna stay, right? My friends all want to meet you," she asked, holding onto him tightly. He squeezed her back and shook his head yes. His fishing hat tipped off in the light breeze and rolled away on the grass. He felt the last remaining great weight lifted, rolling away with it.

Lionel sat beside her on the warm grass, listened to the waves crashing on the rocky shore below, drank in Sunny's bouquet and watched her dab paint onto the canvas.

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About the Author:

Larry Winfield attended his first poetry reading at Weeds in 1990. Over the next twelve years he hosted open mics, featured at many local venues and festivals, organized the protest poetry reading at the '96 Democratic Convention, hosted a weekly poetry and jazz show on pirate station Guerilla Love Radio as DJ Merlot, published poetry books and the online/print zines Liquid Glyph and City Table Review, and performed in Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt, NY, LA and SF, and with ensemble groups Brothers in Verse and the many versions of his poetry band Brass Orchid. He currently lives in L A.

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