

ENEMY UNSEEN

by Ryan C. Thomas,

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Chapter 1

Rhonda White had not been on the third floor of CIA headquarters in well over a year. The last time was when the faxes went down, forcing her to hand-deliver a document on black market goods. The cubicles were so creepily sterile, filled with people she didn't know who wore expensive suits and yammered into black phones like there was a prize awarded to anyone who passed out from incessant talking. They all had a particular glare that made her feel she was under suspicion for being alive. Mostly what she remembered about the third floor, though, was hallway after hallway lined with closed office doors, and on each one, a gold placard that may as well have read **SOMEONE MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU WORKS HERE**. Even now, as she slid her ID card through the elevator's scanner, she couldn't begin to guess why she was being asked to come up. Some directors just didn't like to discuss secrets over the phone, even within the building. All she knew was that her services were required—which could be bad or good.

Chances were it was either something that needed interpreting, or another rumor about the Castro brothers working with the Iraqis, a rumor that needed to be dispelled. Or maybe some dumb American got himself arrested trying to buy drugs in Havana and needed Uncle Sam to rescue his ass. When were people going to learn that Havana was as deadly as it was exotic, and any sign of disrespect to the locals would come back to haunt you? Cuban police got off on messing with Americans—as did many law enforcement agencies around the world these days.

The elevator doors opened and two suited men stepped out, nodding politely as they passed by. One of them had a prominent bulge under his jacket, no doubt his gun holster. In the year she'd been working for the agency, she still hadn't gotten used to the sight of so many firearms. Many carried by men who looked like they'd just graduated high school; field officers fresh from the military, which meant they'd had their share of training, she knew, but that didn't make her feel any better about it. She herself did not carry a gun. Never would; it wasn't required for her contributions. She barely knew how to hold one. There had been no special weapons training classes for her Poli Sci major at Yale...at least not that her advisors had told her about.

She entered the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor, rubbing her hands together as the doors closed. The elevator rose silently, the tiny camera in the upper corner recording her movements, another of many things she'd had to get used to here. It had been weird at first, her every action filed away on a hard drive somewhere, but she understood the necessity of it. There'd been too many leaks over the years not to keep every movement on file. Information was easily bought and sold; everyone had a price, even the men behind the doors with gold placards. Secrets were weapons during times of war, and with the way the world was now, terrorism front page news every night, it seemed America would never know domestic peace and trust like it had before 9-11. Selling classified intel was as much a money maker as selling weapons, drugs or pirated software. Free enterprise, right?

She smoothed her suit jacket, straightened the ID badge pinned to it, pushed her hair out of her eyes and took a breath. Her anxiety rose with the lift. Why? She wasn't sure. But the man who'd rung her desk a minute ago sounded authoritative, his request urgent. For a change, it hadn't been her division director, Dan. No, it was a voice she'd not heard before. Military, she suspected, judging by the formal command—he'd called

her Miss. Normal bosses didn't say Miss, they said "Hey, you." Or perhaps someone from DOD? Rumor was DOD was hanging around so much these days they were moving into the building. Hell, could just be a new departmental liaison who wanted to say hi—with so many departments here it was hard to keep track of who was who.

Her stomach rumbled. She checked her watch and realized it was getting close to lunchtime. Hopefully this mystery meeting wouldn't last long. Lunch breaks were becoming a luxury, and she had two reports due by the day's end. Castro's recent sickness had damn near tripled her workload. Sure, Cuban doctors were still lying at the dictator's request, telling the press that Fidel was going to be in charge for several more years, but Rhonda knew different. Fidel was lying mute in a bed while his brother, Raul, slowly transitioned the country to his own control. His own, ruthless, manipulative control. Things were going to get worse before they got better.

And that meant more long nights ahead.

The elevator doors opened and she stepped out into the hallway. To her left the cubicles seemed to pulse with telephone chatter. To her right, closed doors with name placards greeted her. She'd been told to come up to briefing room 323, but she had no clue where it was. She knew she must look out of place standing in the middle of the hall, craning her neck to see which way the numbers went. The hallways here were also lined with cameras, even if you couldn't see them. How long before someone came out and asked her if she was lost? Or demanded to see her ID?

A young page, already going a bit gray with stress, came out of a nearby office. "Excuse me," she said as he drew close. "I'm looking for 323."

The young man didn't miss a beat as he passed by, pointing down toward the far end of the hall without looking her in the eye. More pages came around the corners, each carrying dossiers, manila files, coffee deliveries or some other kind of menial offering to the men and women who sat secretly behind all these closed doors. All of the pages were young, probably still in college. Rhonda had only graduated college two years ago, groomed by a professor with friends in high places. The pages didn't seem to notice her as they made their way to the offices around her, closing the doors behind them. The pages served as the delivery system for the exchange of information beyond emails and telephones. Security wasn't even guaranteed in the offices of the nation's secret agent headquarters. Write it on paper, pass it off, shred the paper. Official files? They existed, but whether or not the information they contained was true was anyone's guess.

She found 323 at the end of the hall and rapped on the heavy wood door. The sound of several locks being undone (one or two with whirring servos) only served to heighten her anxiety. Closed doors were one thing, but computerized locks were another entirely; the director's didn't want these doors opened accidentally. This increased secrecy in a building of secrets again begged the question: why did they need her rudimentary skills? The door opened to reveal a room bathed in shadow—the blinds drawn—and an older man with white hair and black-rimmed glasses looking her over. There was no badge fixed to his dark, pinstriped suit. "Rhonda White?" he asked.

Nothing like being expected, she thought. "That's me."

"Jim Wilkins. Come in. Over here." He closed the door, pressed the keypad (tumblers slid home, locking her in), and directed her to a long dark table. She saw now that the lights in the room were lowered to better illuminate the monitors on the walls. "Have a seat," Wilkins commanded.

She pulled out a chair and sat between two men that she'd never seen before. The younger wore a black suit, though not as nicely tailored as Wilkins', and an ID badge. The elder wore an officer's uniform, no ID badge and a bad toupee. He was clearly some kind of higher-level military bigwig. Across from her, her director, Dan Yauch was playing with his pen. The sight of him made her feel a little better and she felt her muscles loosen a bit. Familiar faces tended to do that in these types of situations. He liked her, and she him. He must have recommended her to the men in the room.

Wilkins' picked up a remote control from the table and walked over to one of the monitors, which currently was just a blank, blue screen. "Miss White, Mr. Yauch here was telling us you're brighter than a sunspot when it comes to Cuban Intel. Spend a lot of time there, do you?"

The question felt like an accusation and she recognized his voice as the one on the phone. She quickly put together the information coming at her, based on the way Wilkins was running the show and the fact that he hadn't bothered to introduce the other men. He had to be upper level CIA. A commanding presence and a disregard for social protocol always gave away the CIA brass.

"Yes," she answered. "I just got back about two months ago. Is this about Raul's takeover? I'm actually working on a report right now."

"Nah, Raul won't be a problem much longer," the military man said, waving the thought off. Yauch and the other men said nothing.

What did that mean? Was the US going to assassinate Raul? She knew there'd been attempts in the past, but such black ops were rarely discussed openly in front of a lowly analyst. Curiosity tugged at her, but she was fairly confident they would only tell her what they wanted her to know, questions would be futile.

"Let me pull this up," Wilkins said, turning to the monitor. He pressed a button on the remote and a picture appeared on the screen, an angled top-down view of three men in a field. It could be Cuba or anywhere south of the equator. "How many times have you been, all told?"

"I go about every four months," she replied. Across from her, Dan merely nodded, as if to tell her she was doing well so far.

"Then you're aware that Raul is not the only threat to the Cubans right now. Military generals are moving their pawns and rooks up the chess board, so to speak. We're trying our best to keep note of them all. Like fucking cockroaches, these men. Seem to spawn their own little armies overnight."

"I've counted seven noteworthy factions so far," she said.

"You keep good tabs, I see. Just as Director Yauch tells me. Right now though, we're interested in these men here." He pointed to the image.

"I don't recognize this part of Cuba," she said. "Cartel land?"

"No. You don't recognize it because it isn't Cuba. It's Panama."

"Panama? But that's not my area—"

"I know, I know. Let me explain. One of our Recon Sats shot this last week. This man here is Abhur Quayarah. He's Iranian military. Also an arms dealer, a real piece of shit. Had both his wife and daughter killed in an honor killing last year. This other guy here is Manuel Fereza. Chilean. Military as well. He ordered the killings of nearly two thousand refugees a few Christmases ago. Also deals in illegal arms. Both bow to the presidents of their homelands. And both have tried to buy plutonium on the black market

in the past year. Thank Christ the Russians have been going nuke crazy over this Chechnya bullshit and buying it all themselves. The goddamn Chechnyans had better back down soon or they're gonna find their asses glowing green with dirty radiation. Then we'll all have a real shitstorm of a conflict to solve. But for now that's none of your business."

"Jim, the point," the military man said.

Wilkins didn't look happy to be reprimanded in front of the others, but he let it go. "You're here because we want to know who this third guy is." He clicked the remote and the picture changed to a close up of a black man in a sun hat. He held a cane topped with what looked like some kind of animal skull, a cat or something. Various feathers and bones dangled from the handle. Around his neck he wore tiny bones, shells, and what were arguably the teeth of a shark. The picture was remarkably clear, but his face was obscured by the hat.

"No idea," she said. "You have a name?"

"We have nothing, Rhonda," said Dan. It was the first time he'd spoken since she arrived. "I went through all of our files and can't find him anywhere. I thought maybe you'd know. I mean, the skullcap cane and all. Kind of hard to miss."

She shook her head. "Sorry. I haven't seen him before. Are you telling me he's Cuban? How do you know?"

"We don't for sure," Wilkins said. "But we have this." He clicked the remote again and the picture changed to a color shot of a dirty urban alleyway. The black man with the cane was talking to two other men. Behind them an open door revealed what looked like the storeroom of a small arts and crafts shop. There was nothing nefarious about the picture per se, though the men did radiate the type of seediness associated with drug pushers: the slicked back hair, the gold chains, the pinky rings. They were Latino, one about 30 years of age, the other a little younger. They looked familiar, but she couldn't place them. "DEA agents took this in Brooklyn two days ago."

She got the point right away. "So this mystery man, he's in the States."

"Right. Now, these two guys here—" he clicked the remote and the screen closed in on the men's faces—"as I'm sure you know, are Estabán and José Uriquez."

"Of course." Rhonda sat up a bit straighter. She knew of the Uriquez brothers, notorious drug smugglers who had ties to several Cuban drug lords, and to Raul Castro himself. Rumor had it that their father was funding much of Raul's takeover. She relayed this to the Wilkins, who seemed to know it already.

"This alleyway," the man continued, "is behind a store called Regalo del Sol. Sells chotchke swag from Latin America, the Caribbean and Cuba. Mostly Cuba. It's run by a man named Javier Ortez. Also Cuban. In fact, the whole neighborhood is Cuban. Are you putting this together?"

Rhonda nodded. "Our mystery man is meeting with Cuban drug dealers in the States, after meeting with plutonium-hungry terrorist commandos. You want me to do some research, find out who he is?"

Wilkins said nothing, turned his attention to Dan, evidently waiting for him to take over.

Seeing it was his turn to speak, Dan took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked stressed about what he was going to say. "Rhonda, we need you to do a bit more than that. DEA says this guy is still lurking around Brooklyn. They don't know

where he's staying, keep losing him in the maze of low income apartments in the area, but they're confident he's still there. What we need is someone to go in and find out who he is. Someone familiar with Cuban culture. Someone who can pretend to be right off the boat, immerse herself in the neighborhood, get close to this guy and find out why he's meeting with both arms and drug dealers."

"Hold up," she said, putting her hands out in an effort to stop the conversation. "You want me to go undercover? I'm an analyst, not a field agent. No way, send someone else. I'll help whoever you send, but I'm not going anywhere."

"We would if we could," Wilkins said. "But our other Latin-trained field agents are spread thin checking out possible terror camps near Ibagué. Right now, there's no one around who knows the ins and outs of these people like you do. You're the top Cuban analyst at our disposal. All we're asking is a couple of days. Bump around, see what you can find out, then we get you out and get someone else to replace you. But if we don't move now this guy may disappear back into the shadows. You won't be in any danger. Promise. We'll have an agent keeping watch over you, and DEA will be informed of who you are as well. All we want is a name for this guy."

Dan leaned across the table. "Rhonda, it'll be safer than going to Cuba itself."

"Bullshit, Dan. When I go to Cuba I sip Mojitos and buy fabric, read the paper and talk to a poor reporter or two. I don't fraternize with drug lords. Do you have any idea what these guys do to people who cross them. You'll never even find my body it'll be in so many pieces."

"I won't let that happen." This came from the man in the black suit seated next to her. It was the first time he'd spoken.

She turned to him. "And you are?"

"Special Agent Steven Plante."

"No offense, Agent Plante, but you won't need to protect me because I'm not going."

"We need you," Dan said. The look in his eyes made it clear he felt bad asking this of her, was maybe even under pressure to do so. But she didn't care how bad he felt, she wasn't going.

"I'm not trained for this, Dan. You know that."

With a sigh, Wilkins turned off the monitor and sat down at the table. "Listen, Rhonda, Cuba is more volatile now than ever. If this guy is selling arms to the Iranians and Chileans, we need to know about it. But I can't pull my other people out of Columbia just yet, not for a couple more days, and we sure as hell can't send a white person in-- they'd stick out like a sore thumb. If this cane-wielding bushman is a Cuban arms dealer, we need someone who will fit in and knows how Cubans operate. Cuba is your specialty, so that means you. All we want is a name. That's it. Agent Plante here will be nearby at all times."

"You think that makes me feel better, that you need a man with a gun to shadow me so I don't end up as pigeon food?"

"You won't get hurt, Rhonda," agent Plante said. "These guys won't suspect a woman to be infiltrating them."

"Infiltrating? Sounds like I should have night vision goggles and an Uzi."

"Look at it this way, Rhonda," Dan said. "You know how this place works. You know how people get ahead, and it's not by riding a desk, no matter what your position."

It's by proving yourself. You want to move up, you want a big desk of your own? This type of thing, it'll look real good someday. Trust me."

"It's just a couple of days," said Wilkins. "We've got a room already set up for you. Everything's taken care of. Just give us the word."

Rhonda looked around the room, saw all eyes boring into her, even the military man who had yet to speak. They had each flaunted positions of power and were placing a huge weight on her shoulders. She wondered if she even had the option of saying "no." Her ego allowed her to be a tad flattered that they were asking her to undertake a job this important, but intellectually she knew it was lunacy to even consider it. What if she got in trouble? What if she was found out? She was a thin woman, barely five-foot-seven. All the self-defense classes in the world wouldn't save her from a pissed off drug dealer with a gun.

Still, what Dan had said was basically true: if she ever wanted her name on one of the gold placards that adorned those closed office doors, she had to prove she was worth more than the occasional report on an ailing dictator. She sized up Agent Plante beside her. He was fit, looked like he could handle himself. He was making no effort to conceal the gun under his shoulder.

"Just a couple of days?" she asked tentatively.

"Three...four...at the most," Dan said. "Promise."

With a sigh, she nodded.

Chapter 2.

The Leer Jet left Ronald Reagan at six o'clock. Rhonda had been given just enough time to drive home, pack a bag, and return to headquarters where a black sedan whisked her and agent Plante to the airport. Now, twenty-six thousand feet above the earth, she sat in one of two comfortable leather seats that surrounded a small table. Her laptop was sitting on the table, its screen showing an aerial photograph of Cuba. She put her briefcase on the small table next to it and opened it. She felt self-conscious; she'd been on private jets before, but never without a superior sitting next to her. It felt weird to have the whole work area to herself. A flat screen TV on the nearby wall was tuned to CNN, and a wireless modem enabled her to check her emails and surf the web. A small bar at the back offered a number of spirits, from which she'd already prepared herself a rum and Coke. She'd asked Plante if he wanted anything, but he'd respectfully declined.

He sat across the table from her in the other leather seat, reading the day's newspaper. He was pretty quiet, all things considered. Not too hard on the eyes either, even if the "All American" haircut was a little vanilla for her taste. The movies dictated that this was the type of situation where they got into trouble, had an adventure and fell in love, but the wedding ring on his finger said differently. So much for capricious trysts.

From her briefcase, she took out the dossier Dan had given her before leaving. Inside were printouts of the images she'd seen in the briefing room, along with other, similar ones taken from the same satellite but at different angles. Files on two of the men accompanied the photos, each containing additional photos collected over time. All of the materials made her feel like some kind of spy. *Your mission, should you choose to accept it...*

The black man with the cane did not have a file, just the current photos. Her first order of business would be to run through her computer files and see if she could find a photo of him anywhere. Maybe he would pop up next to another known criminal, despite what Dan had said about him not being in the system. She'd been keeping meticulous records of all things related to Cuban politics since college, and her photo archive was extensive. Thankfully, the agency had beefed up the memory on her computer so she could store just about everything she deemed useful. All of it was backed up on a hard-drive and several DVDs in Dan's office—and more than likely a bunch of other places she wasn't privy to.

"Sonofa..." Plante said, shuffling the paper.

"What?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, nothing. The Red Sox lost."

"You're a Boston fan?"

"Born and raised. You?"

"Pittsburg by way of Miami."

"Miami? That why you got into Cuban studies, Poli Sci, all that?"

She chuckled. Everybody always thought that. She should know better than to bring it up at this point. "No, actually, my interest in Poli Sci stemmed from my fascination with the civil war. Dad was a Grant fan. I had a boyfriend in high school who was Cuban though, and I spent a lot of time at his house, learning a lot about his culture, listening to his grandmother talk about her life in a small village. When I got to Yale, some students were organizing a photo trip to Las Turas. I overheard them in the dining hall one day, and my big mouth interjected to correct them on something or other. After that, they started probing me. I realized I knew more than I thought I did, and pretty soon I found myself going with them, all expenses paid, as some kind of guide."

"All expenses paid?"

"Some rich kids go to Yale."

"Spoiled brats, you mean."

"So I'm a brat?"

"Dunno, are you rich?"

"Hardly."

"Then there you go." He smiled.

From the pile of photos, she plucked one of the Mystery Man and placed it on top. "Anyway, I found myself with a renewed interest in the culture. Fascinating people. Like this guy," she held up the photo. "The skull on the cane, the feathers and shells and shark teeth. You know what Santería is?"

"Some crackpot religion."

It was a typical response from someone raised under a mainstream religion. "It's not as crackpot as you think. The American press harps on the weird parts of it, like animal sacrifice, but it's really a beautifully spiritual way of life, full of angels and spirit guides and a very rich folklore. Some of its roots are based in Catholicism, you know?"

"Not real Catholicism."

"Yes, real Catholicism. The West African slaves who were taken from their homes and shipped into areas of the Caribbean were forced to convert to Catholicism. But they retained much of their original beliefs in deities and spirit guides, and so over time the two religions mixed."

“It’s for weirdos.”

“It’s not any weirder than Christianity. You ever think about some of the stories the Bible tries to pass off as real? Walking on water, turning water into wine, rising from the dead.”

“You an atheist?”

His tone didn’t sound negative, but she remained quiet nonetheless. People tended to get heated up over religion.

“I don’t care,” he said, sensing her hesitation. “Just curious.”

Against her better judgment, she decided to risk it. “I would say I’m an agnostic. My parents spent their Sundays watching football, not praying to God. Which is probably why I find religion fascinating. I’m not swayed by any one practice. I just like the folklore, the characters. So many stories and theories and unexplained mysteries. Who knows, maybe the things in the Bible really did happen. Maybe spirit guides do protect us if we wear shells around our necks. It’s only crackpot if you don’t open yourself to possibilities.”

“Doesn’t sound very atheist to me.”

“Agnostic. It’s different. And you meant atheistic.”

“Correcting my English now?”

“Sorry. Habit. I write all day long.” Nice move, she thought. A tryst was out of the question but you could have at least been friendly. Now he thinks you’re an arrogant bitch. “What were we saying?”

“Religion. I’m Episcopalian, and crackpot or not, no matter how much I pray to God the Red Sox are not going to make the playoffs with this kind of record.”

At this point the pilot came on the PA and announced they’d be landing at JFK in a half hour. In a normal plane that would mean putting the laptop away, but here the announcement was just a matter of policy.

With their talk interrupted, Agent Plante went back to reading the scores. Rhonda returned to flipping through her computer’s photo archive. Any person or persons she knew had already been flagged and labeled. Her file on Castro and his aides was enough to take up most people’s hard-drives. Each photo contained a caption with names, dates, and locations. Sometimes an explanation of the circumstance was included, which was the case with the one she had just opened up. The photo showed one of the Uriquez brothers having a beer with a Slavic man wearing an eyepatch. The caption read: “ESTABÁN AND NICO KITOWICZ, PLANNING POSSIBLE HEROIN RUN TO CANADA.”

For the next fifteen minutes she flipped through photos of the Uriquezes, but the mystery man was never with them. If he was selling arms to the Iranians or Chileans—or anyone for that matter—she should know who he was. Hell, she had pictures of the guy who cleaned Raul Castro’s bathroom for Heaven’s sake.

Vexed, she stared at the close-ups of the mystery man. He was very dark skinned, the kind of deep African skin that seemed to contain shades of blue. The sun hat protected his face in many of the photos, so she was forced to piece his features together from different angles. All she could make out were sunglasses and teeth that could stand the attention of a dentist. There was a mark on his right cheek, a scar of some sort, perhaps a run in with a knife. Many black market dealers boasted of wounds, badges of honor derived from confrontation with enemy factions. Having the scar meant you lived...and frequently meant the other guy did not.

The necklace he wore was surely something related to Cuban Santería practices. She'd seen feathers on believers before, as well as the shells, but never the shark teeth. That alone did not indicate anything unusual. It was hard to keep track of all the movements within the religion. More distracting was the cane. Bone white, it looked made of ivory, with subtle carvings running up and down the shaft. The skull on top was half the size of a human's. The bottom jaw was still attached, and the fangs from both the upper and lower jaws were long and sharp. Something about the sloped forehead looked familiar to her, but she could not place the animal.

Dan should have sent the photo to someone who could identify the species. He probably didn't think it would matter, that it was just some kind of showy artifact. But depending on the type of skull, it could mean any number of things. There was a good chance this man participated in specific rituals which offered prayers to that animal's god. If they could find out what sect of Santería worshiped that particular animal, they could find out where it was practiced, and maybe find someone who knew this man.

Then again, it could just be a showy cane. Ominous for the sake of being ominous. She'd have to ask around when she got a chance, find out if a skull-topped cane served a purpose beyond ambulatory assistance.

For the remainder of the flight, she made notes of anything and everything that seemed important. When they landed, she had several pages of notes saved to her computer.

A car was waiting outside the airport to take them into Brooklyn. It was an old Buick with dents in the doors, most likely done on purpose to look inconspicuous – the tinted windows, on the other hand, might have the opposite effect. It had been a while since Rhonda had been to New York City. Before long, the towering high-rises of Manhattan loomed majestically through the windshield, and with them, the allure of treasures buried in those criss-crossed streets. How she wanted to spend a day shopping in SoHo, and supping at a bistro in The Village, taking in art at the MOMA. Maybe, if she could find the time, she would.

“Back in D.C., who was the man in the army uniform?” she asked. She'd been wondering about this since leaving headquarters.

Plante, who was seated in the front seat with the driver, made no motion to turn and look at her. “You don't want to know,” he said.

“Am I allowed to know?”

“Well, I could tell you but I'd have to kill you.”

“Hardy har. I'm CIA, too. Guess that means I get to kill you as well.”

“Have you killed a man before?”

“Not exactly.”

“Wounded?”

“Does throwing a drink in my ex's face count?”

“I dunno. Sounds a little cliché.”

She leaned forward and adopted a serious tone. “It was a pot of hot coffee. He screamed.”

Plante paused. The driver looked at him, looked back at the road. Plante cleared his throat. “Yeah, okay, I'll give you that one.”

Rhonda cracked a smile. “Thought you would. That's what he got when he thought he could push me around one morning when he was bored.”

“Don’t tell me you stayed with him.”

“For another year. But not like you think. He groveled and kissed my behind. Did whatever I asked. That coffee let him know who was boss.”

“And you’re still together?”

Why is he asking about my personal life, she wondered. Was the wedding ring just a front? Or was he one of those married men that had some lame zip code rule that he laughed about with his bar buddies. “No,” she answered. “He left seven months ago. Men don’t like it when you’re in positions of power. Or when you’re smarter.”

The driver looked at Plante again; he was enjoying this.

“Well, point is,” Plante continued, “you’ve never killed a man, and that guy in the military duds...has. Lots.”

“Lots? What, like he’s Rambo or something?”

“Just...lots. At least that’s what I’ve heard.”

“So they didn’t tell you who he is either.”

Plante laughed, suddenly exposed. “Not a clue.”

“And the other man? Jim. What’s his deal? He wasn’t so quick to offer his position either. Is he your boss?”

“Nope. My Uncle.”

“Uncle Jim?”

“His real name’s Sam.”

“But I thought...” And then she got it. Uncle Sam. Nice. Plante obviously thought he was a comedian. Just like every other man out there. Maybe he’d ask her to pull his finger next.

Outside, the tiny brick homes with tiny lawns began to give way to inner city dwellings. Eventually, the roads wound between car service centers, laundries and bodegas, the signs out front changing from English to any number of foreign languages. The further in they went, the more the people changed as well. Simple white and black gave way to Hispanic, Slavic, African, Asian, and more. A true melting pot.

The car turned off the main road, wove its way deeper into a maze of low income apartment buildings. A grayness bled from their facades, spreading depression through the city like carbon monoxide through a house: odorless, tasteless, invisible but deadly. Whatever dreams the tenants of these buildings had, they were being choked to death. A few more streets and the area grew noticeably less safe, now with gangbangers playing dominos on the apartment stoops and pit bulls tied up to fire hydrants. Trash seemed to accumulate the further they drove into the neighborhoods. Rhonda marveled at the driver’s ability to navigate these streets; it was no wonder crime was rampant—there were so many alleys and side streets for bad guys to duck into. It was probably a good thing the windows were tinted, she thought. As it was, the car probably looked like it belonged to a drug dealer and not several upper middle class people in the wrong area. And Hell, might as well just come out and say it—Jim Wilkins had been right, a white person here would attract serious attention.

Despite being black herself, Rhonda definitely felt unsafe in this area. It was the kind of neighborhood people called “hard.” To live here gave one “street cred,” a way to get something from nothing, pride from prejudice. The odds of it ever improving were slim. It was too hard to get a good paying job, too hard to get ahead in life, but it was easy to get respect. The only problem was respect didn’t pay the bills, and too many of

these people would gladly trade respect for a livable income, freedom from violence and a playground that wasn't littered with used syringes.

The car finally moved through the bad area and into a slightly nicer part of town. The trash was gone, the people a little less sketchy. It was still inner city, and the intrusive stares of some of the shadier characters sitting on the stoops told her it was not one hundred percent safe, but it was certainly better. At least here she felt she could walk down the street during the day and not have to look over her shoulder. Night might be a different story. The car pulled over to the side of the road and parked.

Plante turned around and handed a card to her. "This is a subway pass." He pointed out the window to the stairs leading underground, showing her where to catch a train. "For later. First, get out and go to building 145. Right there." He pointed to the building across the street. "Your apartment is number 14. Here's the key." He handed her a brass key. "And here's the key to get in the front door." He handed her another one.

Stunned, she took them both and held them up. "Wait. You mean I'm staying here? Why not in Manhattan?"

"Don't worry. It's safe. The idea is for you to be close to the area the Uriquez brothers were last seen. That way you can keep tabs on them from home if you need to."

"And what about you?"

"I'm a couple of stops down."

"Why not here?"

"The agency has special safe rooms all over the city, but unfortunately only one here. They do it that way sometimes to make sure vested parties are not clumped together. The next closest room is where I'm staying. It's either that or I sleep on your couch."

"The agency has never heard of a hotel?"

"This is safer."

"Not from where I'm standing."

"Relax. You'll be fine."

Rhonda could feel herself about to lose it. "You keep saying that but what if something goes wrong here? You're not going to be able to protect me."

"Rhonda, seriously, you're just here to gather some info for us. This place is designed to keep you safe. But, if you miraculously get in trouble in the next hour, there's a coffee pot in your apartment."

She sat still for a minute, her insides fuming. Did Dan really think she was going to be okay living on her own in what had to be one of the worst neighborhoods in America? And what was with this Plante guy? He'd reassured her back in D.C. Now, he was coming off as unreliable as she'd first feared.

With a huff, she unlocked the door, told the driver to pop the trunk so she could get her bag. The car waited until she went up the steps to her building and disappeared inside, and then drove off. As the car disappeared into the maze of surrounding streets, she kicked the door. "Assholes."

She took the stairs to number 14, slipped the key in the lock and opened the heavy door (a little too heavy, she thought, like it had a lead core). The apartment was fully furnished; in fact it looked as if someone was already living in it. A good-sized TV in the living room, a comfortable looking recliner and couch nearby, a dinette set with place settings already prepared, a bookshelf on the far wall, stocked with a number of different

novels and biographies. She set her bag down and flicked the light on in the kitchen. No cockroaches scurried off, which was a good sign. Out of curiosity she opened the fridge, found it fully stocked with all sorts of foodstuffs. And hey, look at that, peaches. She loved peaches. Which sent a little shiver down her spine—what else did the agency know about her?

She stood still for a few seconds, waiting to hear loud music coming through the walls, screaming from upstairs, gunshots from outside. But there were none. Maybe she could survive here for a few days after all.

Chapter 3.

The night passed uneventfully, with the exception of a brief car horn singing the praises of someone who couldn't find their keys fast enough. When she got out of bed in the morning, she found a text message waiting for her from Agent Plante. It gave directions to Regalo del Sol (a couple stops back into hell, apparently) and Plante's cell phone number. Who knew if it was really his; she was pretty sure she'd entered the level of secret agentness that bore the warning Don't Trust Anyone. The rest of the message suggested she head out there and see what she could discover.

She made herself a cup of coffee and some toast, ate a sliced peach, showered, dressed, and walked to the subway across the street. She took the train out to the dirty neighborhood they'd driven through last night, trying to figure out just what was expected of her. Gather information? Get Mystery Man's name? How was she supposed to do that? The only instruction Plante had given her was not to flash any photos of the men around.

When the train arrived at her destination, she got off and made her way up the steps into the sunlight. Hordes of people were out on the street now. A few of them leered at her, and she wondered if the knee-high skirt she'd thrown on was too short. A pair of police officers, both Caucasian, were standing on the corner playing with their night sticks. They didn't really seem to notice anyone. They looked bored.

She made her way past them and followed Plante's directions, turning down two small streets lined with various mom and pop shops, the majority selling worthless knick knacks, fake designer clothing, and God knew what else in the back rooms. Children, blissfully ignorant of the potential impact this neighborhood could have on their upbringing, played along the sidewalks while their parents worked inside. A street vendor bared his snaggletooth grin at her, waved her over to purchase some kind of alien meat sandwich that smelled like dog food. The occasional nut-job brushed by talking to invisible men, or God, or aliens, or the clouds.

With the sun out, she felt a little safer, but the area still had a palpable sense of danger. There were no cops standing near the stores she was passing now, and in the doorways of surrounding buildings the shadows of lanky men reminded her of how easy it would be to disappear before anyone knew she was gone.

Plante's directions had her zigzagging around alleys and tiny concrete parks where bottomless milk crates served as basketball hoops. The buildings grew worse, windows broken, doors off hinges, paint peeling, bricks missing. While not nearly as bad as the poverty-ridden areas she'd witnessed in Cuba, it was still very disconcerting. That

people actually lived in such squalor here in the United States was beyond her. Where was all the tax money going?

A little girl of about ten sat on the curb, her feet in a puddle of car oil looking at pictures in a *Vanity Fair* magazine. It was faded and wrinkled from being wet. Doubtless the girl had plucked it from the trash. No wonder crime was rampant in low-income communities; if you wanted something you had little choice but to just take it.

Regalo del Sol was located on a street that was lined with trash bags and full of potholes. Murky green water, shimmering with oily rainbows, filled the holes from a recent rain. Men in heavy jackets with football team logos stood about smoking cigarettes, cigarillos, even joints, watching her pass. The language they spoke was so thick with inner city slang she wasn't sure what anyone was talking about.

To her surprise, several of them addressed her in Spanish. ["Hey, baby, you look lost. Want us to take you home?"] The accent had hints of Cuban in it. Did they know Mystery Man?

She wondered again how the hell Plante was supposed to help her if they came after her. Even if he had eyes on her somehow, these creeps were only a few feet away, too close to outrun. She decided to play it tough instead, something she'd learned during her trips to Cuba. Without looking, she flipped them the bird, said "Pendejos," and kept moving. Their laughter followed her as she stopped at the next corner and found the shop she was looking for. Steeling herself, she entered it. A small bell wired to the inside of the door announced her arrival.

Regalo de Sol was almost entirely lost in shadows, the front drapes closed to lessen the effect of the sunlight on all the dust. Incense burned somewhere behind the counter, a suffocating mixture of spices and woods, strong enough to make an allergy-prone person pass out. The items on the shelves were not unlike the ones sold in the market squares of Havana. Wood carvings, books, some t-shirts, the occasional hand-made toy, figurines of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, paperweights, belts, belt buckles, pens, hats, cigar cutters, lighters, candles, oils, incense, cigarettes, pots, coasters, jewelry made from smooth stones. A sign on the front counter announced that the store did not sell Cuban Cigars. Rhonda was pretty sure that was a lie. Researching how smugglers snuck illegal goods into the country was one of her areas of expertise. They got the stuff in on a daily basis come hell or high water.

Behind the counter, a small, chubby man with coke bottle glasses watched her intently. She smiled at him, gave a little wave, but he did not smile back. The glistening sheen of sweat on his bald pate reflected the dim halogen bulb from above, turning his head five shades of puke yellow. Years of bad acne had left deep pits on his cheeks. Gourds would mistake him for a family member.

Beyond the man, Rhonda could see a small access hallway lined with junk, and at the far end of it a door. Most likely the door to the back alley where the photo of the Uriquezes and Mystery Man had been taken; it was hard to tell because the pane of glass set in the door frame was cracked and frosted. Still, if this was the shop, then that had to be the alley in question. Her heart raced a bit faster. Here was a known hangout of the Uriquez brothers, a hot zone that the DEA deemed significant enough to stakeout. Were they watching now? Had they planted microphones inside somewhere? Where were José and Estabán?

“I help you?” the man asked. His glasses slid down his nose so he pushed them back up again. The sweat on his face seemed to be dripping down his neck now. If Rhonda didn’t know better, she’d say he looked real nervous about something.

“Yes.” She sucked in a deep breath. Here we go, she thought, be strong, think about that closed door in D.C. with your name on the gold placard. “I’m looking for some artifacts. Sharks teeth, some shells, for a prayer.”

“Prayer? What prayer?”

She wracked her memory for what she knew about Santería and its practices. “To show allegiance to the Orishas.”

The man switched to Spanish. [“Where are you from that you need such items?”]

[“Macabi.”]

[“Strange accent for Macabi.”]

[“I moved when I was young.”]

He looked her up and down, lingered on her bare shins for a minute. [“And these items...sounds like Santería.”]

[“Yes, exactly. For prosperity and good fortune. Do you practice it?”]

[“No Santería here, miss. This is a strict Catholic establishment.”]

[“But you have these vials of ground hog’s tooth.”] From the shelf nearby, she picked up one of the vials, put it back. [“You must have something I can use.”]

[“The tooth powder is for headaches. There is nothing else here that can help you. I’m closing early today. Good day.”]

She was taken aback, but she wasn’t about to be bullied. [“But, I could have sworn I saw a man here the other day buying these things. Are you sure?”]

[“Look around you. Do you see this kind of shit in my store. No Santería here. No.”]

[“But the man...”]

The shopkeeper ran his arm across his head and wiped the sweat away. His eyes grew larger, and he looked behind him at the door to the alley, then back again. [“I don’t know who you’re talking about. There was no man here. Must be another store. I think you should go.”]

[“No, it was here. He had a cane—”]

Before she could finish, the front door swung open, the bell ringing frantically, and Rhonda’s jaw dropped. Estabán Uriquez, wearing his dark sunglasses and smoking a thin cheroot, made his way up to the store counter. As he passed, he gave her a look up and down, the kind that said if he had the time he’d show her a thing or two about inhibitions. “Let’s talk,” he said to the shop owner.

The sweat on the shopkeeper’s head now became thick enough to swim through. Estabán made his way around the counter, took the man by the shoulder, and led him down the access hallway toward the rear door. He opened it and ushered the shopkeeper out into the alley.

Feigning interest in a hollowed-out coconut shell that had been painted to represent a cereal bowl, Rhonda waited until the door was fully closed before inching her way behind the counter. Through the milky pane of glass in the door, she could see their silhouettes, could see Estabán pitch his cheroot to the ground, but she could not decipher what they were saying. She needed to get closer.

“I get shot for this I’m gonna kill you, Dan,” she said to herself. Sometimes joking controlled her fear. Not this time.

The closer she got, the clearer it became that the two men outside were having an argument. Bits and pieces in Spanish which she tried to piece together: [“Listen , cousin, this asshole has messed with the wrong...has lied to us...sold us powder...haven’t seen José in days...using us to hide...”]

She was right against the door now, hoping against hope they couldn’t see her peering out. The crack in the window pane had split the protective white coating just enough that she was able to peer out and see Estabán and the shopkeeper (his cousin?) talking heatedly and gesticulating wildly. It was hard to tell if they were angry, or frightened, or both. Anxious was the best way to describe it, she finally decided.

And then the small shopkeeper gasped and pointed down the alley. Estabán turned (she lost sight of his face) and they both looked down the alley together. The Shopkeeper made the sign of the cross over his chest, said, “A dios mio!” Estabán nodded as if to acknowledge some moment of truth he was about to face.

“Hola, amigo,” Estabán said. “I was not expecting you yet.”

From somewhere close by came shuffling footsteps and a new voice, low and gravely, the kind of voice that came with health warnings. “And yet you speak of me so freely, Mr. Uriquez. Do you not think I can’t hear it when my name is spoken?”

Had a name been name spoken, Rhonda wondered. Had she missed it? Whoever was speaking was standing just far enough back to remain out of her sight.

“Fine. Let’s talk. Your sample,” said Estabán, “was not in good faith. It did not work. I think it was fake. Can you explain this?”

“Nothing is fake if you know how to sway the loa,” the new voice rumbled. “You have met my friends, yes?”

And then there were more footsteps, pairs of them, accompanied by low moans. The shopkeeper yelped, turned and ran, much faster than a man of his girth should be able to. Rhonda plastered herself against the wall next to the door, assuming the little bald man would run indoors, but he did not. He simply tore off down the alley somewhere. Poof. Gone.

The footsteps grew closer, moving a bit slower, scraping the ground as they came. The moaning stopped, segued into heavy breathing. Relying on auditory senses was not painting a clear enough picture for Rhonda—she needed visuals. Needed to see who was out there. Was this the man with the cane? Was he with the other two men from the photo, the Iranians? She was clearly witnessing a criminal liaison of some sort. Her first thought was that they were using drugs to fund weapons buys, but her second thought was more along the lines of: you need to get the hell out of here right now before you become tomorrow’s trash pickup.

She chanced another peek out of the door window’s crack and froze at what she saw. Estabán’s hard face went slack, he took a step back. A pair of arms, black but yet not black, more of a dark gray, reached out and yanked Estabán out of Rhonda’s field of view. The gravelly voice spoke with pleasure, a hint of a chuckle following the words. “I will show you how the powder works, mon frer. I will show you the loa you scoff at. Bondye at his fiercest.” Then, clearly a command to whatever men were with him: “Hold him still.”

Estabán struggled, the gray arms gripping his shirt tightly. He flailed with all of his might, and briefly, his face came into view through the crack. His eyes were slick with terror, and spittle dribbled down his chin. He struggled against those who held him, grunting and snorting as he tried to break free. “May God curse you!” he shouted, the voice of a man thinking, knowing, he is about to meet his end.

Finally, with a triumphant pull, Estabán freed himself from the iron grip and raced off down the alley.

“Get him!” the gravelly voice shouted. The sound of footsteps followed, moving fast. Not far away, Rhonda heard bodies collide and a struggle ensue.

A shadow framed itself in the door, as though it were looking through the frosted glass at her. Could it see her through the crack? Ice formed in her veins, her stomach pulled tight, realizing the shadow belonged to the gravelly-voiced man. Instead of entering, he turned and made his way toward the struggle. “Bring him in here.” He had moved to the other side of the alley, out of her field of vision. There was the sound of a door opening, and then silence.

Taking out her cellphone, Rhonda dialed Plante. The phone rang but there was no answer. “Shit! C’mon, pick up already.” She dialed again and got the same response. Furious, she left a message telling him to get him or his men or whoever over to the alley behind the shop, that she was pretty sure Estabán Uriquez was about to be hurt.

With that done, she leaned against the wall for a moment, wondering what the hell she should do, wondering how much those gold door placards were really worth. And where the hell had the shopkeeper taken off to? Was he getting help? Was he hiding under a dumpster somewhere?

Okay, one quick look, she told herself. Just to see who the men were. If it was the men from the photos, she’d tell Dan and get the hell back to DC, let someone else come in and deal with it. After all, for as hard as it was supposed to be to find this guy, he’d shown up pretty quickly. There was hardly a need for her to be here.

Slowly, she opened the door, just a crack, just enough to peek out and see that the alley was empty. Trash littered the ground, some cardboard boxes stacked here and there, a broken palette leaning against the building’s side. Scuff marks in the debris were evidence of the struggle, but she could see no men. Across the alley a door was standing slightly ajar. The window next to it had been boarded up, and someone had spray painted on it. It must be a back entrance to the building next door, she thought. They had to be in there.

Stepping cautiously, she made her way across the dirty alley, slinked up next to the boarded-up window. From inside she could hear muffled voices, the sound of a man being gagged trying to scream for help. The gravelly voice was speaking, but she could not make out the words. The voice grew angrier, transitioned into a strange mixture of singing and talking, chanting, like a priest at church. Somewhere beneath it, moaning and grunting.

There was a short squeal, followed by a gurgle. The door flew open and rebounded against the building’s back wall with a clang. Estabán Uriquez stumbled out, his hands wrapped around his own neck. Arterial blood pumped out between his fingers, cascading down his arms and collecting near his feet.

Rhonda stifled a scream, palming her hand over her mouth. It was impossible to look away.

“Go out and get him,” came the gravelly voice. Shuffling footsteps grew louder as they got closer to the back door.

They’ll see me, Rhonda thought. They’ll kill me, too. There was no time to curse Dan or agent Plante or reflect on her life or any such thought processes. There was only time to think that maybe she could get back across the alley and in through the back door of Regalo del Sol before the men came out. The footsteps were frighteningly loud, so close to the door, bringing the moaning toward her.

Knowing she was dead if she didn’t try, Rhonda pushed off the wall and bolted across the alley. Estabán saw her, surprised at the sudden sight of a woman, and reached out to her. She skirted him like a wide receiver heading for the inzone, saw the deep gash running across his neck, and knew that he was only moments from death. She reached the door of the Cuban goods store and tore it open, threw herself inside, and shut it tight. She barely paused to slide the deadbolt before she turned to make her way to the front door. But she stopped. She had to know. Had to see whose voice she’d heard. Just a quick peek. Sweating, she turned and looked through the small crack in the frosted glass once again.

Smack! Estabán’s body fell into the door’s window pane, leaving left a dark wetness on the glass and blocking her view. A light moan escaped with his last breath, and then he was silent.

As the fog of shock threatened to consume her, Rhonda noticed the shuffling hadn’t stopped and was coming across the alley toward Estabán and toward her on the other side of the door.

“Pick him up, quickly,” said the gravelly voice once again, from just outside the door. Estabán’s body moved. Through the crack, she saw a torso in a dirty blue button down shirt, a pair of gray arms, rife with welts and sores, took hold of the corpse. “Take him back and wait for me.”

In response, someone groaned, started to drag the corpse through the trash to the far end of the alley.

A shadow grew larger at the door, reached out and grabbed the handle. Through the crack, she caught a glimpse of something horrific, something that caused her breath to catch in her throat.

An ivory cane, topped with a skull.

It was him! Mystery Man. Here, outside the door, playing with the knob. He turned it, but the deadbolt held. “Interesting,” he said. “To be suddenly locked from de inside. Les Invisibles at work, no?”

Shit, Rhonda thought, they saw me. They’re coming in.

The door knob jiggled again, loose in its housing. A shoulder pushed into the door frame, rattling the jamb. Whoever was on the other side really wanted to get in. Would they break the glass, she wondered. Would they come around from the front?

Fuck this, she thought, and raced to the front door, her legs shaking uncontrollably. The jingling bell may as well have been a spotlight and siren it made so much noise. As soon as she hit the sidewalk out front she pressed the talk button on her cell phone to redial Plante. This time, he answered. “Agent Plante.”

“Get down here right now! Right fucking now!”

“Rhonda?”

“Now!” With that, she ran back through the maze of streets toward the cops at the subway entrance, stopping only when they made her sit down and explain what was going on. Through her tears and heaving breaths, she hoped to God they understood what she was saying.

Estabán Uriquez had just been murdered before her eyes.

Chapter 4.

Plante arrived about twenty minutes later and accompanied a local squad car to the scene. Rhonda rode silently beside him in the back seat, doing her best not to tear him a new asshole. He kept repeating that he was sorry. Like it would matter now if she'd had her neck slashed. Sorry could not raise the dead, all sorry could do was sweep dirt under a rug for a little while. Apparently he'd been in the bathroom when she'd called and had left his cell phone in his blazer, in another room. Apologize all you want, she thought, you almost let me get killed.

She took out her phone once again and called Dan, told him she was done with this assignment, and his response was typical, having already been briefed by Agent Plante. “We had no idea something like that would happen. You've got to believe me. Were you at least able to get a name or see which way this guy went? Did they say anything important?”

“I don't know. All sound was drowned out by the beating of my own fucking heart as it tried to leap out of my fucking chest. Did you hear what I said? I'm done.”

“Now, Rhonda, let's hang on a sec. You weren't hurt, and I doubt these guys even knew you were there. Checking the door doesn't mean anything. Guys like that just like to be thorough. I'm not making excuses for Agent Plante, I'll give him a piece of my mind later, but all told you did a good job. Showed real initiative, the kind of thing that I was telling you this agency takes into consideration.”

If that's what they considered initiative, then what did people have to do to become directors, she wondered, cover themselves in honey and fight hungry bears?

“So we know that he's selling them some powder,” Dan continued. “Probably cocaine, and it's probably being used to fund weapons deals.”

Way to repeat my own intel back to me, she thought.

“What about this backstabbing part?” he asked.

“Don't know,” she replied. “Estabán seemed to think this guy screwed him over. And there was some mention about his brother José having gone missing. Like I already said, I couldn't hear all of it. And like I also said, I don't care. I'm coming back to D.C.”

“Listen, Rhonda, just—”

“Just what, Dan? I'm an analyst, not James Bond. You want to know who's running pot into Miami, I can tell you. You want me to sneak around in the dark playing with a gun, you can think again.”

There was a pause, followed by a long sigh. “Ok, you're right. I'm sorry. We'll get someone else on the case. But I may need you to bring them up to speed with all you know, maybe act as a consultant. Can you do that?”

“No problem.”

“Good. Just hang out for a little bit until I can get a jet out to pick you up. Maybe help Plante out. He’s a good guy, really. I’m sure he’ll apologize profusely. And Rhonda?”

“What?”

“Seriously. Good job.”

She hung up, turned away from Plante, who was, Dan would be pleased to know, still apologizing.

The car made it’s way into the alley, driving slow to avoid trashcans and discarded pallets, and stopped near the rear door of Regalo del Sol. Plante told the officers and Rhonda to sit tight, and then exited.

Through the windshield she watched him spin in a circle and then throw his hands in the air as if to ask what he was supposed to be looking for.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said to the officers, knowing they could care less about anything she said. Why wasn’t Plante making notes? “What’s he doing?” She mumbled and reluctantly exited the car and sidled up to the agent.

“I told you to stay put,” he said.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you...”

What she saw made her jaw drop. There was no blood. No sign of a struggle. Nothing. A complete absence of anything that corroborated her story. It made no sense.

“Thought you said he was bleeding all over?” Plante asked.

“He was. Gushing everywhere. I saw the blood hit the ground.”

“Nothing here.”

She pointed to the ground. “But it was right here. He fell down and they took him away.”

“Where’s this door they went into?”

“Over here.” She led him to the door that Estabán had been dragged through. Together, they went inside, Plante drawing his gun as they stepped past the threshold. Inside was a series of abandoned rooms, metal struts and dry wall revealing the skeleton of the building. It had either been a very cheap apartment or very out-of-the-way office at one point, but now the walls were faded gray, the windows boarded up, dust covered everything like a blanket, and water stains coated the dirty yellow rug under their feet. There was no blood in here either.

“I’m telling you his throat was slashed,” Rhonda said. “They must have cleaned it up.”

“No way you can clean up something like that that quick.”

“Maybe there was a tarp?”

“Doubt it. Looks like none of the dust has even been disturbed. Look, we’re leaving footprints in the rug. Where are theirs?”

I wish I knew, thought Rhonda. How the hell did they get rid of the blood? What kind of professionals are we dealing with here?

Plante made his way through the rooms to the other side of the building. There was a front door but it was boarded up. He gave it a tug just to make sure it hadn’t been disturbed. He came back and walked past her out into the alley again. She followed him, found him looking up and down the alley. As if trying to deduce something, he opened the back door of the Cuban store, went inside the tiny access hallway, and then closed the door.

“I locked that when I left,” she said to herself. Had the Mystery Man gone around front and checked the interior of the store after she’d run out, gone out the back door again?

She heard Plante inside shouting hello, looking for the owner, but there was no answer. Evidently the bald, sweaty shop owner was still running for his life. Through the door she heard his voice. “Rhonda, I can’t see you. Move to your left. Trace the path this guy took when he arrived.”

She took a couple steps toward the back wall of the alley, realizing that she could not make out his form behind the frosted glass. Thank God, she thought. Maybe they really hadn’t seen her. Yet, if Mystery Man had gone inside the shop, what reason could there be other than to come after her? Unless he wanted to find the shop owner, whose whereabouts were evidently still unknown. She heard Plante’s voice again. “Hold it! Okay, I can see you. Now walk closer.”

She followed his command until she was past the door, almost to the police cruiser. The door opened and he came back out. “That’s where you first saw him. He came from there?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmmm. So line of sight through that crack is mostly in the line you just walked.”

“I already know that. Remember, I was there.”

“Can’t really see that other door from inside the shop. The front door in there...” he said, indicating the empty building across the alley, “is boarded up. And the street is over there, opposite your walk. So where’d he come from?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you were there...” he explained, while pointing to the back door of Regalo del Sol “...and you said he came from this direction, which is a dead end, and the front door in that abandoned unit is boarded up, then how’d he get into the alley? The street’s that way, but you said he came from over here per your sight line. But how? See what I’m saying?”

The question was logical, but Rhonda suddenly realized she had no logical answer. If he hadn’t come from the other door, which was the only other one back here, he must have scaled down the far wall of the alley. Which seemed ridiculous when she thought about it.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered, feeling stupid, which in turn made her feel angry. Who was this prick to question any of her story when he couldn’t even stay off the shitter long enough to protect her like he said he would.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“What do you mean ‘let’s go’? What about Estabán?”

“He ain’t here, Rhonda. There’s no sign that anyone was ever here except you.”

“Are you saying I’m lying?”

Plante held up his hands, cutting her off. “No no no. I’m just saying there’s no evidence of anything happening here. There’s nothing we can do. I’ll have NYPD come in and check it out, dust the doorknobs, and if they find anything, then we’ll go from there. For now, let’s wait to hear what they say.”

Reluctantly, Rhonda nodded. Without some traces of the murder, or the missing shopkeeper’s testimony, there was little they could do.

As she made her way back to the police car, it was all she could do not to check herself into the local funny farm. How could there be no signs of what she'd seen? How could there be no blood? No footprints? It didn't make sense. She knew what she'd seen. Estabán had been murdered, and her mystery man had done it. Him and his moaning, shuffling henchmen.

Chapter 5.

Dan called as she was watching a show about Bigfoot on the Discovery Channel and said he wasn't going to be able to get a jet to her until four o'clock tomorrow. Something about a crisis at the Canadian border that needed attention. She thanked him, apologized for snapping at him earlier, and went back to the show.

"How do people believe this shit?" she asked. But for some reason, she found herself enamored by it, watching it until the end when she finally shook her head and reprimanded herself for watching such dreck.

Opening her laptop, she browsed through the photos of Mystery Man that Dan had given her earlier. In none of the photos could she see anyone with the man, other than Fereza and Quayarah, of course. No henchmen, though. Yet *someone* had been helping him in the alley, possibly two or even three men by the sound of it. The gray-skinned arm that had dragged Estabán away flashed through her mind again, the fingers spindly and crooked, the flesh covered in pustules and sores. The way they'd moaned, as if someone had cut their tongues out.

Eventually she slept.

In the morning, she moved through her usual breakfast ritual and found herself sitting in front of the television again, waiting for Dan to call. The phone didn't ring until after the morning talk shows were over, only it wasn't Dan, it was Plante.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes. Fine."

"Good. I always toss and turn after a day like you had."

So, he believes me, she thought. At least that's something.

"Local PD finally got back to me about an hour ago. They didn't find anything at the scene."

"And Estabán? Have they seen him?"

"No. Same with the guy who runs the store, man named Louis Garcia. They put an APB out for him. You were right, he's related to the Uriquezes. Distant cousin."

"And DEA, did they see anything, get any pictures?"

"Sorry. Turns out they aren't even in the area any more. Nobody told us till now. They've got their hands full with something else."

"What something else?"

"It's classified."

"Don't hold out on me, Plante. You owe me."

"Owe you? I was taking a dump. I said I was sorry."

“Sorry doesn’t work with ladies. We either want flowers or classified information, so spill it.”

He sighed. “Fine. They’re chasing down a lead on José Uriquez. Info is muddled right now.”

“They know where he is?”

“Not exactly. Seems one of José’s girlfriends here in the city came home and found him lying dead and bloody on her floor.”

“His throat cut?”

“Didn’t get that much info. But thing is—you’re gonna love this—she ran down the hall to call the police. When they arrived, the body was gone. Nothing there. So she changed her story and said maybe he was just sleeping. Either way she moved out and nobody knows where she is either.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“I guess. These drug guys...sometimes they sample their own stuff, get a nosebleed, pass out. It’s typical. So DEA pulled out of the Regalo del Sol stakeout and are trying to find José and/or his chick.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the world these guys live in. So Dan called me and said he’s flying you out later.”

Dan called Plante, she wondered. Why not her? Was he upset with her? “Four o’clock,” she explained.

“Safe trip,” he said, his way of saying goodbye without getting invested.

But now, hearing about José, she couldn’t deny she was curious as to what was going on.

“Plante, you think Bigfoot exists?”

“Yeah, I married her.”

“I’m serious. This is all very Unexplained Mysteries. I mean, Estabán was sliced open, so how could there be no blood. This girl says José is dead, but he’s gone when the cops show up.”

“So?”

“So, drugged out or not, she would have touched him. Dead people are cold, clammy, their eyes are glazed. Only in movies do people confuse unconscious with dead. Dead is pretty obvious.”

“I’m lost, what’s this have to do with Bigfoot?”

“Unexplainable,” she said. “I don’t...it’s got me curious. This whole disappearance stuff”

“You mean,” he replied, “that you want to make sure you’re not crazy. Relax, I believe you. The shopkeeper’s gone, and you said Estabán mentioned his missing brother. It checks out. So if you say our friend in the sun hat slit his throat, I’m not denying it. But until we figure out what *did* happen, we’ll just chalk it up to the fact you were peeking through that crack. It could have skewed your sight.”

“Not likely.”

“Anyway, I’m gonna head to DEA offices and talk to some people. You hang tight until the plane comes. Like I said—safe trip, okay?”

“Thanks.”

Plante hung up. Rhonda dropped her cell phone in her purse and stood still for a moment, just thinking. So much of this didn't make sense, and like the Discovery Channel dreck, she couldn't look away. There had to be something in that alley that gave a clue to what she'd seen. Something to point them in the direction of the Mystery Man. What was it he'd said to Estabán, something about the *lower*? Something about a *bond eye*? What did that mean?

The clock on the wall read a few minutes past ten. Plenty of time to check things out. Just a quick glimpse into the abandoned rooms of the building behind Regalo del Sol. The room where they had slit Estabán's neck.

"Don't even think it, Rhonda," she said. "It isn't worth some stupid gold placard." But she did think it, and she did want that placard. Who wouldn't? And besides, what were the odds lightning would strike twice in the same place?

Chapter 6.

Walking through the alley was more than a little creepy. It would have been far easier to cut through the store, but the door was locked by order of the police, the shades drawn, so she'd gone down it from the side street. It was longer than she had first realized.

Apparently Mr. Garcia had run to the end of the earth and decided to stay. A large mouse ran in front of her and disappeared under some trash. She held her sleeve over her nose while passing an overturned trashcan, then found herself at the spot where Estabán had reached out for her. The area was quiet, nothing but a lone pigeon in the far corner pecking at a bug of some sort. It ignored her as she drew closer. "Don't suppose you saw where they went," she asked it. It cooed and looked for more food.

She stepped past the now familiar alleyway door and boarded-up window, entered the abandoned room and found it had not changed since yesterday. Still dirty, still covered in dust, still insignificant. Aside from the fact that a man had had his throat slashed in it.

The thought sent a chill down her spine. Just what did she think she would find here? His ghost? Some specter that would rattle chains and show her what happened twenty-four hours ago?

"This is nuts. Plante's right, there's nothing here." Her watch said it was noon, time to get lunch and put this all behind her. As she turned to leave, her eyes caught something strange on the boards covering the window. A powder. A white powder.

Drugs?

Opening her purse, she took out a tissue and approached it. She knew from her research that cocaine did not have a discernible smell, which was why cops on TV always tasted it. Supposedly it tasted a bit like uncoated aspirin, and the only way to tell if it was actually cocaine was by its effect. Essentially, if it wasn't flour, or baking soda, or Tylenol, it was coke. Then again, it could be PCP, some kind of hallucinatory narcotic. She was not about to try it. It'd be far too easy to get into her bloodstream, and the agency required drug tests. There'd be no way to explain it to Dan. But some mixtures of drugs could be traced to their origin, right? Drug dealers were known for putting some kind of stamp on the product. It couldn't hurt to try.

She scooped a bit of it into the tissue, sending a little cloud of white into the air, and placed it back in her purse. Any doubt that it wasn't drugs was put aside at that point

when she became a little lightheaded. *Oh great, is this a contact high? That's all I need!* Panic overtook her as she tried desperately to remember if PCP could be absorbed through the skin. She'd never experienced a contact high before, wasn't sure you could even get one from cocaine or PCP, and prayed the slight dizziness was just lack of air in the room or something; she was trying to be careful here. For a few seconds, all her appendages felt too heavy to move. Then, slowly, the sensation passed.

She secured the clasp on her purse, and then stopped, frozen. Suddenly there was moaning coming from the other room. "Oooooo."

"Oh no," she whispered, her heart racing. Someone was in here with her!

The moaning came again, louder: "OOOOOO." It was followed by shuffling feet, coming her way. Her mouth dry, her neck glistening with sweat, she backed up against the boarded-up window and fought back tears. Coming here was the stupidest decision she'd ever made. What the hell did she think she was trying to prove coming here alone? It had to be one of Mystery Man's thugs, come back to check the scene of the crime, same as she was doing.

A shadow passed across the wall opposite her, lingered for a second, and moved on. That's when she realized the moaning wasn't coming from inside the abandoned rooms, but from outside the far window, on the street. She turned around, pulled at the slats over the broken window, creating a wide enough gap to see through.

On the street, his skin gray, his hair disheveled, Estabán Uriquez was ambling away like a drunk.

Moaning.

Rhonda raced to the front door, forgetting that it had been boarded up. "Shit." Estabán's moaning was getting farther away. She raced back to the window, pulled the board out again and watched as the man she'd seen murdered yesterday turned the corner at the end of the block and disappeared.

She wasted no time running back out into the alley and heading toward the street. When she got there, she could just about make out Estabán turning onto another street two blocks up, heading north.

Running after him, she took out her cell phone and dialed Plante's number. He picked up and said, "More Bigfoot questions?"

"I've found Estabán."

"What?"

"I'm following Estabán —"

"I thought you said—"

Beep.

She felt her chin hit the call button on the phone and disconnect her. "Shit!" she screamed, checking the LED to be sure. "Shit shit shit!" Frantically, she hit redial. This time, Plante's phone was busy. He was probably trying to call her back. "Sonofabitch!"

She reached the end of the block, ignored the curious stares from locals. Some of them were pointing toward the subway entrance at the other end, muttering things like, "Did you see that mothafucking guy?"

Odds were they were talking about Estabán, so she hurried down the stairs into the subway station. Beyond the turnstile, she saw Estabán on the platform, swaying ever so lightly. People were backing away from him, keeping their distance like he was a rabid dog.

The headlight of the oncoming train slashed the darkness of the tunnel as it drew close. Rhonda tossed her cellphone in her purse, knowing it wouldn't work underground, and found her Metrocard. She passed it through the reader and ran to the train as the people were getting on, making it through the doors as they closed.

Estabán was standing at the end of the car, his head hanging down as if he were trying to memorize his shoes. He was still dressed in the clothes he'd had on yesterday, and the front of his shirt was stained with a deep brown.

Blood.

Briefly, he looked up, and Rhonda gasped. His face was ashen (was that traces of coke smeared around his mouth?) his eyes clouded over, like a man suffering from a life-threatening disease. Pustules dotted his face and neck, giant craters of blood and puss that seemed to pulsate as the subway car shook. An evil gash, flaked with dry blood, ran across his neck. The cut was deep, and for a second Rhonda thought she could see his spine. Then he was looking down again, an almost inaudible moan escaping his lips. "Oooo."

A fetid homeless man sitting nearby said, "Somebody die in here?" and moved to the other end of the car, starting a process by which anyone who was not recently murdered or covered in their own feces congregated like packed sardines in the car's middle.

Fortunately, the people crowded close around Rhonda, which allowed her to spy on Estabán without having to worry about being watched back. Evidently everyone else thought he was just another homeless man, and as was the norm, decided to ignore him and avoid eye contact.

As the train swayed, so did Estabán, his hair waving before of his downcast face. There was something different about the man, something beyond the blood, pale skin, gaping sores and gigantic knife wound that should not have allowed him to move among the living. He was emotionless, empty, apathetic. Agnostic or not, Rhonda thought he looked like a man who'd had his soul sucked out of him. Yet there he was, standing, moaning, living...if you could call it living.

The train stopped a few times, letting more people on than got off. These new travelers immediately remarked about the smell. Some even took the initiative to make their way to a new car, braving their way past the homeless man; none of them ventured past Estabán.

The train went under the river, making its way into Manhattan. The lights flickered. Those with earphones on simply closed their eyes and moved to their own soundtracks. Others watched the floor or the ceiling. Some held paperbacks, attempting to read under the strobe effect. Rhonda took her cell phone out of her purse and got ready to call Plante again.

It wasn't until they hit the Union Square station that Estabán shuffled forward to the door. In a very uncustomary move, the crowd parted and let him pass. It must be the smell, thought Rhonda. They were not so nice to her, creating a roadblock she broke with her elbows. "Move!" she said.

"Move yourself, skank," someone replied.

On the platform, she found Estabán climbing the stairs. People stared at him as he made his way to the street, shuffling like he'd lost control of his legs. Some pointed,

some gasped, some stopped and stared after him. A few even looked as if they were debating whether or not they should call a paramedic.

Rhonda weaved her way through the crowd on the stairs until she saw the bright afternoon sky open up before her and smelled the harsh concrete of Manhattan. The square was alive with activity: musicians playing guitar, skateboarders flipping ollies, activists handing out flyers, students reading books, tourists taking photos, and a collection of everyone else just sitting on curbs and steps enjoying the kinetic energy of the city.

Estabán stopped among them. Surrounded.

Rhonda hung back, hit redial on her phone and placed it to her ear.

Estabán exploded, literally. He disappeared in a roaring wave of heat and fire that engulfed everyone around him, sending a collection of New Yorker body parts into the air that came raining down onto a thousand screaming people.

Chapter 7.

Rhonda hit the ground hard, squeezed her head, trying to stifle the piercing ring in her ears. The sudden pounding in her skull made her eyes water. She ran her hands through her hair, felt wetness, and knew instantly it was blood, mixed with melted skin. But she found no gash or baldness, which meant none of the blood was hers. Thank God. Falling body parts smacked down on her. She cowered until they stopped, opened her eyes and saw gore all over her.

A smoking crater assumed the place where Estabán had been standing. The square held silent for a second, everyone dazed or in shock. A scream found its way to the forefront of the scene; it was possible it had always been there, fighting its way past ruptured eardrums. Soon, panic took over. People sprinted away, cried, or stood still trying to figure out what the hell had happened. There was so much redness everywhere. A man cradled a small child's pink backpack and roared, "Ally!? Ally!?" Another college student in an NYU sweatshirt stumbled toward the subway station holding a woman's head--maybe his girlfriend's—in his hands. He didn't make it, he just fell down unconscious at the first step. Around the square, hordes of people shambled, wailing and shaking, looked for their missing limbs. Everywhere Rhonda looked, she saw body parts. A foot, a hand, a leg, a chunk of torso, a head. A man holding a hand to his ear while a mixture of blood and burnt skin slid down his cheek, screamed in a panic, "It's a bomb! A suicide bomb!"

This made some of the wounded get up and run. Others stood defiant, a few tried to help the wounded. Despite what television shows would have people believe, the cops were on the scene so fast Rhonda was sure they'd simply popped out of thin air. One of them, an older officer with a white mustache, yanked her from the ground, asked if she was hurt, and took off running when she explained she was okay. Within minutes every flashing light in the city was converged on Union Square.

Rhonda hobbled away, wincing as a new pain pulsed down her tailbone, and made her way to the next avenue. Those who saw her coming asked if she was okay. By the time she found the bus stop at the next block, the news was already out. Then the questions changed, people wanting to know if it was a terrorist, if she'd seen him. What could she say? Estabán Uriquez was not a terrorist. He was a drug dealer. He lived for

money, buying extravagant things and obtaining power. The Uriquezes could give a flying fuck about the governmental policies of America. Still, she had watched him explode with her own two eyes.

At least, she'd seen his body explode. A body that appeared to be...wrong...somehow. The slashed neck, the gray skin, the pustuled faced. He'd looked like a corpse.

The bus took her to the Flatiron building, where she got off and found a small café. The waiters rushed over with towels and water, told her they'd called an ambulance. No matter, she knew it wouldn't come, not with the bloodshed at Union Square needing real attention. Even now on the TV behind the coffee bar the news was live. People were making phone calls all around her. She checked her cell phone, saw that Plante had left her a text message: COMING TO GET U. WHERE?

She hit redial once again. "Plante?"

"Jesus Christ, Rhonda. Where the hell are you? They're saying a suicide bomber detonated himself at Union Square."

"I know," she said. "It was Estabán."

Silence. Then, "What?"

"It was Estabán. I followed him to union Square. As soon as he got outside he...he exploded."

"Wait a minute. Hold on. Estabán? Are you sure?"

"I'm pulling his stomach lining off my head right now. Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"Why the hell would he do that? It makes no sense. Cuban drug cartel doesn't use suicide bombers."

"Plante, listen, there was something very wrong with Estabán. I watched him on the train. I think he was..."

"What?"

"You're gonna think I'm nuts."

"Try me."

"His neck was still cut. I mean, really cut, back to the spine. No one lives with a wound like that. And he looked like he'd been buried and dug up a thousand times over."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying. I think he was...he just wasn't...human."

"Huh?"

"He was alive, but, I don't know how. I'm sorry. I can't explain it. You just have to trust me. Estabán was not Estabán."

"Okay, stay there. I'm coming to get you. They're closing down mass transit for a little while so this might take a bit. Just hang tight. I'll be there soon."

It took over an hour for Plante to get her. He arrived in the same car they had taken from the airport, with the same driver. While she was waiting for Plante, Dan had called to check on her, and to her disbelief, she told him she was staying.

"Why the change?" he asked.

"I don't know. To make sure I'm not crazy. To find out what's going on."

"Plante called and said you saw the whole thing, that it was our friend Estabán."

“You believe me?”

“Don’t know what to believe. But if it was, then we could certainly use you there. But if you are staying, you don’t go anywhere without Plante. More help is on the way. They started redirecting agents the second the news hit.”

“Thanks.” She hung up.

Plante had urged to her to go to the hospital, but she waved it off. It wasn’t that she was trying to be tough, and her head and tailbone did hurt, but mostly she just wanted to wash off the blood that belonged to all those dead people. It felt oppressive. Besides, she’d seen the carnage, and there were people who needed doctors more than she did. She wasn’t going to tie up valuable resources.

Plante’s ID got them through the roadblocks NYPD had set up at the bridges, and got her back to his place in Brooklyn. It was his idea, to stay together now, and all things considered, she was happy to oblige.

The shower was good and hot, and it took a while to scrub the red gore from her hair. Twice, Plante knocked on the door and asked if she was okay.

“I’m fine,” she lied, and then began to cry, watching blood spiral down the drain, a grim reminder of all the life that had been lost just hours ago.

After she dried off and threw on a bathrobe (there were “his” and “hers” bathrobes in the apartment; was there anything the agency didn’t think of), she plopped down on the couch. The arresting scent of chocolate wafted out from the kitchen.

“What’re you making?” she asked.

Plante stuck his head out. “Hot chocolate and pancakes. I know it’s dinner time but I’m not a great cook and this was easy and—”

“No need to explain. I love pancakes.”

For the next thirty minutes they ate and watched the Discovery Channel, a program on animals that hunted with night vision, and how the military was trying to train them to help in covert operations. Even bats get roped into the government’s bullshit, she thought.

Plante was feigning interest in the show, checking his phone, checking emails, wanting to go to Union Square to help. But he’d been ordered to stay with Rhonda. He paced, occasionally looking at her with what appeared to be genuine concern. He’s still apologizing, Rhonda realized, but it wouldn’t hurt to accept his hospitality a little longer.

“You cook for your wife?” she asked.

He nodded. “When I’m home.”

“What’s she do?”

“She’s a graphic designer for an ad firm.”

“Been married long?”

“Four years. You know what the four year anniversary gift is?”

“Fruit.”

He looked impressed. “You are smart.”

“Nah, its all Discovery Channel.”

“Yeah, well, she took me apple picking in Virginia for our anniversary. She’s that kind of girl. Traditional.”

“How’s she feel about this?” Rhonda pointed to the gun hanging under Plante’s shoulder.

“Oh, she doesn’t know. I tell her I work for the CIA but she thinks I’m lying.”

It was a joke, Rhonda knew, but she wondered how many women really *did* think that line was just a dumb attempt to pick them up. “Am I getting too personal?” she asked. “I have this thing about knowing a person inside and out. Getting close.”

“Don’t get too close, I told my wife I’d be good.”

Rhonda rolled her eyes. “Not like that. Just knowing people in detail. I guess it’s part of my job. It carries over. I’m not, am I? Getting too personal?”

“Nah. Once we start powdering our noses together, then maybe I’ll say we’re spending too much time together.”

The phrase triggered her memory of the tissue in her pocketbook. She slapped her hand to her forehead. “Shit, I almost forgot.” She retrieved her purse from the coffee table, opened it up, and handed Plante the wadded up tissue.

“A booger? For me? You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s not a booger. There was this funny white powder in that abandoned building behind Regalo del Sol. I think it’s coke or PCP. Maybe we can trace it.”

Plante opened the tissue, stared at the white powder. “Trace drugs? Maybe. I’ll put a call in. Chances are we have someone here in the city who can check it out.”

“I think Estabán had been using it,” she said. “When I saw him on the train he had some powdery substance on his face.”

Plante simply nodded, took out his cellphone and disappeared into the kitchen. Rhonda had no idea who he was calling, but she questioned why he had to do it away from her. She was part of the agency, too, wrapped up in this as much as he was. Why the secrecy?

After a minute, he came out, said, “Okay, there’s a lab here that will look at it. It’s PD, but they’ve done some work for us before. I’m gonna run this over and see if they can rush it for us.”

“Was that Dan?”

“No. Someone else.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Uncle Sam?”

“A gentleman never kisses and tells.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Take it however you want. I should be back in a couple hours.” He was halfway out the door when his phone rang again. “Hello. Yeah. No shit.” A long pause. “Garcia is still MIA. I’ll tell her.”

“What was that?” Rhonda asked.

“That was Jim. He was with your boss, Dan. Word just came down that the explosion was a massive pack of C-4. They’re still cleaning up the scene, recovering body parts and what not, but they found a hand. They think it came from the bomber. Trace evidence was scorched into it. They ran the prints already.”

“Estabán?”

“Estabán.”

“My God.”

Plante left.

For the next twenty minutes, Rhonda stared out the window at the sky and made mental notes on what she knew. She already knew Estabán was the bomber, there was nothing new there. But she couldn't get the sight of his slit throat out of her mind. Judging from the reaction of everyone who'd passed by Estabán during his death march, they'd seen it too. How could a man walk around with his head nearly severed from his body?

Eventually she turned from the window and called Dan. He had nothing new to report. Like everyone else, he was waiting for NYPD and the FBI to sift through the enormous crime scene that was once simply Union Square.

"What about Jose?" she asked. Estabán's brother was still missing, still reportedly wounded despite his girlfriend initially reporting him dead. A familiar story now.

"No idea," Dan replied. "DEA doesn't feel the need to share every detail, but they know we're on this as a matter of national security, so I'm hoping they call us if they find out anything."

"Can't you pull some strings?"

"Rhonda, I'm in the analyst business, too. I don't have the authority to call them and demand answers. As soon as I find something out, I'll let you know." He hung up.

The apartment seemed to close in around her, like a booby trap from *Scooby Doo*, so she grabbed her jacket and purse, deciding to get her laptop from the other apartment. Her travel bag and toiletries were there as well, and if she was going to do anything with her hair, she'd need them. Hell, there was no real reason to stay with Plante, anyway, other than to have someone to talk to. Should she just leave him a note saying she'd gone to stay at "her" place? Then again, it was conceivable that Mystery Man was looking for her, if in fact he'd seen or heard her behind the door, so sticking close to Plante (and his gun) might not be a bad idea. Either way, she needed her laptop. She'd decide on the way.

As she got on the train, the sun was beginning to set. There was still a good hour of daylight left, which should be enough time to get there and back (if that's what she decided to do) without having to worry about the animals of the night. The trains were running again, but only so far as the river where they were stopping and coming back. The only way in or out of Manhattan was by taking a bridge, in a car. The controlled traffic allowed the police to perform security checks and hopefully keep any more bombs from crossing the river. No doubt they were profiling anyone of Middle Eastern descent. Had Estabán's name even gone out to them yet?

On the train, she found a copy of the morning's *The New York Post* and looked it over. The big story was something about the mayor making a racist comment. The train was fairly empty, only Rhonda, an old African American woman sitting across from her, and a Latino teen listening to his iPod a few seats back.

They were both commonplace, but something about the old woman grabbed Rhonda's attention. She was wearing a necklace of shells, animal teeth and small feathers, almost a spitting image of the one Mystery Man wore around his neck.

Rhonda got up and moved to the seat next to the woman and made uncomfortable eye contact with her. "Hi," she said. "I like your necklace."

The old woman touched the shells. "Oh, thank you, child."

"It's, um, interesting. Where did you get it?"

"I got this here necklace from Louis. He makes them."

"Why shells? It's religious somehow?"

“To show the loa I support them.”

There it was. That word. “The lower?”

“No, child, the loa. The spirits what guide us through these dark tunnels of life.”

Rhonda was silent, trying to make sense of the cryptic words.

“Oh, child, I don’t mean to scare you. The loa be our guardian angles. Only sometime they lead you astray you don’t show reverence. The teeth keep the bad ones at bay.”

“So you practice Santería?”

“Santería? Goodness, no, Vodou. I wear these to honor Bondye.”

Another word Rhonda had heard. “What’s that?”

“Not what, child. Who? Bondye the creator, our guide, our judge.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following.”

The old woman laughed. “No matter. Most people don’t follow. Most think it all crazy, Vodou, but ain’t like the movies, it like they church. It ain’t none different. Go to church, sing, rejoice and love the saints. Same as other religions, child. I’s raised on it back in Port Au Prince.”

“Haiti?”

“*Oui*, child. Haiti be where I was born. Come to these here states ten years ago.”

Before Rhonda could probe further, the woman rose and grabbed the support poles near the door. “My stop, child.”

“This Louis, would he sell me one of these necklaces?”

“Louis will sell you air you want to pay him for it. You want his address?”

Rhonda nodded. The train stopped and the doors opened. The old woman took a cautious step onto the subway station platform, turned and pointed into the dark train tunnel. “Two more stops and get out. There be a blind man at the station sucking on a lonely harmonica. You ask him for Louis’s address. Tell him Mother sent you.”

“Mother?”

“He’ll know.” The doors closed, and the train was moving again.

Mother had not been lying. When Rhonda got off the train there was a blind man near the stairs playing the harmonica. Wearing thick sunglasses and a corduroy cap, he was part of a three piece ensemble consisting of himself, a guitarist and a man pounding on a pickle jug; they were turning out some kind of painful hybrid Dixieland-blues.

Rhonda noticed he also wore a shark tooth necklace.

At the mention of Mother, the band stopped playing. The blind man broke into a wide grin of jagged teeth when Louis’s name came up next. Air sucked through them with a whistle as he gave Rhonda an address: 1345 Lilton Street. “Ask around. You’ll find him,” he said. He didn’t question what she wanted, he simply returned to playing the discordant music that sounded like knives scratching on metal pipes.

Outside, the sun was sinking, the grayness of night rising up over it. The neighborhood was alive with activity, but not the kind that made her feel safe. People sat on stoops, some dressed in gangbanger gear, others, older, dressed in overalls with sun hats on their heads. Was one of them Mystery Man? Perched on a milk crate, an elderly woman with yellowing eyes gnawed on a chicken leg, a plate of bones near her feet.

Children ran in the street, their dark African faces covered in crusted food and dirt. Here again, as was becoming a common occurrence, trash seemed to grow from the sidewalks.

Everyone stared as she walked along, the type of baleful gazes that grew more powerful the harder one tried to avoid them. She'd grown up listening to her mother's stories about growing up in the ghetto and knew it had been like this place. You were either part of it or you were an outsider. Despite being African American herself, she did not know this kind of life. She was an outsider here and she felt it. If you were an outsider, her mother had said, you'd best show some respect.

No surprise—1345 Lilton Street was a dilapidated apartment complex with a small courtyard. Off to the edge of the courtyard a basketball net was leaning sideways over a tiny patch of concrete. The stoop was crammed with teenagers smoking weed. They made no effort to move as she stepped past them. "Louis live here?" she asked, hoping that Louis was notorious enough to not need a last name. One of the kids hooked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating she should go inside. "Dat way. In da back?"

"Yanking it for Bondye," said another, his Haitian accent thick as mud. They all laughed.

She found the front door unlocked and stepped inside, adjusted to the smell of rot and decay. With the exception of a frosted transom over the front door, sunlight did not penetrate the interior. To her left, a staircase rose up into more darkness. To her right, a gaunt black man stood in a deep shadow, watching her.

She gasped.

His yellow eyes blinked, and for a moment he seemed to disappear completely. When they opened again he sniffed.

Show no fear. He just lives here. That's all.

"Louis?" she asked.

Slowly, he pointed up the stairs, receded into the shadow and was gone.

Rhonda's heart beat faster. Her mouth went dry. There were so many shadows around her. How many people were standing in them, watching her? Where had the man gone? Was he moving around her? She considered running out of the building and calling this goose chase quits, but right then her cell phone rang. It was Plante.

"Yeah," she said.

"It's me, I'm at a lab in midtown. The powder you found isn't coke."

"What is it?"

There was a long exhalation. "I'll let Dr. Gorman explain it."

A new voice spoke to her. "Miss White, this is Gerry Gorman. I understand you found this powder in the projects in Brooklyn?"

"Yes. It's not drugs?"

"Actually, it is drugs. Just not coke or PCP. It's a mixture of various neurotoxins. I was able to place some of them, in particular traces of teradotoxin."

"What's that?"

"It's poison, from a puffer fish."

Rhonda thought about kids licking frogs and eating fungi to get high; if they were moving on to poisonous fish, they must be getting desperate.

"Miss White, I also found traces of bone dust. Human bone."

"I don't get it. Like someone crushed up human bone and fish and tried to smoke it?"

“Either that or...Miss White, have you ever heard of coupe poudre?”

“No. Should I have?”

“Probably not. I feel stupid even bringing it up. It’s really just a myth. A substance used in Voodoo rituals, or so they say. I’ve never seen it, and I don’t think anybody outside of small villages in Haiti have. If it even exists. My guess is someone here tried to fashion some for themselves. Probably found a recipe on the internet or something. Maybe to get high, maybe not.”

Remnants of the conversation between Estabán and Mystery Man came back to her, something about the powder being fake. Had Mystery Man sold the Uriquezes this coupe poudre to make them sick? To trick them? Why?

“Hang on,” Gorman said, “Agent Plante wants to speak to you.”

She waited while they exchanged the phone again. “Hello,” Plante said.

“I’m here.”

“Okay. So, I don’t know what to make of this neurotoxin stuff just yet but I’m coming back. Uncle Sam wants me to sit tight until he figures out the next move. Everybody and their grandma is out looking for José Uriquez and our Mystery Man so right now we’re kind of like extra cooks in the kitchen. Their words. I can swing by the other safe house and get your stuff for you.”

Safe house. It sounded weird to Rhonda. She was staying in a safe house and didn’t even know it. She couldn’t help thinking about who might have stayed there before and why. “No thanks,” she replied, “I’m gonna head there myself when I get out of here.”

“Huh? Where are you?”

“Not sure. Lilton Street. More projects. My guess is Regalo del Sol isn’t too far from here, a stop or two back. Nice neighborhood, if you’re a cockroach.”

“Jesus, Rhonda, what are you doing? You’re supposed to be sitting at my place, waiting for me. The city is on high fucking alert right now. All the cops are preoccupied. If something happens—”

“Relax, I’m fine.” But she knew she wasn’t; she had no idea where the man in the shadows had gone and night was falling quickly. “I just need to talk to this Louis guy. I think I may be able to find out where we should be looking for Mystery Man.”

“Give me the address. I’m coming to get you.”

Wanting to avoid an argument, she gave it to him.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Don’t move.” With that, he hung up.

Rhonda moved toward the stairs, glancing back briefly to make sure those yellow eyes weren’t following her. She steeled herself with a deep breath and made her way up.

As she ascended, the stench of rot grew thicker and the darkness grew blacker. Were the lights merely burnt out, or was this the way it always was? You wouldn’t know if anyone shared the staircase with you unless you bumped into them. Along the walls, grime formed blackened Rorschachs. One of them suddenly moved, scurrying away at lightening speed, and she had to hold back a scream at the realization that it was a giant bug. Too big to be a cockroach, she thought. But then again, in this place, maybe not.

The sound of a small boy singing meandered down the steps, a lazy tune wrapped in a foreign tongue, laden with hints of Spanish and French. Some of it sounded familiar, but not enough to grasp the full translation. It was beautiful, though, no matter what the origin, and it had a gravitational pull that drew Rhonda forward. It was abruptly cut off

by an angry adult voice, and the sound of a hand spanking the boy's bottom segued the concert to a startled cry. And this, dear God, was followed by the bleat of a lamb.

Rhonda stopped short at the top of the stairs, thankful for the bit of waning daylight penetrating the dirty window at the end of the hall. Overhead, a tungsten bulb zapped and flickered. All the doors to the units were closed. "No gold placards here," she said. Good old anxiety bringing the jokes out once more.

She took a step down the hall. Boxes of empty bottles and bags of trash had been put outside the units awaiting trips to the dumpster. She passed the first apartment and from deep within it she heard a record player scratching out a low bluegrass tune. She wondered which apartment was Louis'. She made her way to the next unit and stopped short. A small boy was sitting against the wall, half hidden by a broken rocking chair that was slated for the junk heap.

"Hé!" he said, waving her over.

She swallowed, moved closer, knelt down. In his hand the boy held a small toad. Where'd he caught it was anyone's guess. It hopped back and forth from palm to palm.

"Hi there," Rhonda said. "That your pet?"

The boy scrunched up his eyes, titled his head. He looked like a dog trying to concentrate on a distant sound. In the flickering light Rhonda could see the necklace of tiny feathers he wore. She could also see his swollen lip, glistening with fresh beads of blood. He'd been hit recently. Maybe the spank she'd heard was not delivered on his bottom. Had he been banished to the hall as a means of punishment? What would happen if she was caught talking to him?

"I'm looking for Louis," she explained, keeping her eyes on the doorknob behind the boy.

He repeated the name. "Louis."

"Do you know which one?" She pointed to the doors around her.

"Lá bas," he said. "Houngan. Pourquoi?"

She recognized his accent now as Haitian, but his fat lip was giving him a temporary speech impediment. Sadly, she was not entirely sure what he was saying. It didn't matter, she decided not to go into details, both for her sake and his. "Merci, petit," she said, trying desperately to remember any French she'd learned, which was little. She gave him a pat on his head, causing his quizzical expression to return. Such a cute fellow, she thought. Just how bad would his life turn out growing up here? It'd be a hell of a struggle to get ahead, that was for sure.

As she stood and walked two units down, to the door the boy had indicated, he began his strange song again. Please don't bring your father out, she prayed.

She knocked on the door and watched flakes of paint shake loose, drifting slowly to the floor the way leaves fall from a dying tree. By the time they gathered at her feet, she heard the gruff moans of someone approaching on the other side and her anxiety rose another notch. The door opened but caught tight on its security chain. An aging black man stuck his eye in the crack and looked her up and down. He looked downright pissed off. "Qu'est-ce qui?"

"Um...Anglais?"

"Oui. Yes. What you want? Busy?"

"My name is Rhonda. I'm told you provide charms to appease the...loa."

He looked her up and down again. "You? Loa? No. You lie."

“No, I don’t. I want to buy one of your necklaces. Please? I have money.”

At this, he laughed, a witch’s cackle. “Oui. Yes. For the loa. Twenty dollars.”

Twenty dollars! It seemed kind of steep for a necklace made of shells, teeth, and the occasional feather. Maybe she could charge it to the agency.

The old man undid the chain, stepped back, and motioned her inside. He was dressed only in a pair of dirty khaki pants. His nude chest was covered in dark hair and puffy scratches that ran like worms over his pectorals. Most of the apartment looked like it had lost a battle with a mudslide. Dark brown stains covered the walls, ratty clothes littered the floor, the furniture was all on its last leg.

She followed him into what was arguably the living room.

“Oh my God!” she screamed.

In the middle of the floor, a young lamb lay with its head in a giant wok, its neck slit back to the spine, its tongue hanging loose. Its eyes still fluttered, staring up at her. Had to be the same lamb she’d heard bleating just minutes ago. A fresh kill. Blood spurted from the wound into the wok, collecting in the basin. The man watched her expression, the way she put a hand up to her mouth, and he laughed his witch cackle.

“For Bondye,” he said. “Now you see I know you lie.”

She turned away, but the gaze of the creature’s eyes still seemed to float before her.

“What you really want?” he asked.

“I want... I want to know what it all means? The loa, Bondye, all of it.”

“Pourquoi? Why?”

“Because I’m looking for someone. Someone who wears the necklace I described.”

“You mean this.” Louis stepped over the dying lamb and took a small box off the shelving unit that ran along the wall. Various jars and wooden containers held collections of small bones, rocks, roots, herbs, animal pelts and more. From the box he pulled out one of the necklaces she’d described.

“It protects from bad spirits, right?”

His eyes rolled toward the ceiling, as though he were trying to remember something. He crossed his arms and extended his right hand out a bit, palm face up.

“Hard to say. Maybe your dollars bring back my memory.” He let the ensuing silence linger.

It took Rhonda a moment to catch on. Great, she thought, he’s gonna hustle me. But this lead was all she had. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill and slapped it into his hand. “So,” she said, “does it protect from bad spirits or not?”

“Oui,” he answered, quickly slipping the money into the pocket of his khakis. “But then again no. Depends how you use.”

“Can it be used for...evil?”

“Ah. Oui. The bokor use for this.”

With a tilt of her head, she motioned to the lamb. “Are you...bokor?”

“Me? No.” And again he laughed, rubbing his hands up and down his belly.

“Why are you sacrificing the goat?”

“A manje, to keep balance. Such is demand for loa. Or maybe, it dinner.” He held up the necklace again, shook it. “All from the homeland. Twenty dollar. For you, it bring good luck.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Of course. I bless it.”

From her pocketbook she took out a twenty and handed it to him. In exchange he gave her the necklace, which she wadded up and placed in her purse. “Thank you. Can I ask you another question?”

“Oui.”

On the floor, the lamb kicked out and was still again. Rhonda thought she might lose it any second. “I’m looking for a man who walks with a cane. On the cane is a skull of some sort.”

“Monkey skull,” the man said, nodding.

“Money skull?”

“Oui. To talk to the devil men.”

“You know the man I speak of?”

The old man moved around her, lifted up the lamb’s head to open the gash wider, allowing more blood to flow out. “This lamb know bad men about. Bondye take care of them. The man you seek.”

“Who do I seek?”

“Jean Pierre.”

And there it was, she thought. Finally, they had a name. Just to be safe and make sure he was talking of the right man, she asked about the powder. “Do you know what he’s doing with a white powder?”

Louis stood up in a flash, grabbed her by her arms, and dragged her to the door. She tore at his fingers, but they were curled around her biceps in a death grip. He opened the door and forced her out. “I no speak to Jean,” he said. “Get. Go. Now!”

With that he slammed the door in her face. Tears were running down her cheeks, the shock of his grip kept her frozen in the hallway. What the hell had that been about? One second he’d been humoring her, the next his eyes had gone wide with fear. What had she said to set him off?

After what seemed like minutes, but was probably seconds, her feet began to move. The shock of it all was wearing off. She had a name. That was her whole mission here in Brooklyn and she had done it. Dan would be pleased. Maybe that gold placard would be there when she got home after all...

Outside the dirty window at the end of the hall, a sallow moon was just barely casting its glow through the grime; night had fallen. She wanted to get the hell out of this neighborhood and back to the safe-house. She composed herself and headed back toward the stairs, noting that the little boy was no longer in the hallway.

When she reached the stairs, she heard footsteps coming up toward her from below. Inky shadows blanketed the stairwell, obscuring everything. There was no telling who was coming. Maybe the little boy, maybe the man she’d seen in the foyer. For the first time in her life she wished she had a gun.

With a *bzzz*, the overhead light flickered out and did not come back on. The darkness was so total she could barely see her hand in front of her face. The footsteps clomped up the stairs slowly, getting closer. Clomp...clomp...clomp. Another pair of feet joined in. Maybe two, three people total, making their way toward her at an unnaturally slow pace. Clomp...clomp...clomp. And...breathing. Familiar, heavy breathing.

It couldn’t be.

There must be another stairway at the other end of the hall, she thought. Another way out. I'll just take that one and hope to God Plante is here.

When she turned, she realized there was nowhere to go. Framed in blackness by the small amount of moonlight coming through the far window, a large silhouette blocked her way.

"Louis." Even as she said it, her voice faltering, she knew it was not Louis.

"No, my child," the voice said. The gruff, gravelly voice from the alley. The man who'd murdered Estabán.

Mystery Man.

"So dark in here," he said. "How I would love to behold the features what puts forth dis voice of an angel. Allow me..." The silhouette reached up and tapped the tungsten bulb. It flickered to life with a wan coffee stain glow.

Before her, she saw, up close, what Mystery Man looked like. At least six and a half feet tall, his wicker sun hat fell over his head like a giant saucer, his dark sunglasses hid his eyes and parts of his cheekbones, the lenses reflecting back the ghostly image of a woman with a gaping mouth. On either cheek, those long scars were thick enough to grab onto. His dark yellow button down shirt hung loosely around his lanky frame. Necklaces strung with various bones, feathers, runes, teeth and beads jingled around his neck. A collection of ostentatious rings adorned the fingers of his hands. His right hand wrapped around the monkey skull on the ivory cane, as if he were trying to read its thoughts.

An intense negative energy radiated from him. If death had a personal assistant, it would look like him.

Rhonda took a step back, her heart racing.

Behind her, the footsteps on the stairs continued to get closer. She risked a look back, and thought she might lose the last remnants of her sanity. Five or six steps down, the dim bulb barely illuminating their faces, two men—if you could call them that—stared back at her. Their faces, like Estabán's, were cursed with sores. The skin, even in the darkness, looked gray. Their heads lilted side to side as if their necks were made of Play-doh. She could not see their irises, only a thick milky white where they should have been.

"Stay," Jean Pierre said, holding his hand out to the men. They remained still, low moans drifting from their sagging jaws. There was something decidedly inhuman about them.

"Now," Pierre said, dipping his head down to her again, his voice rasping like screws grinding against concrete, "Did I hear someone mention my name?"

"No," Rhonda replied.

He lifted the cane and shook it. Inside the monkey skull, something rattled.

"Untruths. For I was called. My name spoken."

"No. It wasn't me. I was just going—"

"And yet you've come all de way here. Why?"

"No reason. Just...lost." The men on the steps moaned again. Her feet wanted to carry her away from them, but Jean Pierre took another step toward her, forcing her to make herself smaller.

He shook the monkey head again, listened to it rattle. "I smell you before. Yes."

"What? No."

"Mademoiselle, I recognize dis scent of fear."

“No, I...” Hurry up, Plante, she prayed. I don’t want to die in this craphole of a project.

Pierre leaned in close to her, sniffed her neck. “Oh yes, I know dis scent.”

A banging from one of the far apartments caused Pierre to look away. Rhonda reached into her purse, felt around for something to use as a weapon. Her hand locked on the necklace Louis had sold her.

Pierre now seemed very interested in the sounds coming from the apartment down the hall. He shook the cane again, the contents of the monkey head rattling down the corridor. “Louis,” he said. He spun back to his men on the stairs, shouted, “Come.”

They stormed up the steps, on the verge of roaring now. Rhonda moved away from them, noticing their features as they walked into the sallow light. Aside from their fetid stench, like rotted cheese, what caused her to gag was the decay of their faces. Far worse than what she’d seen on Estabán, with milky cataract eyes, deep blue lips, flaking epidermis, black fungus and deep gashes across their necks.

She couldn’t hold back her fear anymore, screaming with all the air in her lungs. The two creatures brushed past her without a second thought, shuffling toward their master. Rhonda was about to run down the stairs and out into the night when Pierre grabbed her by the shoulder.

“A gift,” he said, and blew something in her face. A powder, stinging and dry.

She stumbled backward into the nearest wall, tearing at her eyes with her fingernails as the powder erased her vision and sent waves of intense heat through her sinuses. It seemed only a second before her thoughts were shimmering in and out of focus. A numbness fanned out through her chest. By the time she lost control of her appendages, she was sliding down the wall with tears streaking from her eyes.

Reality folded in on itself.

Chapter 8.

The world is covered in saran wrap, blurred and full of lens flares. She is not awake, yet she is not asleep. She is somewhere else. In the distance, the sound of Pierre’s weathered voice speaks of betrayal and gifts to the gods. At their mention, her view suddenly changes, and she is now lying naked on a dirt floor, encircled by dancing men and women. A pole rises from the earth next to her, adorned with herbs and bones, ascending into an onyx sky where unhappy shapes swim through the clouds like veins of light under the surface of a lake. Drums beat wildly, a pulsing rhythm that manages to spin the world. Around the pole men and women undulate, their ebony bodies slick with sweat, eyes rolling back in their heads. Mist swirls around them, moving as if it has a life of its own, encircling their torsos like vines. Touching them in a way both tender and sinister. She watches the dancers bend low, placing their hands in the mud beside her, crawling on the ground now, growing horns from their heads. Their skin sprouts hair, their pupils grow ovoid and green, tails flip from their bare behinds. Now they are not human, but a hybrid of man and animal, tongues lolling as they salivate. They crawl over each other sniffing, licking, and with a feral cry, begin to copulate. With each pelvic thrust, the mist grows more solid. Phalluses, pink and slick with joy, flash in the strobing lights from the sky. The mist takes shape, becomes the form of men and women. Some of the mist people are still, watching. Others are angry, joining in the orgy, making slaves of their

partners, tearing their holes wider. Knives are drawn from somewhere and the hybrids bleat as their throats are slit in time with orgasms.

With a fury, the mist people sup on the blood, coating themselves in the viscera of the dead. These are the loa, she knows, though she does not know how she knows this. And yet, they are not the loa. They are something more, something far deadlier. The feasting goes on for what seems like hours, until all parts of the animals are consumed, everything from eyes and tongues to phalluses and hooves. Now full, the spirits hover toward Rhonda, who is unable to move from the earthen floor. Blood from the slaughter runs over her feet, arms, and face, the stench of copper thick in her nostrils.

There is a hand in front of her, coated in blood, nails curled like scythes. It wants something from her but she cannot speak to ask it. Not that it matters; it traces the lines of her body, between her breasts, over her belly, down to the soft flesh between her legs where it grips hard, squeezing. In her mind she is screaming, begging to wake up from this dream that is not a dream. More hands join in, all made of mist and blood, and squeeze all parts of her body. Their nails tear open her flesh and reach inside, rip the entrails from her cavity, toss them aside. With liquid skill, they move into the newly opened spaces inside her. In here, they skin the inner walls of her flesh, tearing her dermis layer by layer. They do not stop until two small points of light float up from her gouged heart.

The loa then leave her body, reach out and take the lights. One for the angry loa. One for the peaceful loa. Their deed done, they float skyward toward the clouds, trailing the lights behind them. How badly Rhonda wants to reach out to them, to take back what was hers. The gros-bon-ange, the ti-bon-ange. Her big and little souls. Gone now. Wrenched away.

Death is imminent now.

But the loa do not make it to the sky. There is something stopping them, something bringing them back to her, faster and faster, like missiles gunning for the earth. The ground ripples as they slam into her body, her souls stabbing back into her heart.

Sensing that her arms are working now, she reaches into her chest cavity and seizes her beating heart. When she pulls her hand away, however, she is not holding her heart.

She is holding a necklace.

If the Big Bang was real, it was now replicating itself within Rhonda's head; the flashes of light and incessant pounding were enough to make her wish for death. Her tongue was cotton, her eyes were crushed glass, her skin itched with the ferocity of biting fire ants. Every inch of her face was throbbing.

When she reached up to feel her lips, she felt something in her hand. Opening her eyes created a whole new world of hurt as her vision fought to focus on something, anything, that would confirm she still had normal sight. The tungsten bulb glowed above her once again, throwing the same, steady, sallow hue over the hallway as if the walls had coughed up bile.

With a shudder, she bent over and vomited on the floor. Her muscles locked, tears ran down her cheeks, and she was sure she pulled something in her neck. The action left her gasping for breath and crying. After the pancakes were expelled in a mush puddle around her knees, she leaned back against the wall and noticed, finally, what was in her hand.

“Necklace,” she said. Louis said it would protect her. From what, she didn’t know. With effort, she pulled herself off the floor, saw remnants of a white powder outlining where she’d been. The scene came back to her now—Pierre, saying something about Louis, blowing the powder in her face, her vision wobbling as shadow demons came and danced throughout her mind. And then the blood orgy.

She wiped her arm across her face, collecting streaks powder on her sleeve. Was this the same coupe poudre she’d found in the abandoned building where Estabán had been murdered? Had to be. Some kind of neurotoxin, according to Plante’s lab friend. From a puffer fish. Didn’t sushi chefs serve pufferfish? Something about it inducing coma? So that was it: Pierre had drugged her. But where was he now?

She stood up, the vertebrae in her back cracking like kindling in a fire. The hallway was not as empty as she’d thought; standing in front of Louis’ door was the little boy with the toad. He was watching her, half curious, half afraid. “Louis,” he said, pointing through Louis’s half open door.

Rhonda held the wall as she moved toward the little boy, listening for Pierre and his two...creatures. “The man in the hat,” she said. “Where is he?”

“Louis,” the boy repeated.

That’s right, she thought, he doesn’t speak English. What the hell was French for “where’s the maniac with the two drugged-out lepers?” The boy stepped aside as she reached the door, indicating with his stricken visage that she needed to look inside. She did, at first unsure of what she was seeing. Horribly, it sank in, and she could make out the way Louis’ body had been gutted and hung from the ceiling by a large chain.

With a scream, Rhonda turned and ran for the stairs, descended into the darkness. The bottom floor was pitch black, the sun having gone down long ago. She ran for the front doors but stopped short, backpedaled a couple of feet. Two glowing eyes hovered in the darkness, blocking her path. She curled her fists around the necklace, prepared for a fight, her muscles pulling taut. Not again, she thought. I will not take any more of this. “If you touch me I’ll kill you,” she said, never more sure of her words than right now. “I swear to God I will.”

The eyes stepped out of the darkness, took shape in front of her. “Rhonda?”
It was Plante.

Together, Plante and Rhonda waited for the police to arrive to deal with Louis’ body. Rhonda gave a statement, let an EMT check out the rash on her face (he recommended she buy some aloe), and left.

“What the hell are you doing?” Plante asked when they got back to Rhonda’s safe house. “You’re like a goddamn murder magnet.”

“That’s not funny. I was checking some things out.”

“And what did you find? I hope it’s something good. I hope it’s worth all the reports I’m going to have to file on this stuff.”

“Please,” she said sarcastically, “don’t talk to me about reports. I write reports all day long while you’re out playing cowboy.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means...fuck, I don’t know. I just got attacked and you’re giving me a hard time! Aren’t you concerned?”

“Of course I am! People are blowing themselves up! People are getting strung up like livestock! And if you die I might get fired.”

“Forget this.” She yanked her purse off the couch and made for the door. Plante stepped in front of her.

“Ok,” he said, “sorry. I’m a little frazzled is all. Every time you go out a new problem arises. It’s making things a little tough. This was just supposed to be a recon job. Get in, get some info, go back home. Now we’ve got murders, a suicide bombing, some guy blowing poison powder in people’s faces. What’s next, a giant gorilla gonna grab you and climb up the Empire State building?”

“I’m not blonde.”

“Well thank God for that.” He was worked up, his chest heaving. It took a few seconds before he started to calm down.

“Did you get it all out of your system?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m good. Okay, spill it. What’d you find out?”

“What I found out is that Mystery Man’s real name is...” She hesitated, wondering if saying his name would summon him. Still, she knew she had to tell someone. “Jean Pierre.”

Plante was speechless, his mouth open and searching for words. He settled for, “Fantastic. We need to run him through the system.”

“Just let me get my laptop.”

“No prob. We going back to my place?”

“You make it sound like a cheap date.”

“Hey, I’m not cheap, I have Bisquick. C’mon, I’ll make you some pancakes, replace the one’s you lost.”

“No deal. The way they tasted coming up—I’m off pancakes for a long time. But if you stop and get me some White Castle, I’ll accept your apology.”

“White Castle?”

“Yeah, I know they’re shit for the system, but I’m upset. You should let an upset women get what she wants.”

“Deal.”

Rhonda packed up her belongings, shouldered her laptop case, and followed Plante down to the subway.

When they got back to Plante’s safehouse, White Castle now digesting in their bellies, Rhonda lay on the couch and began snoring. As much as Plante wanted to use her database to check up on this Pierre guy, he knew she needed the rest.

He placed a call to Uncle Sam instead. “Hello?”

“Plante? That you?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Jim. Ever hear of a Jean Pierre?”

“This our guy?”

“Yeah. Ugly fucker in the sun hat. He drugged Rhonda today, mutilated a Cuban man to boot.”

“He follow you?”

“No. Ben’s outside in the car anyway, keeping watch. He’s got surveillance set up pretty tight.”

“So...Pierre. We know anything about him?”

“Not yet. Rhonda’s got her notebook with her, but she’s out cold. I’ll give her an hour to nap and then wake her up.”

“Pierre,” Jim said again, mulling the name over.

“Figured you’d have heard something about the bombing by now. Pierre’s name come up?”

“I haven’t heard shit for hours. FBI is afraid to get its hand slapped, so right now they’re just piecing things together. Won’t release info until they’re sure it’s a fact. But I’ll have my Chilean contacts shake things up, see if they can get intel on this Pierre. If he’s dealing with Fereza then chances are other Chileans know him as well. I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“And Plante?”

“Yeah?”

“You see him, I want him breathing.”

“Gotcha.” Plante hung up the phone. He looked at his wedding ring, felt a pang of loneliness flutter through his gut. Two weeks, he thought. It had been two weeks since Vanessa left. Couldn’t take it anymore, she’d screamed. Was tired of lying in bed wondering where he was, whether or not he was safe. He couldn’t blame her; he’d been told early on that marriages in this business had a poor success rate. Desk jockeys, directors—sure, they managed to get by. Even have kids. But field agents, the strain was too much.

She’ll call soon, he thought. She has to. It wasn’t like she didn’t love him anymore; she just wanted him to put down the gun and go sell life insurance or something. They’d work it out. Somehow.

He hoped they would, anyway. Making her pancakes was the best part of his day. This Rhonda woman didn’t seem to care about his epicurean delights. Too bad for her. Not that she was a bad person, and hell, she wasn’t hard on the eyes, but she was talking about some weird shit lately. What had she seen in that rundown apartment building? She really had looked ready to kill someone.

She shifted on the couch, continued snoring. Maybe I’ll give her more than an hour, he thought as he retired to the bedroom. He lay on the bed and turned on the television, keeping the volume low. The news was replaying the scene of the bombing—the screaming people, the carnage. Then an aerial shot filled with nothing but flashing red and blue lights. Five minutes later he was out like a light.

He slept more than an hour, so Rhonda did as well.

The morning news was completely focused on the bombing investigation, and Rhonda was willing to wager they'd stick with the story for at least another month. These days it was the news' job to milk a story until it yielded nothing but dust. When they got to dust, they spun the story and started over, from a new angle.

On the plus side, the FBI was reporting that this was not a Muslim Jihad-related attack. After 9/11, the last thing the Muslim-American community needed was more scrutiny based on hearsay.

"Sleep well?" Plante asked when he got out of the shower.

"Oh yeah, very comfortable couch."

"My bad. You looked peaceful. I was gonna wake you but I...I guess I fell asleep."

"Figured you'd be up all night making calls."

"I made one. I read once that narcolepsy is a symptom of extreme stress. Maybe that's it."

"I've heard that too. I'm surprised, you don't seem like a guy who gets that stressed."

"I don't. Just my body does. And speaking of calls..." he disappeared into the bedroom. A few seconds later Rhonda heard him on the phone.

She powered up her laptop, waited until it loaded the startup programs, then ran a search for Jean Pierre in the off chance she already had his name in there. It was still running when Plante came out of the bedroom, now dressed in a suit, his shoulder holster invisible under his jacket. "Uncle Sam checked in with the local PD, says nothing new yet."

"You told him about Pierre?"

"Last night. This Pierre either has no record, or it's a fake name."

"What about Louis?"

"What about him?"

"What was all that stuff in his apartment? The dead lamb, the bottles and boxes of bones on his shelves?"

"Shit," he said, "I don't know. You tell me."

The computer beeped. Her search hadn't come up with anything. "There WiFi in here?"

"Far as I know. I'm not really that computer savvy so I just go with what they tell me."

Rhonda clicked on her wireless icon, searched for the wireless connection. The computer found it but it required a password. "It's encrypted," she said. "I don't suppose they told you the password."

"They probably did. But unless they used my birthday, I'm not going to get far by guessing."

"Who knows it? Uncle Sam? Dan? The creepy military guy who's killed 'lots'?"

"Uncle Sam is in a meeting right now. You can try your boss. You never know who knows what with this agency."

It was worth a shot, she thought, but when she dialed Dan a few seconds later, she got his voicemail. She hung up without leaving a message. "Dammit."

"Not in?"

“No. Maybe he’s in that meeting with Uncle Sam.”

“I doubt that. Not this meeting.”

She cocked her head, noting the twinge of arrogance in his voice. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because Dan is squeamish around blood, and Uncle Sam is with the creepy killer you mentioned...getting information out of some naughty Chilean boys.”

“That mean what I think it means?”

“Depends on what you think it means. Want pancakes?”

“No. Enough with the pancakes. And please, don’t make me think the man I’m doing this for is out torturing people.”

“Torture? No no no. Torture is illegal. He’s merely administering some heavy persuasion. And before you get all high and mighty, know that any protestations would fall on deaf ears right now. I’d rather some religious fanatic with an RPG suffer a few broken fingers than the women I love gets blown to bits while she’s out grocery shopping. Shit.” Plante turned away, went into the kitchen and started banging pots around.

The way he’d mentioned his wife sounded heated, and yet, it was so completely touching it almost made Rhonda want to go to say something reassuring. Something was up, but it wasn’t her place to ask, and besides, what would she tell him even if he did offer insight into his private life? Her list of successful relationships wasn’t all that impressive; as a matter of fact, he’d have better luck making his marriage a happy one if he steered clear of her advice. One thing was for sure—Rhonda White, Love Doctor was not a gold door placard she would ever see.

She didn’t need to think about the intricacies of love, right now, she needed to concentrate on getting online. The words and phrases Louis had used, the way he’d been bleeding that lamb, all of it pointed toward a possible religion, and she had a hunch which one. All she needed was confirmation, and then they could stop searching for Pierre’s origins in Cuba, and start looking somewhere else.

She strode to the kitchen, found Plante eating a bowl of cereal. “Call the driver. We need to go into the city and find an Internet café. I have a hunch.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The streets of New York were full of the normal hustle and bustle, people racing this way and that, cabs speeding around one another like life was a video game. The energy was kinetic. Who says perpetual motion is unattainable? Maybe it would stop for a beat, like it did when the towers fell, but there was an undercurrent of pride that pulled New Yorkers forward again. This was their city. Tear down all the buildings and blow up all the streets, they would just climb on the rubble and start building it back up, the way ants did. Never stopping. Always moving. It was admirable.

They were almost into Soho when Plante’s cell phone rang. He answered it, muttered a few yups and ahas, but it was the “are you fucking serious?” that caught Rhonda’s attention. When he hung up, she didn’t even have to ask what the call was about. “That was Uncle Sam. You’re not gonna believe this.”

“What?”

“They found José Uriquez. He was up in Westchester, breaking in through the window of Senator Mills’ house with a gun. He tripped a silent alarm.”

“They catch him?”

“Catch? Not really. Get this—when the cops showed up, they told him to get on the ground, which he did. But the bastard never got back up. When they yanked him to his feet, his face was blue, eyes glazed over, stank like hell. His throat was cut. The ME says he’s been dead at least a week.”

“What? But how? How was he breaking in if he’s...”

“I don’t know. But they found traces of something on his face.”

She knew exactly what he was going to say. “Powder.”

He nodded. “And Bingo was his name-o.”

“It’s Pierre. He’s doing it. Somehow.”

“Animating the dead? You realize how that makes you sound.”

“You didn’t see those guys with Pierre. You didn’t see Estabán. I know it makes no sense but I know what I saw. And now this...this thing with José. He’s up and walking around and the Doc says he’s been dead a week! Admit it, something unexplainable is going on here.”

“Seems that way.”

“If you can believe Jesus rose from the grave, why not this?”

“Because it’s nuts.”

“Just try. For one second.”

“Shit. I dunno. Nothing makes sense right now. Tell me what’s this hunch you have? Because right now all I know is we’ve got two dead drug-dealing brothers walking around with their necks cut, singing zippety Goddamn do dah, when they should be six feet under! What the fuck is going on!” He punched the back of the front passenger seat. The driver flinched, but kept driving as if he hadn’t noticed the outburst.

They drove the next couple of blocks in silence, until finally the driver pulled over at a small café and let them out. “Don’t go anywhere,” Plante told him. “NYPD comes by, have them come in and talk to me.”

The café had a minimalist décor: tiny tables, tiny chairs, art deco on the walls, most of it made of cheap plastic that probably sold for far more than it was worth. The owners thought they were creating a unique sense of space, but Rhonda felt like they had simply fallen victim to a bad interior design firm.

She paid the cashier for an hour of online service, fired up her laptop once again and immediately got a signal.

She searched for information on “LOA”. All sorts of pages came up about religion, most notably that of Vodun, which developed much in the same way as Santería in Cuba but was practiced by the inhabitants of Haiti. This made sense, considering the old woman on the train had said she’d grown up in Port Au Prince. It also coincided with the French the little boy spoke. Rhonda scanned through a few of the sites, getting a poor man’s education on Haiti’s social structure and slavery history. Then she came across a site about zombies, about how evil priests, known as the bokor, had been accused of raising the dead to work in the fields. It was superstition, and no site went so far as to claim there was a truth behind it other than to say there were recorded incidents of dead people showing up in town after their burials. But even these incidents were labeled unexplained rather than definitive proof of zombism. Rhonda showed the pages to Plante.

“You ever hear of Voodoo?”

“Like I said about Santería, it’s a crackpot religion.”

“Some followers of Voodoo believe you can raise the dead with a certain type of ritual. According to this the dead can then be controlled through the use of this coupe poudre.”

“Which Dr. Gorman already told us is a bunch of BS.”

“But what if the powder Pierre uses is real? What if he’s one of these bokor?”

“I don’t buy it. I refuse to believe that the Uriquezes were the walking dead. No way. This is nuts. We’re missing something, that’s all.”

“Then explain how I saw Estabán murdered, how I saw him walk onto the train the next day, get off at Union Square, and blow himself up. Explain how José was seen lying dead in his girlfriend’s apartment then breaks into a senator’s house a week later. This... powder... whatever it is, Pierre knows how to use it. For real.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“Listen, Plante, I had this stuff in my system. When I was under its influence, I saw things that... that were so real and so frightening. I know it sounds dumb, but I think I saw these loa... these spirits that control our fates.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a dead person now, too.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Not really. There has to be an explanation. I mean, if he got this stuff into your system, how come you woke up and were fine?”

Instinctively, Rhonda’s hand reached inside her purse, took out the necklace Louis had given her. “I think, because I was holding this.”

“I hope you didn’t pay for that thing. I’ve seen better crafts made by grade schoolers.”

“Fine, scoff at this. But I think we have to consider it. Louis said he blessed it for me. And he said something about bleeding the lamb to keep bad people away.”

“It obviously didn’t work. Pierre still showed up. See, it’s a bunch of hooey.”

“You’re being obstinate. You were raised Episcopalian, right? It’s typical when one is raised under a certain faith to decry other ways of worship. That’s part of the religion’s job, to declare their way of worship the best way. Some would even call it brainwashing. Remember the Crusades? But understand for just a second that your religion is not the only religion. Maybe there’s truth behind these Voodoo rituals... then what?”

“You want me to believe that dead people, zombies, are walking around New York trying to eat people?”

“Not eat people, no. That’s just movies. They’re motivated by something else. Estabán blew himself up in a public square, José was climbing into a senator’s window with a gun.”

From the way Plante squinted his eyes, Rhonda could see his gears were turning again. “What? Assassins?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, okay, supposing this shit is true...“ He looked toward the ceiling, said, “bear with me for a second, big guy,” and then looked at her once again. “If it’s true, then Pierre isn’t trying to pass off this powder as drugs to the cartels for money to buy weapons with...”

She nodded. "The powder *is* the weapon."

He paused, then: "Shit."

"Which explains why Estabán was so angry. Pierre sold him the powder, but according to these Web sites, you have to be ordained as an actual Voodoo priest before you can perform the ritual."

"But why sell it in the first place? And why the Uriquezes? Money has to be involved somehow. But for what?"

"DEA."

"Huh?"

"The DEA...they were keeping tabs on the Uriquezes, right?"

"Supposed to be anyway. They're all over the bombing case now, seeing as how Estabán was involved. Which might explain how they didn't know where José was sooner."

"Can you call them?"

"Why?"

"Ask them if Estabán and José had ties with the Chileans or Iranians."

"I don't get it."

"There's nothing to get. Can you just find out?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hang on." Plante made a few phone calls, motioned with his finger that he was on hold a few times, then spoke some more. When he hung up, he was smiling. "You drive a Ferrari?"

"What? No."

"Then they're not paying you enough. You hit it on the head. The Uriquezes had a couple deals go sour with some unknowns from both Chile and Iran, as well as Russia, Australia and some other places in South America, Peru and whatnot. DEA has photos of them meeting with these people, and I'm willing to bet the guys in those photos have ties to Abhur Quayarah and Manuel Fereza."

"The men in the satellite photo."

"Exactly."

"So there is a connection here. Somehow."

Plante put his hand to the back of his neck and massaged it. "Let me try this: The Uriquezes fuck over these military whack jobs, Quayarah and Fereza, sell them crap product or something. So the military can't sell it or use it or whatever they planned to do with it. So they hire Pierre to come to the states and kill the Uriquezes. Payback."

She held up her hand and stopped him. "Close. But not quite. Guys like that wouldn't use a wild card like Pierre, they'd just send in men with guns. I'm thinking Quayarah and Fereza weren't buying drugs from the Uriquezes, but weapons. Estabán and his brother are into more than drugs, as most cartels are. Trust me, I've done plenty of research on them. They'd have guns for sale. But something goes wrong. Maybe a bad deal like you said. The Uriquezes are on their shit list now, but they're small potatoes. What they need is to find another arms supplier. So Quayarah and Fereza hear about this coupe poudre stuff, turn their sights on Pierre—"

"Or maybe Pierre sends out word through the black market announcing his new business."

“Maybe. Either way, they want to see if this coupe poudre is as powerful as it sounds. Think about it—it’s the best weapon you could ever have, because how formidable is an army that can’t die.”

“Pretty fucking formidable.”

“Right. But it’s not like cocaine, you can’t just taste it for purity—”

“Plus you need to be a priest, right?”

“Right. So instead of selling it to them, he shows them how he can make it work for them. Shows them how it’s real.”

Plante smiled. “Pierre takes out two birds with one stone. He kills the Uriquezes, which puts him in the Iranian’s good graces, and then uses the corpses to carry out terrorist acts to show how powerful it is. That makes Pierre and his powder one hell of a force to be reckoned with.”

It was her turn to smile. “And bingo was his name-o”

“This is nuts, you realize that. There’s no way anyone will believe this shit. Hell, I don’t even believe it.”

“Unless we can bring Pierre in alive, prove what he can do.”

“Alive is the goal. I’m not so sure letting anyone get their hands on his powder and his magic is such a wise idea.”

From the street outside the café, someone screamed.

Gun drawn, Plante raced out the door, Rhonda on his heels. “Stay back,” he warned her. The driver side window of the company car had been shattered. Slumped over in the front seat, the driver was bleeding from a large gash in his neck. Plante reached in and checked the man’s pulse. “Sorry, Ben,” he whispered.

“Dear God,” Rhonda said. “Is he...”

“Yeah.” Plante scanned the street, looking for the killer. “Anybody see it happen?” he asked the crowd on the sidewalk. A bike messenger spoke up. “Dude, I don’t know what the fuck I just saw. Some black dude all cut up and shit just whipped out a machete and offed that guy like it was nothing. He took off that way.” He pointed down the block toward Houston Street.

“What do you mean all cut up?” Rhonda asked.

“I mean the guy looked like a turkey ready to be stuffed. His chest and stomach were wide open. I swear there wasn’t shit inside. It was just, you know, like, fucking empty. The man should be dead, not waving a machete around.”

Plante grabbed Rhonda, started jogging toward Houston. “You don’t think...”

“Louis?”

“Shit.” He took out his cell phone, made a call as he ran. Behind him, Rhonda was doing her best to keep up. Thank God she’d worn sneakers and jeans this morning. There was no way she’d be doing this in heels.

Plante reached the main thoroughfare of south Manhattan and tried to pick a murderer out of the hordes of people walking on the sidewalks. He spun around with his gun out. The few people who noticed it backpedaled and ducked into doorways. He spoke into the phone: “It’s me, Plante, put me through to the morgue. Yes, the morgue. Now.” He waited a moment, then: “You had a body come in last night, Louis something. Black

guy, Haitian, split down the middle. Yeah, that's him. His body still there? Yes I'm serious. Just fucking humor me and go check."

Before the person on the other end could reply, Rhonda stuck an arm in front of his face and pointed across the street. "There. That's him."

Plante saw it too, the creature that was once Louis moving quickly up 2nd Ave. Into the phone he said, "Nevermind. I found him. I was you I'd get better locks for your storage units."

He tossed his phone into his pocket and stepped out into traffic, almost got squashed by a cube truck. Rhonda yanked him back, said, "New Yorkers aren't gonna stop. Wait for the light. I can still see him."

It took a few seconds for the light to change, during which time Plante threatened to shoot it, then the city worker that installed it, then the mayor, anyone who was responsible for him not being able to cross.

Then, together, they raced across the street, cutting wide of the mass of people who were in the crosswalk with them. On the other side, they tore up the sidewalk, weaving in and out of window shoppers, tourists, and the occasional homeless person. "Where'd he go?" Rhonda asked, swiveling her head this way and that.

A scream from the end of the next block caught their attention. Standing in the middle of the street was Louis, a machete in one hand and a gun in the other. He was spinning around, waving them above his head. His skin was gray, hanging open around his rib cage like a loose vest. Where his belly was split wide, you could see naught but a hollowed-out maroon interior, glowing slightly pink as the sunlight showed through the skin of his back. Pustules and massive blisters marked his face, leaking oils and blood down his chin. The pupils of his eyes had given way to a chalky film, as if someone had jammed eggshells in his sockets. A thin coating of powder flaked from his forehead. When he saw them looking his way, he roared, a guttural declaration of war that sent people scattering.

"Get down!" Plante shouted to the crowd. People crouched low, trying to hide behind garbage cans and apartment stoops. Taking aim, he squeezed off a shot, hit Louis in the neck. The wound opened like a flower blooming at high speed, but no blood spit out. A normal person would have pitched backward to the ground and died in minutes, but Louis let loose with another roar and took off running to the next block.

"Where's he going?" Rhonda asked.

"Beats me, but he's gonna kill someone. Bet on it."

They ran after the creature, waving for people to get out of their way. Plante shouted that he was the police, which seemed to work when the people saw him carrying the gun. The creature was fast, much more agile than a man Louis' age should be. Certainly faster than a corpse should be. It was leaping over hydrants, skirting around cars and knocking people over like they were made of straw. Most people gaped after him, stunned, as if trying to find a hidden camera somewhere. A few teenagers even laughed.

A deep burn began to ignite in Rhonda's lungs; she had not run like this in a long time. Riding a desk all day had not given her any muscle tone to brag about. This was seriously starting to hurt. She figured she had four, maybe five more blocks in her before she keeled over.

“Louis! Stop!” Plante yelled, but the dead man kept running, roaring every few steps. Police cruisers passed them, lights on, sirens whooping. Word had gotten out, and it couldn’t be long before Louis was captured now.

If that happens, Rhonda thought, at least they’ll believe our story, send the marines in to find this Pierre guy.

To Rhonda’s amazement, the cruisers kept speeding up the street. There was no way Louis could have run that far. Not that quickly. You idiots, she thought, he’s back this way.

Confused, she stopped and scanned her whereabouts. Louis was nowhere to be found. He was gone. “Where’d he go?”

Plante stopped, turned, bent at the waist and walked back to her. He was trying to catch his breath, between inhalations and exhalations, he sputtered out, “Don’t know. He was here a second ago. Look around, he has to be somewhere.”

There was a set of bulkhead doors a few feet away, leading down to the underground storage area of a live/work loft building. Rhonda bent down and grabbed the ring used as a handle and pulled. Two white eyeballs glared back at her, a gaping mouth hissing like a Tasmanian devil. She screamed and let the door slam shut again.

“He’s down there,” she said, her heart beating so fast it hurt.

“Look out.” Anticipating an attack, Plante pointed his gun toward the bulkhead, reached down and threw open the door. It swung up with a clang and remained upright. For a flash, Louis’s ruined face snarled up from the shadows before he roared and took off into the dark recesses of the basement.

Without a word, Plante ran down after him.

A shot rang out. Then another. Then Plante’s gun came sliding back from the darkness, into the light at the foot of the stairs.

A loud crash punctuated the beginnings of a struggle. Something large and metal bounced on the ground, followed by glass shattering. Storage shelves, Rhonda surmised. There were grunts and the sounds of fists on flesh. Plante howled and cursed in pain. Louis roared in response.

“Rhonda! My gun! Hurry!”

It was hard to move her feet, but Rhonda forced herself down the stairs, ducking her head into the shadows of the basement. How she wished the police would come back. For a second she even considered phoning 911, but knew Plante could be dead by the time she made a connection. She picked up the gun, hefted it in her hand. It was surprisingly heavy for such a small weapon. Could she really pull the trigger? Even if it meant life or death?

Another cry of pain rushed at her from the far side of the basement. It sounded like Plante. Everything was pitch black beyond the triangle of sunlight that extended from the bottom step and disappeared ten feet from her. Moving slowly, she raised the gun in front of her, walked toward the sounds of the fight. The darkness closed over her, reducing everything to shades of gray. Shelves, as she’d thought, lined the walls. They were stacked with boxes, plastic storage bins, paint cans, fabrics, plumbing pipes, and bric-a-brac she couldn’t identify. The sounds were coming from another room, a room so black she could barely make it out.

“Rhonda!” The call echoed off the cold, cement walls.

Sweat running into her eyes, she rushed into the room. Plante's grunting was immediately louder. So were Louis's roars. She felt along the wall for a switch, flipped it on.

In horror, she plastered herself against the wall as the scene before her jumped to life. Louis sat on top of Plante, his teeth buried in the agent's neck. Blood was flowing from Plante's carotid artery, forming a lake of crimson on the dirty, cement floor. The creature looked up at her, snarled with blood-stained teeth and said, "Twenty dollars." The voice was barely human, air being forced through pipes that no longer worked properly.

Oh God, she thought, it knows me.

Beneath the creature, Plante tilted his head back and looked at her, reaching out to her. "Shoot it," he said, his voice now a low wheeze. A large hole the size of a fist had been chewed into his neck.

But before she could squeeze the trigger, the creature leapt up and ran to the far wall. It tossed aside a collection of boxes and snatched the machete that had been flung there during the fight. With another leap, it landed back on Plante and swung the machete into the agent's face. It struck home with a *thunk!* It all happened in the blink of an eye. Too fast to follow.

Plante went still, his outstretched arm lowering itself as his life faded away.

The basement was silent for a heartbeat, then broken by the creature's heavy breathing. It stood up, walked over to where its own gun lay on the ground, picked it up and faced her.

Rhonda was barely aware that she was crying, the gun in her hand shaking so badly she was sure she'd drop it. The creature cocked its head and licked its lips. Was it going to bite her or put a bullet in her, she wondered. The gaping wound in its belly drew her sight, a mockery of biology that dared her to explain it to her superiors. There was nothing there, no stomach, no intestines, no lungs, liver, spleen, pancreas or anything that would classify it as human. Aside from a spine stained off white and red, the creature before her should not be alive.

Yet it blinked. It moved its mouth. It twitched its nose. It raised its gun and pointed it at her.

"No!" She fired. Missed.

It fired back, missed as well, the bullet spitting out a chunk of wall near her head.

Heart pounding, she sprinted back toward the bulkhead. Her foot caught on one of the toppled shelves and pitched her onto her stomach, knocking the air out of her. The gun slipped from her grip. Her purse came undone and the contents spilled into the sunlight at the foot of the stairs. The necklace, wrapped around her compact, came to rest just out of reach. Behind her, she could hear the moaning of Louis' corpse walking her way. Getting closer. Pulling back the hammer on its gun.

"Please God, please God, please God," she crawled on her hands and knees, a pathetic being looking for a miracle. The type of crawling a cat will do after being hit by a car, making its way to the side of the road to die. Painfully. Slowly. Her hand wrapped around the necklace, and this made it all okay for some reason. Now, it can kill me, she thought. I'm just too tired to keep running. I don't care anymore.

Rolling over, she placed the necklace on her chest. The creature stood above her, looking down with dark red teeth. Had it really been eating Plante, she wondered. Or was

it just an easy way to kill an adversary? Most wild animals went for the necks of their prey, drained the blood until the prey died, and then dragged it away for later feeding. What was this thing before her? The undead. Yet...aware. And remarkably strong.

Was it host to the loa right now? Was a demon living inside it? Or was it truly just flesh overrun with coupe poudre, rendering it immune to the laws of biology?

Did it even matter?

“Please,” she begged.

The creature roared, raised its arms above its head, shook like a child throwing a tantrum. Rhonda saw that it now carried both guns. Then, with a final hiss, it ran up the stairs and out into the daylight.

Twenty-eight shots followed, complete with the terrifying screams of people caught in a crossfire that held no meaning other than to spread fear.

She closed her eyes and prayed.

Hands were grabbing her, pulling her along the ground, rolling her over. Two faces broke into her line of sight. Young men, one blond, one with spiky black hair, both wearing blue jackets with red crosses on the shoulders. One of them placed an oxygen mask over her face, the other tipped her up to get a hand under her back, feeling for wounds.

“Are you hurt?” Spiky asked.

Rhonda shook her head, wondering how long she’d been lying there talking to God. “I’m okay,” she finally said.

“I’m gonna help you up. On the count of three,” the blond man said. On three, they lifted her into a sitting position, then up onto her feet. Each taking an arm, they walked her up the basement stairs and into the daylight. The street above was a disaster zone. Bodies lay everywhere, some covered with sheets, others covered with EMT jackets because, as was evident, they’d run out of sheets. How many, she wondered. Too many to count. One for every bullet Louis had fired.

“There was a man with a gun,” she said as they led her to the curb. Spiky was holding a small oxygen tank, which he set beside her.

“He’s dead.”

“But how?” Through the mask, her voice sounded like Charlie Brown’s teacher.

“Police got him,” the blond man said.

“Where is he?”

“Don’t know. Think they took his body away already. Must have been wanted because some guys in suits went with them.”

Suits? Hadn’t Dan said something about more agents coming down? “Did you see it?” she asked.

“The body? No. We were too busy covering up dead...um...” He broke off, realizing his job-like attitude toward the victims could be misconstrued as insensitive. “You’re real lucky you didn’t get hit. Smart of you to run down there. What happened? You trip over something?”

“No. I...” and then she remembered Plante was still down there in the back room. “My friend is down there. Agent Plante. In the back.”

“You sure?” asked Blond. “I checked it out. No one else down there but you. Maybe another crew took him to the hospital.”

“He was in the back. He had...”

“Just you, miss.”

Tears filled her eyes as she remembered the sight of Plante with the machete in his face. Oh God, she had failed him. If only she’d not been so afraid and shot Louis when she had the chance. He’d still be here, cracking a joke, offering her pancakes, supporting the insane story she knew as the truth. Is this what he’d signed up for? The job was dangerous, sure, but had he ever suspected it would end with a blade in his skull? It was just supposed to be a simple recon job. Get in, get out, get an office with a gold placard on the door. How would they tell his wife? Did Dan even know about it? What about Uncle Sam? The tears came in rivers now.

“Here,” Spiky said, placing something in her hand. It was the necklace she’d been gripping in the basement. The necklace that had enraged Louis, been blessed by him, maybe even saved her life. If you believed that kind of stuff. Which of course, she did now. The EMT also placed her purse in her lap, said, “I put your stuff back in it. It’ll be okay. You don’t look too hurt. Just a bit stressed. We’ll get you out on the next ambulance.”

The hospital was the last place she wanted to go. If Pierre had sent Louis to kill her and Plante, then what she needed was to get out of New York, back to D.C. where she could let the company handle this mess. “No. I’m fine. Really.” She took the oxygen mask off and handed it to Spiky. “Thanks for the help.”

“Miss, I don’t know that we can just let you go. I mean, you might be hurt and not know it—”

“And the cops want to talk to everyone involved,” added Blond. “They told us to tell them which witnesses could talk.”

“Well I’m not staying,” she said.

“But miss—”

They stopped protesting when she took her wallet from her purse and flashed her company card. It wasn’t a badge or anything like that, but it did say CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, and that was good enough for the EMTs; they didn’t know any better.

“Shit,” Spiky said. “Is this related to the bombing yesterday? Is this, like, terrorists?” His face went three shades of pale. Chances were he was thinking about the guys in the suits, wondering what type of intelligence they represented, wondering if his hometown had just become the new Fallujah.

“Something like that,” she said. “Maybe stay indoors for a few days. Where do these ambulance go?”

“Depends on what’s taking drop offs. Beth Israel, Cabrini, Bellevue. Who knows. Between yesterday and today the rooms are filling up quickly.”

“Thanks.” As she pushed past the police cars, having to flash her ID once again, she couldn’t help but feel she was contributing to the madness. Was it terrorism? Was it something less broad? And more importantly, where the hell was Plante?

Twenty minutes later she was stepping off the subway at the stop near the safe house, shouldering her laptop once again. Thankfully, no one had snatched it from the Internet café when she'd gone back for it (who said all New Yorkers were rude?). The company car, with Ben's body being looked over by the police, had still been parked outside.

When she hit the street, her cell phone beeped; someone had called her while she was underground. The LED showed Dan's name, who was exactly the person she needed to speak to. Still, she feared some kind of outburst. "It's me, Dan."

"Rhonda. What the holy fuck is going on up there? Something about a mass shooting is all over the news. I saw you in the background. You all right? What happened?"

"I wish I could explain it. Plante's dead."

"How?"

What was she supposed to say? A zombie hacked him up? "He was slashed with a machete."

"By who?"

"One of Pierre's men. At least he became one of Pierre's men. It's a bit complicated."

"Tell me it wasn't Plante's gun that killed people. We really don't need our name attached to this shit."

"I didn't see it happen, but I'm not taking odds against it."

"Jesus Christ. This is bad."

"Worse. This Pierre guy is using some kind of..." What?

Magic? Voodoo? It sounded ridiculous. "He's got people carrying out his terrorist plans that wouldn't normally do it. A kind of drug, but not in the traditional sense. God, I really don't even know how to explain it. Look, he knows we're here. The guy driving for us—"

"Ben."

"Yeah. Ben. He's dead too. His neck was cut. Which leaves me and whoever else you sent. And with what we're dealing with, I'm pretty sure we're sitting ducks."

"I don't know who got sent. It was decided upstairs."

"I was mostly referring to me, anyway. Pierre knows

I'm here. Knows what I look like. Knows I was asking about him. I had a run in with him and now I think he's been following us somehow. I need to get out of the city, and you need to send some professionals in to get him."

"Okay, I'll do my best to get some local boys to run protection for you. Can't promise anything. They were already spread thin with the bombing. This new shooting makes it worse. Can you get to the safe house?"

"I'm here now."

"Good. I'm getting a plane up there STAT. Even if I have to spend all the Agency's money to buy a new one. Can you hang on a couple hours? Can you wait that long?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'll compile a file of what I know on the plane. And Dan?"

"What?"

"I'm not crazy, and I want that to go in the file that talks about the work I did here. I didn't almost just get killed too many times to count to not have this work out for me. Hear me? I'm not crazy."

“Why would I think that?”

“Because when you read my report there will be no other explanation. But I’m not crazy.”

“I know you’re not crazy, Rhonda. Crazy people don’t analyze, they send analysts into situations they shouldn’t be in because even crazier bastards convince them it’s a wise move. Just get to the airport. Be safe.”

She closed her phone, put it back in her purse next to the necklace, and entered the apartment building. The interior of the apartment safehouse felt wrong somehow, emptier, as if a piece of it had been taken away. Plante’s jacket was supposed to be hung over the chair at the dining room table. Pancakes were supposed to be cooking in the kitchen. It’s funny how you can feel a person is really gone for good when you know they won’t ever walk back in the front door. But there was no time to grieve right now. Time was tight, even with a two-hour window. Briefly she debated calling a cab to get her to the airport, but with the way things were going it wouldn’t be hard for Pierre to have one of his men pick her up. No, she’d have to take the subway out to the airport, stay around people, be in public so there were witnesses, stay alert for suspicious activity, all of which meant at least a forty minute ride, and time getting through security (even federal workers have to pay their dues when it comes to aviation safety). First she collected her bags and piled them on the couch. Then she grabbed a granola bar from the kitchen, stuffed it into her laptop case. After making a final room-to-room search to make sure she had everything, she picked up her bags and opened the door to the hall.

Standing there, smiling down at her, his sun hat blocking out the light from the overhead bulb, was Pierre. “Bon jour, mademoiselle,” he said, and struck her across the face with the back of his hand. The force of the blow was like hitting a brick wall in a car doing sixty. It sent her to the ground, and for the second time that day, she had the wind knocked out of her. White hot, fiery pain laced its way from her right cheek down through her neck and into her stomach. The taste of copper tingled on her lips. Get up, she told herself. He’s going to kill you!

“Move and I will hit you again,” he said, making his way into the apartment. Behind him, two creatures shuffled in after him and stood to the side. They were the same two creatures she’d seen in Louis’s building, the same two that had crept up the stairs like puppets. Only now she could see them in the light. Their cheeks were torn into strips of skin with holes large enough to pass fingers through. Their teeth were rotted black. What little hair they had was white and stringy, stuck to their gray pates with shiny oil. Eyes were all white, but seeing her without difficulty. There was no powder on their faces, but the telltale sign of blisters and sores were in abundance, one blister so large it closed the eyelid of the creature on the left. From these sores a yellow slick bubbled out and meandered down to their mouths. They swayed, moaning, their faces focused on her with an intense yearning.

“You anger me, mademoiselle. I leave you to rot inside yourself. And yet here you be, running around de city, speaking my name. It come to me on de wind, spoken in awe, tickling me. Reeking of de same scent o’ fear I know well. To haste, I fear, is to dishonor Bondye. And so I no more hasten. Dis is de word of our fathers and mothers, who grow angry at such insolence.”

Rhonda crab-walked farther into the living room, until she came up against the coffee table. She put a hand to her lip and felt the swollen bubble where Pierre had split

it. Blood coated her fingers. But her hand was not trembling, a sign of her resignation that there was quite possibly no way out of this. She would die here in this safe house, alone, under the hands of this magician. She bit back a giggle at the irony of dying in a “safe house.” And what then? Her corpse used for another bombing? “What are they?” she asked, tossing her eyes to the creatures. Speaking hurt her mouth, but she had to know. “How are they alive? Did you kill them? How does it...work?”

Pierre took a few steps forward, squatted down in front of her. When he reached out and ran a finger across her mouth, she did not flinch. “Le zombi. Yes. Men who owe me for de life I provide them back home. I not a selfish man, you see. But I not a selfless man, either. Dis for dat, as it be said. When you know how to satisfy de gods, you can ask for favors. Mighty powerful de loa be, spinning dis earth on their knees. A tiring job dat require de occasional rebirth. And so I give it to dem. What’s left be for me. Again, dis for dat.”

A throbbing was beginning in her jaw where a bruise was forming. The smell of his hand was still thick on her skin, a mixture of earth, musk, and body odor. This, of course, was the least of her worries. When Pierre commanded it, his two servants would tear her apart limb by limb and there would be no way to overpower them. The question was, did she even want to try?

Pierre stood back up, said, “Here,” and one of the creatures shuffled forward, its tongue now lolling out of its mouth. “De blade.”

The zombie removed a large pocket knife from its tattered pants, handed it to Pierre in a gray and decaying fist.

Pierre took the blade, cutting the creature’s flesh as he pulled it free. No blood ran from the wound. “For Damnballa, Zakka, Ogou, I give dis gift of flesh.” He laid the blade sideways across his palms and brought it to his chest. “It only hurt for a minute,” he said, looking at Rhonda the way a doctor might to a child about to receive a shot. For the next few seconds he spoke in a mixture of Hatian French and at times what seemed another language entirely. The bass of his voice rumbled through her body. The words became a chant, a steady beat that promised to move the universe.

The zombie on Pierre’s left swayed in time with the words, and a long line of drool stretched to the floor like monofilament. It even looked like the creature was smiling, enjoying the entertainment, anticipating something grand. When Pierre was done chanting, his eyes now shockingly stitched with bloodshot veins, he flipped the knife around in his hand, blade pointing down for stabbing. “Mademoiselle, dis be a brief adieu.”

He lunged at her.

Instinct took over and Rhonda shoved off her feet, up and over the coffee table and landed on her back in front of the couch. The coffee table tipped over on top of her just in time, Pierre was right behind her and the table met the knife as it plunged toward her. The sound of the zombies’ loud grunting filled the room, a raucous noise that bordered on laughter, like children watching a cartoon. Pierre’s sun hat tipped down over his face for a second and Rhonda kicked out again, sending the table into Pierre’s knees and knocking him to the ground. Up and over the couch she went, picking up her pocketbook and swinging it into his weathered face. The purse was full and made of heavy leather—the smack resounded throughout the apartment. Pierre let out a surprised grunt and covered his head with his arms.

Even as Rhonda headed to the door, Pierre was shouting, “Stop her!”

The two zombies moved quickly—one jumping in front of the door, the other blindsiding her with a tackle that sent her sliding into the kitchen. Her purse came to rest beside her and the necklace peeked out from inside. With one hand she snatched it up, with the other she grabbed the counter top and hauled herself up. The two zombies came at her, mouths snarling, their brows drawn into Vs above their chalky eyes. All signs of the slow shuffling creatures they were seconds ago had vanished. Now they were agile. Were their slow movements just a ruse? Had they simply been waiting for a command to run? “Stop!” Rhonda said, holding up the necklace.

They stopped. They roared. They shook with rage.

A ceramic bowl was in the dish rack next to the sink. She grabbed it and threw it at the zombies, catching one in the head. It shattered and a shard struck home, piercing the creature’s cheek. The creature did not seem to notice. From the silverware drawer she took a knife, held it in front of her next to the necklace.

“So you believe.” It was Pierre, pushing his way between the zombies to stand in front of her. “Dat is good. To believe make it easier for de loa.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I don’t believe shit except that my superiors know who you are and are gonna kill you.”

“I doubt dat, mademoiselle. They do not chase men like me. Maybe some of my acquaintances, but not me.”

“They will now.”

“Lies. All lies. But no matter, for you believe de real truth. The truth of what awaits you. So hard to make believers see what be there always. Let me take dis.” He reached out and snatched the necklace, held it up in front of his eyes and laughed. “Poorly made, but I see Louis’ powers be stronger than I’d thought. I wonder why you not hear my call before. Had I de tools at my disposal I would reverse the spell. But dis work as well.” He dropped it down the garbage disposal in the sink and flipped the switch on the wall. The shells popped and cracked, the sink shook slightly at the effort of breaking it all down. It was the sound of hope dying.

The two zombies came closer, their mouths still gaping, their tongues flicking. What they wanted was a command, but Pierre merely stood in front of Rhonda smiling.

“And now...” he said, reaching into his shirt pocket and removing a small burlap sack held shut with a bit of twine. He untied it, letting the sack fall loose. Inside was a white powder, similar to what had been on the faces of the creatures Rhonda had seen in the city. Just like what had been blown in her face yesterday. She knew it was all the same. “To resume,” he said, finishing his thought.

The knife came up quickly, caught her in the belly. Her scream cut the air, but she had no way of knowing if it was heard outside. This being a safe house, the glass was surely bulletproof, the walls reinforced. And besides, the screaming made the pain worse so she stopped.

Pierre stepped aside and let her pass, her face slack with shock and disbelief. It was really happening. She was really going to be murdered. As she pushed past the zombies, she looked into their blank stares, prayed to God it would not end for her this way.

“No no no no,” she gurgled, now in the living room, holding the wet hole in her belly. She reached for the front door again. I need to call Dan, she thought. I need a

doctor. But she didn't get the door open because the two zombies charged her and tackled her to the floor. "Hold de bitch down!" came Pierre's voice.

A strange sensation bloomed in her stomach, the feeling of her life rushing out through the deep stab wound. Blood stained the front of her shirt, running down into her jeans, making everything slick and warm. Suddenly she was on her back, the faces of two dead men growling over her. Past their decaying heads she saw Pierre, bobbing his hand up and down. Then he bent down, turned his hand over, and let the powder from the bag sprinkle down into her eyes. The world went white.

Chapter 10.

Every television and computer in the agency's offices was tuned to the media coverage of the New York City slayings. First a suicide bombing that killed fourteen and wounded thirty more, then a shooting spree that left over twenty dead. Witnesses were spouting stories of bloodied men walking the streets with guns, some of them with open chest cavities. The media was having a field day with their bullshit speculations: a new kind of enemy agent that engaged in sadistic rituals before unleashing whatever wave of terror it saw fit. Not just Middle Eastern, but from Africa, South America, maybe even Canada. America will never be the same, they said.

"Nice," Dan replied, "spread xenophobia, you idiots. You're gonna get yourselves shot. Morons."

It was only going to get worse from here on out, at least until they figured out who was doing all of this. If it was this Pierre, in league with Iran and Chile and God knew who else, they had to find him quickly. One agent had been killed, his neck slit, though the company had already put a lid on it. On the plus side, the victim, Ben, was unmarried and had no kids, no one who might go screaming to the media. Maybe the guy had a girlfriend or mother he kept in touch with, but they wouldn't call for a day or two. When that happened, it was just a matter of explaining to them that this was official business and they'd be in trouble if they spoke about it. There was no use letting the news report that some terrorists were targeting government agents.

The phone rang. He turned the volume down on the television. "Yeah."

"It's me. Rhonda."

"Did you land yet?"

"Yeah, we're taxiing now. Dan, I was attacked...again."

"Are you okay?" She sounded weak, her voice gruff and strained.

"I've been stabbed, but I bandaged myself up. I'm okay for now. Did you locate Plante?"

"No, not yet. I left messages at the hospitals and we've got men out searching for him. All those bodies, he may have been mislabeled. Fucking emergency response teams don't have training for this kind of thing, I don't care what FEMA says."

"Dan, I think we may have been compromised."

"How so?"

"I can't explain over the phone. I need to talk to you in private. Can you meet me somewhere?"

"Sure, where?"

“I don’t know. Wild guess here, but I’m assuming we have some kind of safe house near the offices?”

They did, but Rhonda wasn’t supposed to know where they were. In fact, he didn’t even know where they all were. “I’ll have to run it by my superiors.”

“That’s fine. They’ll probably want to come see what I have to show them.”

“Okay. Hang on.” He put her on hold and dialed Jim’s office and explained the situation. Jim gave him an address and a time. Dan clicked back over, gave Rhonda the address. She repeated it slowly, writing it down somewhere. Her voice seemed to be getting worse. How badly was she hurt? “Was it Pierre who got you?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“We’re gonna find him. Don’t worry. This is off the record, but we were able to get some information from our friends in Chile. This Pierre is a drug dealer of sorts, has a number of alleged murders under his belt. Quayarah and Fereza swear he’s their ticket to tackling Yankee Imperialism...their words. I don’t know who they think they’re dealing with, but no drug dealer gets away with this kind of shit in America. He’ll be strung up by his balls in a day or two. Mark my words.”

“I hope so. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Glad to have you back. You did good. I’ll be talking to my superiors about you when this is all done.”

“Thanks, Dan.” She hung up.

Dan leaned back in his chair, looked at the television again. The scene showed a collection of body bags on the street, blood thick and brown around them. “Where are you Pierre? And where the fuck did you come from?”

The safe house was actually a condo out past American University. Dan parked the car outside and turned to Jim, who was riding shotgun. “Place is a shithole.”

“That’s the idea. But it’s impenetrable.”

“I could get inside,” said the man in the back seat.

Dan glanced in the rear view mirror, saw the white-haired man staring back at him. The military outfit had been replaced with a simple black sweater and black suit pants, which somehow seemed more impressive; a man who wore all black was a man with secrets. His name was Hugh Brenon, the agency’s own superhero—or as close as they had to one. If reports were to be believed, Brenon had overseen some of the more impressive black ops in recent years, a few of which were staged out of Camp Warhorse along the Iranian border. Infiltrating enemy strongholds and gathering information on enemy positions was his forte. The man did not cry over spilled blood, and he’d spilled plenty of it himself. Twenty years of that type of work—Dan knew the blackness in the man’s eyes had been hard earned, but what scared him the most was that officially, Brenon did not exist.

“Where’s our girl?” Jim asked.

“Don’t know,” Dan replied. “Let’s wait inside before people get nosey and call the cops on us or something.”

All three got out of the car and made their way up the steps to the condo. Jim slipped the key into the deadbolt, jiggled it, looked concerned. “It’s unlocked.”

“How?” Brenon asked. It was more of a command than a question.

“Don’t know.”

The door was heavy metal, painted to look like your average wooden entryway. Jim pushed it open and all three watched the way it swung wide with a slant. They stepped inside and Brenon ran his hands over the hinged side of the door, humming in contemplation. The hinges were hidden inside the metal, and the metal was warped. “Someone broke it,” he said.

Jim and Brenon removed their weapons (Brenon’s came out of nowhere). Dan followed a few steps behind as they slowly moved toward the living area. The blinds were down, the lights off, a small clock on an end table clicking solemnly. Daylight might have seeped through and provided enough light to see, but night had already fallen. The room was dark with vague shapes in various shades of black, any of which could be an enemy in waiting. Despite the mild weather outside, the room felt far colder than it should be. There was a definite smell, like gym socks that hadn’t been washed in weeks.

“Dan?” It was Rhonda, stepping out from the adjacent bedroom. She stopped in the darkness of the shadows, silhouetted against the wall.

“Rhonda,” Dan said. “Shit, you scared us.”

“I almost shot you, miss,” Jim said.

“I appreciate you not doing it, Uncle Sam.”

“Uncle Sam? What’s that mean?”

“Nothing,” she said, her speech heavy with phlegm. “I see you brought the whole gang.”

There’s something wrong here, Dan thought as Rhonda moved into the middle of the room, his eyes beginning to adjust to the gloom. The way she was speaking, she sounded drunk, or sick, or both. He could see her mouth moving, even when she wasn’t speaking, as if she couldn’t control her jaw. “Rhonda, you don’t look good, let me see where you’re hurt.”

“No! Stay there!” she roared.

Spittle hit Dan in the face, stopping him short. Yes, definitely wrong, he thought. This was not the Rhonda he knew. But then, maybe she was just in shock. Being attacked twice in two days could certainly do that to a person, especially if she was dealing with a knife wound. “Fine. Let’s turn the lights on, sit down. You can tell us what you know.”

“The lights don’t work,” she rasped, her body swaying slightly. “And what I know is that the loa are angry.”

“Who’s that?” asked Jim. “The Iranians? Some new cartel?”

“Not quite,” she said.

“I’m opening the blinds,” Brenon finally said. Rhonda shouted no again but he ignored her and pulled the drawstring, revealing bulletproof glass and letting in the moonlight. Dan was the first to really see her face, and took a step back. Jim lowered his gun, said, “My God.” Brenon turned to see what the matter was, took in Rhonda’s appearance, but said nothing. The man was a stone.

“Rhonda,” Dan said, “I’m calling an ambulance.”

She drew a large steak knife from behind her, held it out straight. “Don’t move.” With spaghetti legs, she shuffled further into the room, the moonlight now shining heavy on her features. Her eyes were dry and clouded over, a smattering of dirt and blood

splotted her face. For a moment, Dan felt like he was standing on a boat in rough seas, nausea fighting to overtake him. He tore his eyes from hers and noticed a large bruise, like a slice of eggplant, on her right cheek and numerous sores, like tiny anthills around her nose and mouth. White powder coated all of it.

“What the...” Dan said. “How...”

“Put the knife down, missy,” Jim said, raising his gun again. “I can see you’re pissed off, but no need to go all PMS on us. We want to help you.”

“No,” she hissed, “you want what I know. And what I know is that Bondye’s time has come. Soon, all the world will walk in his everlasting shadow. And America, the evil snake, will be no more.”

“Fuck this shit,” Brenon said, and stormed toward her, raising his gun. In a flash, she whipped the knife at him. It flew through the air, too quickly for him to duck; his reflexes were not what they used to be. It slammed into his neck, slicing through the Adam’s apple, and stuck out the back. With a gurgle, he fell backwards, his legs kicking, his arms reaching for the blade.

“Rhonda!” Dan yelled. But she wasn’t listening anymore, she was charging Jim, who fired a shot that caught her in the chest. All Dan could think was that this was all wrong. His superiors should not be shooting at Rhonda. Rhonda did not kill people—let alone have the skills to throw a knife like that.

He had to get out, to get help. If Pierre had drugged her, there was no telling what secrets she had revealed. Cuban analyst or not, she had access to sensitive information, may have overheard things in the offices that shouldn’t have been said. Loose lips and all that.

She tackled Jim to the ground, apparently unconcerned or unaware that she’d been shot. With a snarl she bit down on Jim’s neck, thrashed back and forth like a dog with a chew toy, and then yanked back, taking a chunk of carotid artery with her. Jim fired again, a wild shot that hit the ceiling.

Finding his legs, Dan turned to make for the front door, ran smack into another person, a large man whose shadow reached higher than the lintel. He shoved off the man and fell onto the couch, knowing there had to be a gun nearby. On the floor next to him, Jim was screaming bloody murder while Rhonda dug her claws into his chest, burrowing into his flesh, trying to wiggle her fingers past his ribcage.

Brenon’s gun was still in his hand. Jim’s gun was under his body. There was nothing closer that could be used as a weapon, except for Dan’s own fists. He balled them up, knowing that he was a poor fighter. “Stop right there.”

The man stepped closer, and Dan could make out who it was. “Plante?”

Plante moaned, a low humming that could be heard over Jim’s screams of pain. On rickety legs, the agent moved closer, reached out and grabbed Dan’s leg, began to yank him toward the arm of the couch. His face was worse than Rhonda’s; the pustules and eyes were the same, but a long gash began at his forehead and ran down the center of his face, splitting his nose clean in half, and ending with a giant open wound near his lips that looked like a severe cleft palette.

As Dan tried to find words for what was happening, a new voice broke into the symphony of moans and wails. Like sandpaper, it rubbed at the walls of the room, with enough dark vibration to strip the paint. “Easy, my friends. Do not ruin dem too much. Perception be de skeleton key dat makes us invisible.” From the shadows of the bedroom,

a new figure emerged. Tall, gaunt, surrounded by an aura as dark as his ebony skin and black clothing. About the only thing Dan could make out for sure was the shape of a large sun hat.

Mystery Man. Jean Pierre. Holding what looked like a large machete.

“Up,” Pierre commanded, and Rhonda stood up from where she’d been tearing a hole into Jim’s chest. The man was dead. Blood had pumped vigorously from his exposed carotid artery, coating his face, and his chest was torn in jagged strips from Rhonda’s clawing. She shuffled over to Pierre’s side and stood next to him. “Leave him,” he said to Plante, and the thing with the gash in its face let go and moved away.

On the couch, Dan shivered. He could see the wound in Rhonda’s gut now, the hole in her shirt that revealed her insides. It didn’t take a doctor to know both she and Plante should be dead. But somehow they weren’t. It didn’t make sense, just like Rhonda had suggested earlier.

“You can’t do this,” Dan said, glancing toward Brenon and gauging how quickly he could dive for the gun.

“Oh, but I can, Mr. Yauch,” Pierre said. “Yes, I know you name. Mademoiselle tell me. And this...” He waved his arms around the room. “It be written in the heavens, and there be no way to fight it. The trail was done blazed long ago when de spirits ruled supreme.”

Can I get to the gun, Dan wondered. And if I can, will they die? Will Pierre die? Can I make it to the door and take off in the car?

As if in answer, Pierre called out, “block de door please,” and two more figures moved out of the shadows of the kitchen. Each one wore a pilot’s uniform, and each one had a slice across its neck. They stood at the end of the couch, blocking access to the outside world. “My army,” Pierre said, introducing the men. “More where dey came from. Once yours, now mine. It be a new world order, yes? You enemies want my aid, and now I show dem how it work.” He laughed, a sound so hollow Dan thought he could crawl down it and die.

“They can fly planes?” he asked.

“No. But I do. I do a lot of tings, Mr. Yauch. Master o’ trades, as dey say.”

“I work for the CIA. Do you have any idea—”

“Of course I do. Dat be de whole point, is it not?” Pierre hefted the machete, handed it to Rhonda. She took the blade and stared at it for a second, mesmerized by the dark stains on it.

“Rhonda, if you can hear me, you gotta wake up,” Dan said.

Pierre threw his head back and let out a torrent of laughter. “Mr. Yauch, she no wake up again. There no ti bon ange left, see? Just my voice in her head. Forever and ever. So de loa command. And now, time to go.” He nodded to the two dead pilots. “Please, restrain dis man.”

With a jolt, Dan leapt up and tried to run through the creatures, but they hooked their arms around him and brought him to his knees. With everything he had, he let out a screaming plea for help, but it was answered only with urgent moans.

“Dear girl,” Pierre said, giving Rhonda a push on her shoulder. “Do show Mr. Yauch why we be here.” As Rhonda stepped toward Dan, the recent gunshot in her chest still fresh with the stench of burned flesh, Pierre pulled a small bag from his shirt pocket. He dipped his hand inside and pulled out a tiny mountain of white powder—it looked

blue in the moonlight, like crushed sapphires. “So many important men in one room. The places we will go, no?”

“Please, Rhonda,” Dan said, struggling against the creatures’ strong hands. Their fingers dug into his arms and neck, rendering him immobile.

“For the loa,” Rhonda wheezed, her dead eyes staring into his. “For Bondye.”

Beyond her, Pierre began sprinkling the powder into Jim’s and Brenon’s faces, chanting as he went, looking heavenward and back to his newest recruits, speaking in tongues.

He stopped, looked at Dan and said, “Such high clearance men. I believe we go see your president now. I have promises to keep, yes? America, a new day for all.” He laughed.

It seemed so crazy, Dan thought. Yet, they’d been fooled as easily as the secret service would be. He almost wanted to laugh, but his quivering lips kept him from it. He was pretty sure he could hear Jim moaning now, could see the man’s legs twitching. It couldn’t be, but it was: he was coming back to life. They’d all be coming back to life, somehow, so they could help end everyone else’s. So many days analyzing the globe, fleshing out terrorists, locating enemies, always asking, how do you defeat an enemy that wants to die? Now, he had to ask a different question: how do you defeat an enemy that *can’t* die?

You don’t.

With a graceful swing, the machete slashed across his belly, spilling his insides onto his own lap. They were warm.

THE END.

Word of mouth is crucial for any author to succeed. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. Even a couple sentences can make a world of difference and is very much appreciated. Thank you for reading!

About the Author

Ryan Thomas works as an editor in San Diego, California. You can usually find him in the bars on the weekends playing with his band. When he is not writing or rocking out, he is at home with his wife and two dogs watching really bad B-movies. Visit him online at www.ryancthomas.com

Other books by Ryan C. Thomas:

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