



The coming of dark.

Gary Martin

THE COMING OF DARK.

Book 1 of the dark series.

BY

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THE DOORWAY NOVELLAS:

Other world: Book 1
Night Stalkers: Book 2
The Wizard: Book 3
The doorway trilogy (All 3 novellas).

The end of the track: a ghost story.

NOVELS:

The dark series:

The coming of dark
The dark strain

The Entity: Science fiction/horror
The Nexus

Christian

The old man and the girl

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CHAPTER 1

He had a bad feeling about this. His informant had called him no more than forty minutes ago to tell him that the meeting place had been changed to the old, defunct Keiser plant. Two questions came to mind almost at once. Why the change? Why the Keiser plant?

Troy Dance was thirty-one years old. He had been a cop for nine years, and a detective for the last three years. During that time he had learned to be suspicious of any sudden change in a situation like this.

Why the Keiser plant?

The Keiser plant had once been a thriving cotton mill providing most of the financial backbone for the small town of Terretton, Georgia. That was back before it had become a suburb of Atlanta. Back then, just as the Vietnam conflict was ending, Terretton boasted that they were the fastest growing city in the south.

The mill had lasted nearly twenty years. It finally went bust due to both its inability to keep up with foreign competition and some bad investments made by the executive board. The town's growth turned to a dribble after that and didn't improve much as the town staggered its way into the present day.

The plant now stood as a colossal eyesore of rusted metal, crumbling faded brick, and rotting wooden structures. The asphalt roads that cut around and between the several small and larger buildings were cracked and potholed.

Troy had crept into the main building through one of the rear doors that had once led to a line of offices. He had come into a huge open space that looked to be about two hundred feet wide by three hundred feet long. The ceilings were a good thirty feet high. Old dust-covered lights hung down by cord and chain, like rows of hanging skeletons. Most of the floor was empty. The machines that had once filled the void had long been taken away. All that was left were a few metal pipes stubbed several inches out of the concrete slab, and a few odd pieces of machinery scattered about the floor like broken bones.

He could hear voices rumbling through the plant even before he spotted them at the opposite end of the building. It was evening and the last light of day showed through broken window frames lined with jagged, yellow glass. The insipid light bathed the seven men in its glow, and a little beyond, but hadn't the strength to reach much further. The rest of the enormous room sat in nearly total darkness.

He had to get closer, maybe cut the distance in half. If he had had more time he could have set up some decent surveillance equipment to catch every movement, word, or grunt. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. So now the best he could do was to record them from a distance with a ten-year-old camcorder that he had at the house and hope for the best. It had been either that or his cell phone.

Troy inched closer, moving softly across the pitch-black floor. Before coming here, along with the video camera, he had also taken a small flashlight that he had slipped into his right jacket pocket realizing that it would be dark when he headed back to his car. He had his Glock 9mm as well. It was tucked away in his shoulder holster in case the need should arise. Right now, however, he was content to blend in with the shadows and stay invisible.

He knew what he was doing wasn't quite legal, but he couldn't let this opportunity to put away some very despicable criminals pass him by. He would think of something later to make this appear legal, even if it meant discarding half of the evidence he would gather, and of course, lying through his teeth.

He stopped in the darkness close enough to the men ahead of him that he could make out the words that were being spoken. He pointed the camera in their direction and began to film.

“While we’re waiting there’s a little unpleasant business we need to dispense with.” It was Richard (Rock) Duffy speaking. He was the reputed crime boss of the Atlanta, Georgia area. He had been implicated in a host of criminal acts from drug trafficking to murder. It was believed that he had ordered several hits upon competitors and others that were causing him trouble. So far evidence wasn’t significant enough to indict on anything but minor charges.

Not only was Rock an intimidating criminal figure, but his stature was also quite imposing. He was a big man. He stood a few inches over six feet and weighed a good two hundred fifty pounds, distributed across broad shoulders and a barrel-like chest. When he spoke it was with the authority of both voice and body.

Troy noted the six men standing around close to Rock. They were bullshitting and laughing like this was some kind of high school field trip. Four of the men he only recognized from mug shots. The other two he had arrested at one time or another. One of those two men he had arrested was his informant, a thin, weasel of a man named Lonnie Laliah.

“Shut the hell up!” Rock suddenly yelled.

The men quickly silenced, some of them cutting their words off in midsentence.

“That’s better,” Rock said. He looked around at the men gathered before him. “It seems we have a ‘snitch’ among us.” He squeezed out the word ‘snitch’ as if it were a bitter taste in his mouth.

The men began looking around at each other.

Troy swallowed hard. Oh, God had Lonnie been made?!

Rock slid out a long, black pistol that had been tucked into his belt. For a moment he stared off into the darkness, his eyes seeming to square off with the camera as if he were looking directly at Troy.

Troy could see Lonnie at the far right corner of his lens. He appeared to be composed enough, not shaken by Rock’s words. If Rock were simply trying to draw someone out, to elicit a confession, Lonnie wasn’t going for it.

Rock suddenly whipped around swinging the gun in an arc. In an instant, the gun was pointing at Lonnie.

“Wha ... what are you doing?” Lonnie stammered.

“I got some disturbing news a while back that you were seen in some hole-in-the-wall bar talking to a detective.”

“That’s crazy!” Lonnie exclaimed. “I don’t even know any detectives. Whoever said that is lying their ass off.”

“I had my doubts when I was first told of this. I said this can’t be true. My buddy Lonnie is as loyal as they come. But, just to be sure I hired me a tech guy to go through your smartphone and computer one day when you were passed out from too much partying. I had to be sure you were who you were portraying yourself to be.” He exhaled loudly and shook his head. “You can imagine how disappointed I was when I got the results. You really should have done a better job deleting these messages you sent out.”

“There’s got to be some mistake, Rock. I don’t know what you found, but...”

“So, you never had any communication with a Detective Dantan?”

“No. Never heard of him. I swear. You got to believe me.”

“My tech guy seems to be pretty sure of what he found. Can you explain this discrepancy?”

"I don't know. Maybe he was setting me up." Lonnie shook his head viciously. "I don't know," he whined. He began to fidget with his hands and alternate his weight from one leg to the other. Rock didn't respond. He simply stared at him and shifted his gun slightly to point at the center of his chest. "I don't know," he pleaded. "I swear, damn it, I've never met or spoken to no Detective Dance or any other cop."

"I said Detective Dantan."

"Wha... What?"

"Dantan, not Dance."

"Well ... I... It sounded like you said Dance."

"This is why I canceled that drug deal without telling anyone and decided on this place to meet at the last minute. I wanted to make sure you couldn't get a message out."

"I wouldn't ..."

Rock fired once. The blast of the gun reverberated through the empty building like an explosion. Lonnie was thrust backward as though he had been slugged with a baseball bat. His upper back hit flat on the concrete floor with a heavy thud, and even before his body settled, a gout of blood had begun to seep from his back and then across his chest where the bullet had penetrated the flesh. Lonnie made a short, gurgling groan. He stared vacuously up at the vastness of the high beamed ceiling. His mouth opened and closed like a dying fish as he gasped for a swallow of air that wouldn't come.

"That's a one bullet sin," Rock said. "If you survive that then all is forgiven."

Troy began to back up, still aiming the camera at the fallen body of Lonnie. He was hit with a deluge of emotions: fear, anger, confusion, remorse, sadness. He hated to admit it but he had begun to like Lonnie a bit. Not a lot. He was still scum. Lonnie had only agreed to become an informant to keep from serving some hard time himself. Yet, he couldn't help but feel sad that the man had lost his life.

Another emotion quickly surfaced when he realized what this meant. It meant that instead of evidence for drug trafficking he now had hard evidence for murder. With his testimony and the video, he should be able to put away Rock for the rest of his life.

Troy continued to back up in the stark darkness when his right foot came down on a short length of loose pipe. The conduit, about one inch thick, rolled backward taking Troy's foot with it. He yelped as his legs spread into a split and he tumbled to his left. He grunted as his left shoulder slammed into the concrete floor. The camcorder smashed into the floor beside him clattering with the discord of noises that rebounded through the large, old building. At the same time, the pipe rattled backward rolling and spinning for several feet before finally settling in the solid darkness of the dilapidated mill.

For a moment he was dazed. He heard the commotion off in front of him, but the voices seemed to be completely disconnected from him, as though they were coming from another dimension. Then, in the next moment, his senses began to fall together very quickly.

"Get whoever the hell that is!" Rock was shouting.

They were running at him. At least two of them had flashlights and were sweeping the beams across the floor. The light was almost to him.

He didn't bother to get up. There was no time to make a run for it. Besides, on the floor, he was a smaller target, a little harder to spot. He decided his best chance to escape was to crawl to the nearest wall and hope that he could surreptitiously disappear from the building.

He was halfway to the wall when his attackers reached the scene of his broken recorder. He didn't pause. He continued his steady creeping across the remaining

thirty feet of floor hoping that his shuffling wouldn't be heard above their commotion. Hoping that he wouldn't be shot in the back like an animal.

Crawling across the floor seemed to be an interminable task, and when he did finally make it he found himself out of breath. It was not so much the distance as the sheer fear and adrenaline that was rushing through his body.

He turned around into a squatting position placing his back against the block wall. He slipped the Glock from his shoulder holster and held it tightly in his right hand. He looked about, not able to see much, but able to make out the dim outline of a door along the wall off to his left not many feet from him. He figured this would be his way out.

He eyed the sweeping beams of light across the floor and the darkened forms behind them. The lights had diverged from their single point. Some of the men had figured that Troy had slipped into the dilapidated office area while the other men seemed to feel that he was still somewhere across the large expanse of open floor.

He decided to head for the door. He had no idea what it opened up to, but it was in the opposite direction of where the men seemed to be heading, and if he stayed where he was he had no doubt that he would eventually be found. He felt that through that door was the only true choice that he had.

He began to edge along the wall trying to be as small and as quiet as possible. Behind him, a beam of light began to angle toward him. He was unaware of it until mere seconds later when a spray of light hit him just as he reached the front of the door.

"Stop right there, chicken shit!" the man behind the flashlight demanded.

Troy, who was still on hands and knees, turned abruptly to face the light. When he did something spooked the man with the flashlight. Perhaps it was the sight of the gun sandwiched between Troy's right hand and the concrete floor. Whatever it was the man responded with gunfire.

The first couple of shots hit the thick wooden door missing Troy's head by only a few inches. He fell onto his back and brought his gun up. Concrete exploded in front of him as a round of bullets burst into the floor. Pieces of shattered concrete and fine white dust sprayed over his face. He was nearly blinded and could only make out the stream of light that bounced around him as the gunman shifted about to keep from getting hit by expected return fire. Troy was not about to disappoint him and began shooting at the light hoping to hit whoever was behind it. Someone howled suddenly and Troy figured that he had hit someone. Then at once a haphazard round of shots rattled the door behind him and peppered the concrete floor in front of him. One stray bullet found its mark and sunk into his right thigh. He stifled a yell of pain and nearly dropped his gun.

The shelling abruptly seized and the beam of light fell away as if in slow motion. The flashlight hit the floor and rolled backward creating crisscrossing circles of white light.

One or more of his bullets had hit his attacker. Relief washed over him like a balmy breeze. But the relief was short-lived. Others were shouting and running towards him.

He pushed himself to his feet and suddenly cried out as a jolt of pain gripped his leg. He almost came back down both from the excruciating pain and a wave of dizziness that immediately followed. He was forced to hold onto the doorknob for precious moments until he felt he was steady enough to push forward without spilling onto the floor.

He was sure that they were about to catch up to him. The gunfight had seemed an eternity to him but had lasted less than a minute.

At last, he opened the door and pushed through. He paused as the door settled. He was afraid to move. The room was solid black. He couldn't tell what was ahead of him. For all, he knew he could be standing in front of a bottomless pit, or a brick wall.

He remembered the small flashlight in his right coat pocket. He quickly withdrew it and flipped it on in front of him.

He was in a stairwell. A set of battered plank-like steps led upward. By taking the stairs he could be effectively painting himself into a corner, but he couldn't see that he had any other choice. To go back out the door he had just come through would certainly be suicide.

He hobbled up the stairs, groaning at the stabs of pain that came with each step. Sweat poured across his forehead and he was shaking somewhat. He wondered if he would have the strength to finish the climb.

He made it to the stairway landing where the stairs bent to a ninety-degree angle to continue upward when someone with a light in hand abruptly burst through the door. Troy immediately dropped into a squat and killed his light. Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough, for the person saw him and dashed underneath the open stairs dousing his light as he did.

He expected his assailant to start shooting up through the wooden steps any second, but it didn't happen. Now he wondered if his attacker had seen him. Or, maybe he had indeed seen him, but so briefly that he hadn't noted exactly what part of the stairs he was on. Maybe his attacker was afraid to randomly start shooting, afraid that Troy would not be where he thought he was. In that event, he would be giving away his location, and Troy could have a bead on him.

Troy couldn't go up. He might be able to move soundlessly up a few steps but climbing to the top without some slight squeak of the old steps would be nearly impossible.

He had another idea.

He turned and crawled down two steps head first as softly as he was able to, clenching his teeth at the agony that each movement brought to his injured leg. The staircase was open. There was no backing between the steps. His eyesight was now in line with the underside of the stairs. If he could see, but the blackness was complete. In his right hand, he readied the gun, and in his left hand, he leveled the flashlight to a spot between the steps underneath the landing. He was in an awkward position, lying on the steps feeling as if he were upside down, but he felt he needed to go on the offensive and this was the only practical way he knew.

At once he flipped on his flashlight. The bright beam caught the left side of a man crouching in the corner. Instantly, before the man had time to react Troy shifted the light to catch the eyes of the startled man successfully blinding him. Troy fired twice.

The man was just able to swing his arm up and get off a single shot of his own as he fell back against the wall. He slid to the floor leaving a line of his life's blood trailing him against the block wall.

Troy was hit in his left arm by a terrible jolt that knocked him onto his side. At the same time, he lost control of the flashlight and it went bounding down the stairs. He yelled out in pain unable to stop himself.

He half expected to die right there on the spot, either from the last shot he received or from the gun of another one of Rock's goons bursting through the door to finish him off.

He fought his way back up to the landing and into a sitting position. It felt as if a dull razor was running the length of his leg and he had to fight off the urge to scream.

He clenched his teeth once again and gave himself a few quick seconds for the torment to ebb somewhat. On the other end, his left arm didn't hurt at all. It felt more like a tangled piece of meat hanging from his shoulder.

As he began crawling upward toward the top of the stairs the door below him opened again. He heard the patter of feet, but couldn't tell how many people had come through. They weren't using their flashlights, and they whispered. Their voices were far too faint for him to make out any words. Not that it would help him. He continued to crawl not daring to stop. He figured his odds of survival would be a lot better out of the stairwell.

He made it to the top of the landing when he heard the first faint groan from the old stairs. Other faint groans soon followed.

He forced himself to stand up fighting against the flash of pain. He tottered and reached out his right hand to catch himself against the door frame. He was badly winded. He gasped, sucking in gulps of needed air. He knew he was too loud but couldn't control himself. His lungs were overruling his mind's command to keep quiet.

He grabbed the doorknob and pulled the door open, no longer concerned about the noise it made. He was sure his jagged breaths had already given him away. His best bet was to get on the other side of the door as quickly as possible.

Once inside he closed the door. This room was as dark as the inside of a casket. He could see no faint trace of light sifting through window panes, or slipping through cracks in the walls or ceilings.

Since he had lost his flashlight he had to inch his way across the floor, his right hand feeling for the path. He had gone nearly twenty feet when his hand touched something hard, metallic. He quickly felt about the object. It was a 55-gallon drum. The lid was off and from its weight, it appeared to be empty. He started to step around it when he heard the door behind him begin to open.

He ducked, attempting to get out of sight behind the barrel. When he started down his leg buckled underneath him and he fell forward hitting another drum in front of him that he hadn't realized was there. That drum, which seemed to be a little less than empty, tipped over to one side and landed with a thud. Troy fell to the side of it, managing to catch the brunt of his fall with his right arm keeping his face from smashing into the floor. Upon impact, the Glock had been knocked loose and slid across the floor into the darkness.

A flashlight beam cut across Troy just as he was falling. Another man, adjacent to the one with the flashlight, fired first, blowing a hole in the empty barrel that Troy had tried to duck behind.

This last fall had hurt him. He didn't know if he could go on. His body was begging him to quit. He was tired, beaten. His strength was fading. He was injured, outnumbered. He no longer had a weapon. It didn't seem worth trying, anymore. All the odds were against him. Still, he couldn't just quit. It wasn't in his nature.

He pushed off, rolling over the floor hoping to find cover. Hoping desperately to find his weapon in this dark, dungeon of a room.

Another shot exploded in front of him where he had lain just a second ago. With the flashlight shining at him he could see another drum just to the side of him. He reached out to pull it down in front of him. Before he could act another shot rang out hitting him in the left leg just above the knee. He wailed for just a moment, then with all his remaining strength he pushed himself onto his stomach. He tried to worm himself forward, but there was nothing left. He was totally drained.

He heard a noise then, somewhere beyond his gasping breath, and the cruel laughter of his attackers. Footfalls on dilapidated wooden steps. At the time he hadn't

wondered how he could have heard such relatively quiet things. It was just another sound that had come to him.

Yet another shot rang out. This one sunk into his lower back.

He groaned the voice seemed to come from very deep inside of him like a vast echoing from a dark deserted cave. At that point, his whole body began to shut down. At once he felt akin to a fat, slimy slug.

“Freeze!” The words came to him from space. People were moving about. He could see them. No. Not with his eyes. But he could see them. Blurs. Or, ghosts, jumping about, shouting, falling.

A large, round face looked down at him. The lips moved, but he couldn't hear the words. The face moved away. Further. Further. He could see the face vanishing in a pool of black fog. Then the blackness descended and suddenly engulfed him.

CHAPTER 2

Trina Dance sat stiffly erect in the dull brown, cloth-covered armchair staring blindly at a rustic picture on the wall of an old farmhouse set amid green grass and blue skies. Her big brown eyes were a glistening pool, the remnants of a flood of tears that had fallen earlier.

She absently swiped back a few wayward strands of dark hair from off her forehead with a slender hand. She closed her eyes and in her mind, she prayed once again, as she had done many times that evening that he wouldn't die.

She wasn't sure how long she had been in the waiting room. It seemed an eternity. She opened her eyes and looked at the clock on the wall across from her. It had been six hours ago that Tommy had come by to tell her the tragic news that Troy had been shot and was in serious condition. He had driven her to the hospital because she was in no condition to drive. There he stayed along with her.

Detective Tommy Waters sat beside her. He was a light-skinned black man of thirty-five. His hair was neatly trimmed close to his head and an early gray had begun to set in around the edges of his ears. He was of medium height with a slightly muscular build. He was staring down at a People magazine, skimming the paragraphs, but his mind was barely registering what he had just read.

He had tried to console Trina as best he could, but it was very difficult. He had told her that Troy was strong and stubborn, and if anyone could pull through this he could. He had stopped short of telling her that everything would be all right because in the real world things didn't always work out. In the real world, people died.

The last he had heard was that Troy was walking a tightrope between life and death. He had lost a lot of blood. It was quite a miracle that he had made it this far. At the hospital, his heart had quit on him twice, and twice the doctors had gotten it started again. If it happened again Troy might not be so lucky.

Troy was a close friend and partner. The two had hit it off almost immediately two years ago when Troy was transferred to his department. They found that they had a lot in common, but enough differences to make their friendship interesting.

Trina had become a good friend too since her marriage to Troy about a year and a half ago. She was a very sweet and giving woman. He imagined that if Troy should die it would devastate her. In that event, she would need all the help he could give her.

A tall, lanky doctor, in green hospital smocks, stepped in front of them breaking both their lines of thought. He was an older man, mid-fifties, with a soft, slightly wrinkled face that showed genuine concern. He squatted down in front of Trina and next to Tommy.

"Hi," he said to Trina and only allowed himself a partial smile. "I'm Doctor Frank Mallory."

"Trina Dance," she said very softly, hesitantly, as if speaking her name out loud would make this whole terrible ordeal even more real, less of a chance that this whole thing could be some horrible nightmare.

The doctor looked at Tommy.

"Thomas Waters. Tommy is what most people call me."

"How is he, doctor?" Trina asked, getting impatient with the pleasantries.

"Well ... he's doing better, but his condition is still very fragile." His eyes met Trina's. "As you've probably already heard Troy has sustained several gunshot wounds."

Trina nodded.

“He was shot once in his left arm just above his elbow. The good news is that the bullet passed through the outer part of the arm causing only minimal soft tissue and muscular damage.”

“Good,” Trina whispered but didn’t smile. She could sense that the really bad news was forthcoming.

Tommy nodded. He too was expecting the worst news to follow but was hoping that it wouldn’t be too bad.

The doctor continued. “His left and right legs were also hit. These injuries were more extensive.”

“I know,” Trina said. “We were told about the surgery.”

“Yes. Anyway, the surgery went well, and barring any complications, I believe that over time his legs will heal up rather well.”

Trina breathed a pent-up sigh. “So, when can I see him?”

He frowned. “I’m afraid there’s more.” He watched her face suddenly drained of color. “Troy was shot in the back as well. He’s suffered some spinal cord injury.”

“Which means what?” her voice shrilled.

“Most likely there’s going to be some paralysis. To what extent we won’t know fully until he wakes up.”

The tears began to trickle down her face. “When do you think he’ll wake up?”

The doctor’s frown seemed to deepen. “We’re not sure. There’s no head injury to speak of, but there has been a substantial shock to his system.” He paused a moment searching for words that might offer her some comfort. “For Mister Dance to have overcome as much as he already has is a miracle in itself. So who knows what else he might overcome. We just have to wait for his mind to tell him to wake up, then go from there.”

“Anything we can do?” Tommy asked.

“You can pray. Other than that I suggest you both go home and get some rest. You two look exhausted.” He gave them his partial smile again. “Come back tomorrow. If anything happens in the meantime someone will call you.”

“Sure,” Tommy answered. Trina seemed unable to respond.

The doctor stood up. “I’ll talk to you two later.” He walked away.

“What do you think?” Tommy asked Trina. “Should we go home and get some rest?”

She didn’t answer right away. She wasn’t sure she was ready to leave. What if Troy were to wake up asking for her and she wasn’t around? She couldn’t bear the thought of not being there when he needed her.

“I can’t leave right now,” she said. “But you need to go. You have to go to work in the morning. As it is you’ll be lucky to get three hours of sleep.”

“You know what, I’ve got some sick days saved up and nothing is pressing on my schedule. Mind having me around a little while longer?”

“Of course, I don’t mind.” She took his hand in hers. “But are you sure you want to spend your time cooped up in a hospital?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

As she sunk back into her chair it felt as if a great boulder was sitting on top of her pressing her into her seat. She felt she couldn’t move. All she could do was sit here while her life crumbled before her eyes. She was deeply in love with Troy. He was the only man she had ever felt this way about. All her other romances seemed shallow in comparison. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing him. If he should die ... She closed her eyes not wanting to think about that possibility anymore. She was exhausted both physically and mentally, and somewhere between wake and sleep the story of how she and Troy had met began to slowly run through her mind.

It was a little over two years ago. She had stayed late at the Kompton and Blair marketing firm where she worked to put the finishing touches to the Henson Cookie account. Henson Cookie was only one of a dozen companies owned by Tacton Inc. a thriving corporation that was steadily moving across the United States and Canada, and recently into England and Japan. Henson Cookie was a fairly new subsidiary of Tacton and had not moved past the borders of Florida and Georgia, but it was the biggest account she had ever been handed. She was very anxious to make a good showing.

It was late evening when she finally left the office. Only the remnants of the sun's rays still colored the edge of the western sky in smears of orange and yellow.

She left the parking lot with a complacency settling on her like a warm, familiar blanket. The day had gone well. She felt like the proposals she had offered were top-notch. She planned on basking in her success all the way to her apartment. Unfortunately, her plans didn't work out the way she hoped.

About a mile down the road as she attempted to accelerate onto the entrance ramp of I-85 the car hesitated briefly before it seemed to catch up and increase speed. She made a mental note that if it continued to do so she would have it checked out during her lunch hour tomorrow. The engine light didn't come on, so she figured it couldn't be too serious.

The car cut out again about two miles down the expressway as she cruised along at sixty-five miles an hour. For a few moments, the gas pedal was of no use. The car quickly dropped its speed to fifty-five miles an hour before the accelerator kicked in again. The 'check engine' light flickered but didn't stay on. That angered her and scared her all at once. The night was rapidly approaching, and she feared the car would break down, especially in the middle of the expressway.

She directed the car into the slow lane in case the car should die on her. If it should quit on her she should be able to maneuver the car to the side of the highway while she still had momentum.

She reminded herself that it would only take a moment for her to make a phone call through her car. All she had to do was speak it and the call would go straight through to her auto club. That was reassuring. What troubled her was how long the wait would be for someone to come to her aid. She certainly didn't relish the thought of being stranded on the road after dark.

She went another fifteen miles without any trouble. She had begun to relax a little and push the thoughts of car trouble to the back of her mind. Then it happened. The engine died.

"Oh no," she groaned. She began pumping on the gas, hoping that the car hadn't completely shut down. Hoping that somehow she could force more gas into the engine, believing that the car was simply starving for fuel. It didn't help, however. As the momentum of the car began to dwindle she put on her hazard lights and began edging the vehicle off the interstate onto the shoulder. She frantically pumped the gas, but her expectation of success was almost spent. She began to think about the exit she had just passed and what was ahead of her. Behind her, just a little off the expressway was a convenience store with gas pumps out front and plenty of overhead lights. Across the street from the store was a McDonald's, and a little further down a Taco Bell. All with plenty of lights at the ready when the light of day had faded. They were all good places to wait for assistance. Unfortunately, they were about two miles back. She wasn't about to try to walk all that way by herself. The next exit ahead of her was a mile or less, but there weren't any retail businesses right off the interstate. Even if there were, it was still too far for her to walk alone. She would just have to wait it out in her automobile.

The car rolled to a stop. She shoved the shifter into park and cut off the radio thinking that somehow it may be at fault for the way the car was behaving. She began turning the key off, then on, repeatedly, desperately, hoping and praying, that the car would start. The vehicle rumbled a time or two as if it wanted to start, but it wouldn't turn over. "No, no, no," she whined. "Please don't ruin my good day, you stupid car." She punched the center of the steering wheel in frustration. She wanted to cry but wouldn't allow herself. It would do no good. She took a few seconds to compose herself, took a deep breath, and placed a call to the auto club.

The lady on the other end of the line was friendly enough but quickly told her that it was a busy night and that it may take thirty minutes or so for someone to get to her. Trina assured her that that was no problem, but inside of her, it felt as if her heart had dropped into her stomach.

It was still early she told herself. Traffic was still fairly brisk. She would be alright. No one would try to do anything to her with so many potential witnesses passing by.

She stared out her windshield at a steel-gray sky. The streaks of color provided by the sun had drained away as though they had been merely watercolors rinsed away from a painting. A nervous shiver coursed through her body. She reached over and locked the doors. She turned her ignition key to accessory, then turned on the radio. It instantly came to life which was a relief to her. The music and even the chatter of the deejays would have a somewhat calming effect on her and help to take her mind off her situation. She kept the volume on low, however, wanting to be alert to what was happening around her.

She thought of something else and began digging through her purse once more. Half a minute later she pulled out a can of pepper spray. She set it to the side next to her. That made her feel a little bit safer.

The music helped, but the minutes still ticked by painfully slow. She had to continuously tell herself to be patient and that help was on its way.

It was fifteen minutes later when headlights lit up her car from behind. She felt instant relief. "Thank God," she whispered. They had gotten to her earlier than expected. She would have been a nervous wreck if she had had to wait much longer.

The vehicle behind her moved up close to her bumper and stopped. She expected someone to come immediately to her door, but they didn't. She looked behind through the rear window, but the light blinded her and she couldn't see much.

At last, the engine of the vehicle behind her turned off. The lights remained on, however, continuing to cast a swath of illumination about her car. A shadowy figure emerged from the driver's side a moment later and began heading toward her.

She couldn't be sure, but she began to suspect that the vehicle behind her was not a wrecker. She quickly decided that she needed to get out of the car. For an instant, she could envision some lunatic breaking out the driver's side window to get to her, and her not being able to get out the passenger side door fast enough to make a getaway. She quickly slipped her cell phone out of her purse and dropped it into her pant pocket. She clutched the pepper spray in her right hand. She pushed the door open and stepped out just as the man was coming up to her door. She pressed the pepper spray against the backside of her thigh not wanting to reveal the fact that she was armed until it was necessary.

"Good evening, ma'am," the man said, stopping a few feet in front of her.

"Yes?" she said, her voice tremulous.

"You need some help?"

"No," she answered quickly. "My car quit on me, but someone from my auto club will be here any minute."

“Oh, okay.” He smiled at her then turned and began to walk away. She took a deep breath. She hadn’t realized that for the most part, she had been holding her breath during their exchange.

He walked around to the back of her car stopping about the center of her rear bumper. For a moment he seemed to be doing something with his hands, then he headed back around the car toward her.

Her hand tightened around the can of pepper spray. If he tried anything she would spray him in the eyes and dart away. By the time he recovered, she hoped that she could have either flagged down a car or found a place to hide.

He started to speak as he came up to her but was suddenly distracted. He noticed the pepper spray in her hand. She had inadvertently pulled it to the front of her leg mentally preparing herself to bring up the spray at the slightest provocation.

He took a single step toward her and then did something unexpected. He laughed. Not just a simple laugh, either. It was a booming, hearty, infectious laugh.

At first, it startled her. Then a smile crept across her face and she had to fight back her urge to laugh. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

He reached into his back pocket to get his wallet. She instantly raised the can of pepper spray in front of her. “Wait,” he said, putting one hand up. He took out his wallet and flipped it open revealing a policeman’s badge. “I’m a cop. You won’t need the mace.”

“Pepper spray,” she corrected. “And how do I know that’s real?”

He shrugged. “I guess you could call my station to confirm that I work there. My name is Troy Dance.” He stuck out his hand, but she wouldn’t shake it.

“What were you doing at the back of my car?”

“You had a little dirt on your tag and I was cleaning it off so I could read it better.”

“The car is not stolen,” she said defensively.

“I know I already ran the plates. What I was confirming was that your tag had expired.”

“Well ... eh, I know. I had planned on running by the courthouse at lunch earlier this week, but I’ve been so busy lately that it slipped my mind.”

“I understand, but we can’t have people abusing the system.” He said it with a wry smile. She couldn’t tell if he was serious.

“Take me to jail then. It doesn’t matter. This day has steadily depreciated from an all-time high to an all-time low.”

He smiled warmly. A smile, different from his previous ones. This one stirred her.

“I’d rather take you out to dinner.”

A smile inched across her face. For the first time, she really looked at the man in front of her. He was a little bit taller than her, maybe five-ten. He was lean and muscular with a physique that made her think of a gymnast or a dancer. His eyes were the color of a deep blue sky at the crux of a summer day. They were wide, alert, soft, and friendly. She found herself drawn to them more than anything else.

“I’m in a little bind right now,” she answered.

“I don’t mean right now. You give me your number and I’ll call you tomorrow to find out when is a good time.”

“Well ...” her voice trailed off. She still didn’t know him. He could be a psycho. But then again that could be true about the boy next door these days. She would, at least, call later on to make sure he was a cop. She found a pen and notepad in her purse and wrote down her name and number. She tore out the sheet of paper and handed it to him.

He looked down at the paper. "Trina," he said. "I like that name."

She smiled and started to answer when a wrecker appeared and slowly pulled in front of her.

"I'll hang around a little longer," he said. "Just to make sure there's no problem."

He was somewhat early for their date that Friday evening. He was imbued with nervous excitement that would not allow him to wait the last few minutes.

He showed up in smoky gray slacks, a navy blue dress shirt, and a tie with subtle blue and white designs. He had just bought them yesterday. He felt he needed to make a good impression, and the only other dress clothes he owned were the ones he wore when he worked at the station or went to court, and they were drab and plain. Off duty, he stuck with jeans and cheap shirts.

She greeted him at the door and invited him into her apartment.

"Nice place," he said as he stepped into her living room. Plush, gray carpet stretched across the living room floor and up to the threshold of the dining room and kitchen off to his left. Straight ahead of him near the end of the living room and close to the glass doors that opened up to the patio was a long sofa. Sitting just past the other end of the sofa was a brown leather recliner. The two pieces of furniture faced a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall that was off to his right. On the wall behind the sofa, which was to his left, was a large oil painting. In the painting, two young girls were standing on the beach looking out at the sea at a passing ship. Behind the girls was a lighthouse.

"Yeah, I like it. It's a little pricey, but I like the security of the place."

"I can see that. It's gated and it's in a good neighborhood."

"I live alone so I want to feel safe in my own home." She smiled. "Have a seat," she said, motioning him to the sofa. "I have to finish putting on my makeup."

"You look fine to me."

Her smile broadened. "I'll be just a minute." She glided away, still smiling to herself as she disappeared into the bedroom.

He started to sit down on the sofa when he noticed the series of pictures mounted on the wall a few feet from the painting. He didn't recognize most of the people in the photographs, but in two of them, he saw a young Trina. She looked to be a teenager, maybe fifteen to seventeen years old. She was with a younger girl who looked to be about five or six. Trina was pushing the little girl on a swing. They were both smiling big as if they were having the time of their life.

Trina was just as beautiful back then. He mentally shook himself. He couldn't believe how he felt inside just looking at her photograph, much less thinking about the real thing. He felt like a damn, silly, nervous teenager. Butterflies were having a party inside his stomach. This was not like him. Usually, he was bold. Some even considered him brazen and arrogant.

He had just met Trina but already he could tell that she was of a higher caliber than the women he was used to. She handled herself like a real lady. She was refined, elegant, and exuded enough sex appeal to arouse the most stoic of men.

He took her to an expensive French restaurant with a name he couldn't pronounce. Though she hadn't mentioned what eating establishments she preferred he couldn't imagine taking her to one of the cheaper restaurants he was accustomed to.

"So, how long have you been a policeman?" she asked.

He had just taken a big sip of the burgundy wine that he had ordered with their meal. He set the wine glass on the table. He would rather have had a cold beer, but he wasn't sure if this joint even carried any. "I've been a regular cop for about nine years, a vice detective for the past three years."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "Vice. That's pretty dangerous work isn't it?" She immediately thought of how her mother would disapprove. She hated all cops no matter what they did because of what had happened to her favorite child, Trina's little sister.

"It can be, but it's not like the movies. When I'm not at the station filling out reports, or in a courtroom, I'm busy arresting cheap hookers, strung-out drug addicts, and small-time drug pushers. Undercover is a dangerous part of the business. I've spent a little time undercover, but it was pretty small stuff. It wasn't like I was undercover in the mafia."

She took another bite of her meal. She chewed as though mulling over what he had just said.

"So," he began, "you said you were in the marketing business. Is it like the advertising business?"

"In a sense, it's the same."

"Your job anything like what they show on the old Bewitched television series?"

She laughed aloud and was immediately embarrassed by her outburst. She placed her hand over her mouth. He liked her laugh. There was something pure and innocent about it that made him feel good.

"I've seen a few of the re-runs when I was little, and yeah the basic idea is the same though the technology has changed quite a bit. Computers have taken over a lot of the tedious part of the work. I still meet with clients and do presentations and such, but much of it is done through teleconferencing." She paused. "And, it's not as fun as in the show," she added, "but it is fulfilling. I like it."

"I love your laugh. And your smile. They're both so vivacious."

She felt herself blush and her smile grew bigger. "Vivacious, huh. You don't sound like a cop."

"I try to keep my cop voice confined to my job."

Her smile seemed plastered to her face, but that was okay. To her, it felt warm and natural.

"You know," he began, "on one hand you're so beautiful you scare me. On the other hand, you're so damn easy to talk to. Maybe I just need more time with you. Will you go out with me again?"

"Yes," she said quickly, but ..."

Her last word was like getting hit by a brick. He waited for the inevitable disappointment.

"This place is nice, you know, for special occasions." She placed one hand softly on his. "Myself, I would prefer something more modest, more casual. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is. The truth is that on my salary I couldn't keep this up anyway."

A month after they had been dating he said he loved her. In the back of her mind, she thought that it was too early for them to be saying they loved each other, but she couldn't help herself, she said she loved him, too. No other words had felt so right.

They dated steadily for another month when she invited him over to her apartment for dinner. When she answered the door he embraced her with a long, passionate kiss. "What is that great smell?" he asked as he pulled away from her.

"Lasagna," she said. "I know how you like Italian. I figured I'd see what I could whip up. I hope you like it." Even when they hadn't gone out to an Italian restaurant, and instead to somewhere like Applebee's or Chili's, he had often gravitated to the pasta entrees

"Judging from the smell of it I'm sure I will."

She led him by the hand to the table. Two lit candles sat in the center to signify their two-month anniversary of dating. Two plates were adjacent to each other, each

with lasagna and garlic bread. To the side of each plate was a glass of iced tea. "Have a seat," she said. As he sat down she walked over to the wall switch and dimmed the lights.

They talked and ate. Troy raved about her lasagna making silly little noises to let her know how delicious he thought the meal was.

Later that evening they made love for the first time.

They married six months later in a small, intimate ceremony. Each of them invited a few friends. Neither of them had relatives to attend. Troy was an orphan, and though Trina had invited her mother to the wedding her mother had refused to attend. She was not yet willing to accept a policeman into the family.

CHAPTER 3

He awoke suddenly as if coming forth from an abyss of total blackness.

Quit the damn daydreaming and eat your supper," his dad said to him in his usual gruff voice.

"Eat your dinner, dear," his mother added in her soft, soothing voice.

Troy Dance blinked his eyes a couple of times. He hadn't been daydreaming. Something else had happened to him that he couldn't quite explain. For a few moments, he had blanked out. And in that time he had seen— no, more like felt— his friend Jamie. He had felt Jamie's thoughts and emotions. It was as if a mass of convoluted feelings hit him all at once. What he concluded scared the hell out of him. Jamie was planning on revealing their little secret.

He nibbled absently at his supper. He needed to try to talk Jamie out of this need to be so damn truthful. There had to be another way. It wasn't fair to him.

He started to eat quickly. He knew he wouldn't be allowed down from the table until his plate was clean. In a matter of minutes, he finished his meal and gulped down his tea.

"What the hell is your hurry, son?" his dad asked, irritated.

"I want to go see Jamie. Maybe ride our bikes for a while."

His father grunted. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to be hanging around with this Jamie."

"They're just children," his mother said.

"I won't be gone too long," Troy pleaded. "And I've done all my chores."

His dad pushed away from the table and slid a cigarette pack from his shirt pocket. He tapped out a cigarette from the pack and then pulled out his metal lighter from his pant pocket. He 'clicked' his lighter open and lit his cigarette. He took a long drag before speaking.

"I still don't like it." He looked to his wife. She smiled weakly and nodded. He looked back at Troy. "Don't be doing anything you shouldn't. You're old enough to know what I'm talking about."

Troy's face flushed. "I won't," he promised as he pushed away from the table and got to his feet. In less than a minute he was slipping out the front door.

He believed that he had made the two miles in his quickest time ever. Reliving the blackout (or whatever it was) that he had experienced at supper seemed to magnify his fear and drive him forward with a passion.

As soon as he had turned onto the dirt driveway he noticed that the faded green Dodge was gone. He wondered if Jamie was even at home. But then again, the absence of the car meant little. Jamie had been left alone many times.

He propped his bicycle against a sprawling Maple tree that grew in the front yard. He looked up at the old, two-story frame house as though he were seeing it for the first time. For the first time in the eight months that he had been coming here, it frightened him.

He felt in his front pant pocket for his Buck knife. The knife contained two blades. The smaller blade had been broken a year ago when he tried to pry the cap off a soda bottle. The other blade was three inches long and fairly sharp. He prided himself on keeping the blade honed down to a really good edge. Feeling the knife gave him a weird sensation. It should have sparked some confidence, but instead, he found himself wishing that he had left the knife at home.

He walked warily up to the door. He hesitated. For one brief moment, he thought of turning back around and riding off on his bike. But no. That was a ridiculous thought.

At first, he knocked very softly, as though he were afraid his knocking would truly be heard and something terrible would happen. What that something might be he had no clue.

After a couple of minutes of no response, he knocked harder. No sound. Nothing to indicate that anyone was moving about inside. But as he waited the utter silence of the house seemed to grow into an entity all its own, an energy of sorts that sucked up evil and all the bad things around it to become a formidable mass.

He was shaking. No one was home. It was as simple as that. He needed to go. The thing that happened to him at supper was just his mind going spastic on him. Jamie was probably off with the parents at Dairy Queen.”

He laughed to himself to lighten his mood, but he wasn't very successful. The irrational fear he felt was clinging to him.

He turned to walk away then stopped abruptly. He turned back. He was being silly. There was nothing about the house to be afraid of. He needed to talk to Jamie. It was very important. He decided that he would investigate a little further to make sure Jamie wasn't at home, perhaps watching television, or listening to the radio, and couldn't hear him knocking on the door.

He tried the front door. It was locked. No problem. He knew that one of the windows to the kitchen would not be locked. The latch had been broken for as long as he had been friends with Jamie.

He went around to the back of the house to the kitchen window. He pushed up on the screen and it came easily off the hooks. He propped the screen against the house to the right of the window.

He peeked through the dingy glass frames and for a second he thought he saw the face of a man staring back at him. It startled him and he jumped. Then he realized it was only the face of a boy. It was his reflection.

Other than his reflection he could see most of the kitchen, and part of the dining room through the archway that separated the two rooms.

He pushed up on the window as far as it would go. The window sill itself was about four feet off the ground so he had to stand on his tiptoes to push the window up the last few inches. He climbed up and over the window ledge with a bit of effort, then dropped onto the kitchen floor.

He moved through the kitchen and the small dining room pausing in the living room at the foot of the stairs. He looked up at the steps that ascended to a fine point of near blackness. The bedrooms were upstairs. He listened for the sound of a television set that Jamie might be watching in his bedroom but heard nothing.

“Jamie,” Troy yelled up the stairs. “Jamie, it's Troy, come on down.” He waited, listening to his own heavy, nervous breaths. No answer. He didn't know whether to be relieved or to be even more worried.

At once he heard a noise drifting down to him from upstairs. It was very slight like the faint shuffle of bare feet across a wood floor.

He laughed to himself. Okay, Jamie, he thought. If you want to play hide and seek then let's go for it.

He crept up the steps with a grin painted across his face. It was evident that Jamie was trying to scare him. Troy temporarily forgot about the episode at supper.

He strode upward into the darkness of the stairway, pausing at the top of the stairs in a vapid puddle of light from a small window at the end of the hallway. To his

right was a bathroom. Just beyond the bathroom was a closet. To his left were the two bedrooms. The closest room was Jamie's.

As he walked tentatively toward Jamie's room the smile on his face began to slowly slip away. Come to think of it this hide and seek stuff wasn't like Jamie at all.

He halted in front of the closed door to Jamie's bedroom, reaching out to grasp the doorknob as he did. What if it wasn't Jamie inside there? What if it were a prowler? He jerked his hand away from the doorknob as if it suddenly became a piece of scalding metal.

With a trembling hand, he dug into his front pant pocket and removed his knife. He flipped out the one good blade, and when he did something wet splattered across his right cheek and arm. It scared him and he looked down at the knife. It was saturated with something dark and viscous like black syrup. A glob of the syrupy stuff ran to the tip of the blade and dropped off. It splashed on the toe of Troy's right shoe.

It was blood! The thought was so sure it struck him at once like an electric current. But where did the blood come from? His eyes swept over his body. He could see no wounds where he might have inadvertently cut himself. So, who's blood was this? He could feel his heart pounding inside his chest as if it were a bomb about to explode. He could hardly breathe. A grayness quickly washed over him, and he seemed about to fall over. His grip on the knife loosened and it fell to the floor. It tumbled half a turn and hit the wooden floor point first sticking into the wooden floor, and for a moment the knife sprung side to side.

He stared down at the knife at once frozen by what he saw, or rather what he didn't see. The knife was clean, suddenly free of the glutinous substance that he had assumed was blood. It was as if what he had seen moments ago never really happened. A sliver of light gleamed across the knife punctuating the bareness of the steel blade as he bent down and gingerly pulled it out of the floor. He lifted it close to his face twisting it slowly about in his hands looking for a trace of the warm, tenacious blood. There was none. The blade itself was unusually cold in his hands as if it had sat in a refrigerator for the last few minutes.

A slight sound down the hallway drew his attention. It sounded like the soft splash of water. It had to be coming from the bathroom. A nervous chill as cold as the knife he was holding ran down his spine. Everything felt wrong, but he didn't know why.

Cautiously, he began to make his way down the corridor. He pushed the knife in front of him, not only for protection but to see if it would begin to bleed once more.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar. He hadn't noticed it before. He inched closer to peek through the crack of the opened door. The light to the bathroom was off and the only light in the room was the faint light that passed through the frosted glass of the bathroom window. He squinted and could make out a head that lolled against the porcelain bathtub. It was Jamie.

Troy laughed and pushed the door all the way open. "Hey, wake up," he said. "This ain't no time for napping." He flipped on the light. At once a scream caught in his throat. He almost fell over and had to catch the edge of the sink for support.

Jamie's eyes were open, but blank, staring lifelessly up at the ceiling. The tub of water Jamie lay in was colored pink, but rapidly darkening as the blood streamed from Jamie's slashed throat. Troy closed his eyes at the sight, not wanting to see anymore. But he knew he had to. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

No. He was mistaken. The blood was not from a slashed throat as he had at first thought. Now it was apparent that the blood was streaming from two slashed wrists.

It was evident that Jamie had committed suicide.

He quickly snatched up the towel from the rack to the side of the sink and raced back down the steps and through the front door that he had left open. He wiped his hands thoroughly on the towel he had taken, then wrapped the towel around his bloody knife. He shoved the towel into a makeshift saddlebag he had attached to the back of his seat, pushed the bike off, and jumped on.

He stopped by Henson's lake on the way home. He tied several large rocks in the towel, along with the knife then threw the bloody instrument as far into the lake as he could. He paused a few seconds to watch it briefly bubble then sink beneath the murky waters.

CHAPTER 4

There was a low beeping noise and a red light suddenly lit up for room number 302.

The night shift had just begun.

“Not again,” said the buxom nurse.

“What’s the matter?” asked a thin, young nurse, pulling the words out with a deep southern accent. “Is this patient a pest or something?”

The fat lady laughed. She stepped out of the nurse’s station. “I forgot this is your first night. Come on. Let’s go take a look at the patient.”

The big nurse chuckled to herself as she walked around the corner and down the corridor. A uniformed policeman, who had been sitting in a straight-backed chair against the wall of room 302, stood up as they approached.

“Again?” he asked.

“Yeah, ‘fraid so.”

“Maybe it’s the real thing this time.”

The nurse smiled and nodded. “I hope so, Ed. If this thing gets any weirder I think I’ll lose the few marbles I have left.”

The policeman, a bit on the chunky side himself, but a whole lot taller than the nurse, laughed. “You and me both.”

“By the way,” the big nurse began, “this is Kathy. It’s her first night. And Kathy,” she said still looking at Ed, “this is Edward. He’s here to guard the patient. To make sure none of the bad guys get to him.”

“Nice to meet you, Kathy,” Ed said as he stretched out his hand.

“You too,” Kathy answered as Ed’s big hand swallowed her hand up in a firm handshake.

As their hands parted the fat nurse leaned up and over to whisper in Ed’s ear. “Just ‘cause she’s a pretty little thing don’t get no ideas, Ed. She’s way too young for you.”

“Oh no, she’s too small I like em with a little more meat on their bones, Millie,” Ed whispered back, but it was loud enough to be overheard by Kathy.

Ed and Millie both laughed. Kathy’s face reddened.

Millie turned to Kathy and her tone became a bit more serious. “I guess we’d better go see if it’s the real thing this time.”

Millie moved past the guard and opened the door. She motioned Kathy ahead of her, then closed the door behind them.

The first thing that grabbed Kathy’s attention when she walked into the private hospital room was the single bed. It sat askew, turned a good thirty degrees to what it should have been, and was pressed firmly against the IV pole nearly toppling it.

Millie stepped over to the man in the bed. His eyes were closed. He was unmoving. She pulled back the hospital gown to be certain that none of the monitoring wires had come loose. They were still intact. She looked up at the monitors. Heartbeat was fine. Pulse was good. Blood pressure was good.

“Another false alarm,” Millie said matter of fact. She walked over to the IV pole and pulled it away from the bed so that it would stand up straight, then aligned the bed the way that it had been.

Kathy looked over at the unconscious man lying in bed. “Who pushed the nurses’ call?”

“Good question. Ever since this guy was put in this room this call button seems to have a mind of its own. It goes off nearly every day for no apparent reason, sometimes two to three times a day.”

“Maybe it’s just some kind of electrical short?”

“No, honey, we’ve had it checked out. Our maintenance men say there is nothing wrong with it.” Millie laughed, but it seemed hollow. “I think we must have a poltergeist haunting this room.”

“A ghost?”

“Yeah. You see that bed?” Kathy nodded. “It has slid across the room like that about once or twice a week. This time the IV pole didn’t fall, but most times it does.” Millie nodded and took a breath. “But that’s only part of it. We’ve had the television set come on all by itself. Sometimes the volume would be so low we couldn’t say when it had come on. At other times the volume would be thundering. It would seem to be louder than what the television is designed to put out. I guess it depended on what kind of mood the ghost was in.” Millie smiled, but her familiar laughter couldn’t get beyond her lips. Talk of ghosts was scaring her more than she wanted to admit. “Besides that,” Millie began again, “we’ve had pictures constantly falling off the wall. That’s why there’s none up there right now. We got tired of replacing the broken frames. And the window. It opens and closes on its own. I never know what to expect when I come in here.” She sighed. “I’d say that it was our patient, Mister Troy Dance, playing some sick, practical joke on us if he weren’t in such a deep coma. Been like that for about a month.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s a cop. He was on some kind of undercover operation when he was shot. Several times, in fact. Hell, it’s a miracle he’s even alive.”

“Why is he in a coma? Did he suffer a head injury?”

“No. He suffered significant injuries to his body, but not to his head. Why he’s still in a coma is a question that even the doctors can’t agree on.”

Kathy stepped tentatively over to the patient as though he might reach out and grab her, or as if she were afraid that she might catch something from him.

Troy Dance had enough color to his cheeks, but he was absolutely still, and his breathing so severely shallow that he might have passed for a cadaver.

“Do you think he’ll pull through?”

“I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Poor man. Does anybody ever visit him?”

“Being on the late shift I can’t say personally, but from what I’ve been told he’s got at least one cop buddy that visits him quite a bit. And his wife practically lived up here in the beginning. I’m told she still visits daily, but only for a couple of hours. I guess she had to get back to making a living.”

“Poor man,” Kathy repeated.

CHAPTER 5

“Trina, you okay?”

Trina looked up from the papers that she had been preparing for a client. She had been reading them a few minutes ago, but then had drifted off, seeing through the papers to a place far beyond the walls.

“Yes, I’m okay. I guess my mind wandered off a bit.”

“Maybe you need some more time off,” Adrianna said. “You know, to sit with Troy.” She was a tall, slender woman with wide brown eyes that looked almost too big for her face. “Jack will understand.” Jack was their immediate supervisor.

“I know, but I’ve already missed so much work, and I’ve got so much catching up to do. Besides, if I spent any more time with Troy watching him lie there, unmoving, wondering if he’ll ever wake up ... I ... I couldn’t take it.”

“Trina, I know you don’t have any family in town so why not come stay with Grayson and me for a while. Until Troy ... until Troy gets better. It’s not good for you to be staying in that big old house by yourself.”

Trina was silent a moment. At one time she and Adrianna were the best of friends. Now it seemed like an incredibly long time ago. They had grown apart, slowly, almost imperceptibly. First with Trina spending more time with Troy, then a few months later with Adrianna moving in with her boyfriend. About a month after that Trina and Troy were married.

Trina knew very little about Grayson, Adrianna’s boyfriend. He might be the nicest guy in the world, but she knew she’d feel awkward around him. With Adrianna, it wouldn’t be much better. She would have to endure all the pity stares and the talks from Adrianna meant to console and encourage her, but that would only serve to arouse the fear and hurt inside her.

“I appreciate it Adrianna, but I’m okay. The only time I’m at the house is to sleep. I either grab some food on the way to the hospital or eat there in their cafeteria. Then I spend an hour or two with Troy and go home.”

“Are you sure? We’ve got plenty of room.”

“I’m sure. Besides, my mother may be coming down for a visit.” That of course was a lie. Other than her traveling a few miles once or twice a week to do a little grocery shopping her mother never left the house. Ever since her youngest daughter Alicia (Trina’s little sister) died in a car accident her mother had become somewhat of a recluse. That was four years ago. Their father was not in the picture, his whereabouts were unknown. He had left years earlier when he went to work one day and never returned.

Trina had come down from college to attend the funeral. It was a brutal time. A big chunk of Trina’s life had been ripped away from her. She had always been close to her little sister, and though they had been separated when Trina went off to college, her sudden death was no less devastating. Trina had often thought that when her sister grew old enough to attend college herself and begin her career that they would grow even closer, sharing in each other’s lives. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

For a while, she had stayed with her mother who seemed to be just as much destroyed inside as Trina was. Together they cried on each other’s shoulders and often talked about the good times they had with Alicia.

After three weeks of draining their emotions Trina’s mom had insisted that Trina go back to school. There was no sense in her failing her classes. Her sister had passed. There was nothing else she could do.

At first, Trina had resisted, knowing how angry and hurt her mother was. She finally gave in realizing that nothing she could say or do was going to help her mother. For herself, she had accepted the fact that she had to move on with her life. Alicia was gone. Though it hurt tremendously all Trina could do was hold her warmly in her memories.

The pain never quite went away but over time, she was able to deal with the loss of her little sister. With her mother it was different. Over time her mother had grown angry and bitter. She sued the police department. It was their fault that her baby daughter was dead. On that fateful day while driving ten-year-old Alicia to soccer practice they were hit head-on by a speeding police car. The policeman had taken the curve ahead of them too fast and veered into their lane. The impact was mostly on the passenger side. Alicia never had a chance.

Her mother woke up in the hospital with cuts, bruises, and a concussion, but nothing life-threatening. Alicia died at the scene. The policeman died on the way to the hospital.

It was days later before her mother got the details of what had happened. It nearly drove her mad knowing that her baby girl had died in such a senseless way.

The policeman (actually just a young boy barely twenty-one) was chasing a fleeing teenager who left a service station without paying for his gas. The total bill was a little over twenty dollars. And for that Alicia had lost her young life.

It was estimated that the policeman had been doing over ninety miles an hour when he went into the curve of a fifty-five-mile an hour zone. The boy he was chasing was about a mile ahead of him. The saddest part was that one of the gas station's cameras had already picked up the license plate number of the car. There was no need for a high-speed chase.

After college Trina had offered to stay around town to help her mother out. Her mother had refused. She knew that Trina had a great job offer for a company in Atlanta and insisted that she go. Reluctantly Trina had left to accept the job.

Her mother felt that Trina had betrayed her when she married Troy. She had a keen dislike for all cops, despite Trina's insistence that it was not fair to place all cops into one category because of what one inexperienced cop did. Her mother could not accept that logic, but Trina held out hope that one day she would.

Adrianna didn't argue. She smiled knowingly. "Well, if you change your mind my house is always open to you."

Trina smiled back at her. "Thank you."

Adrianna nodded. "Okay, well, I guess I'll get back to work, and let you get back to your papers."

Trina watched her walk away a moment before returning her eyes to her papers. This time she fought a little harder to push away her mournful, distracting thoughts of Troy, and concentrate on the work at hand.

CHAPTER 6

Trina drug the small armchair over to the side of the bed as she had done for the past seven weeks. With her magazine doubled over in her left hand she sat down.

“How are you doing today, Troy?” she asked not expecting an answer. “I got the Hartin Biscuit account today. I told you I was going to get it. I worked my butt off for it. Sometimes it was hard to concentrate knowing that you were in here.” She looked over at the nearly motionless body of Troy lying on the bed next to her. His eyes were closed as if he were merely sleeping. His only movement was the slight rising of his chest as he breathed. “You need to hurry up and wake up so we can celebrate.” She watched him another minute before turning away.

She unfolded her magazine and began to skim through its contents. She found a story that she thought might be interesting. She looked back over to Troy. “I’m going to read a little bit of my magazine, but if you want to talk just go ahead.” No response. “Okay, then.” She stared at him another minute wishing that his eyes would suddenly pop open, or that his mouth would utter a word, a sound, anything to let her know that his essence was still somewhere there in that body. But, no. Reluctantly, sadly, she turned to her magazine.

The clouds appeared out of nowhere like mounds of white, fluffy cotton. They colored the entire sky. It was strange how there was no movement among them. It was as if they were painted on. But then again there was no breeze to push them one way or another.

His eyes traced the clouds to the horizon. A straight brown line marked the edge of the world. Incredible.

He couldn’t see below the horizon. At first, he couldn’t understand why then he realized that he was positioned wrong. He was on his back looking up at the sky.

The brown line wasn’t right. Why was it brown? Shouldn’t it be red, or orange, or yellow, or a combination of those colors? And the angle of the line was too straight, too unwavering. It was all so strange. He followed it with his eyes as far to the right as he could. When his vision reached its end he tried to move his head. It wasn’t easy. It was as if his head were in some kind of vice and he was pushing against the side of the metal structure.

He groaned as he fought to move his head. Or thought he had groaned. He wasn’t sure. The sounds he heard were fleeting. They came and went quickly. As did the voices. Some voices came to him as ghostly whispers from people in his distant past. Other voices were newer, some familiar, some not. Occasionally, he heard Trina’s voice, but there never seemed to be any structure to it. The words were jumbled and cut off as if she were talking into a cell phone that kept losing its signal.

He pushed harder and felt the grip of the vice give a little. His vision extended a bit further, going below the horizon.

At once he saw a variety of little flowers in soft blues and greens, and yellows running up and down and left to right.

Something was wrong. He couldn’t grasp what he was seeing. He became agitated, feeling as if he were losing his mind. Then it suddenly came to him. He was looking at a wall. At wallpaper.

He was inside, not outside like he thought. But where? And why was he lying on his back? He turned his eyes downward even further. Three silver-colored bars ran parallel down the length of his body, rising just above his ... mattress. He was lying in a

bed! But, what kind of bed was this? He tried to think. Then he saw her. He could see her face between the top two rails. Trina. She didn't see him looking at her. She was looking down at a magazine she held close to her lap.

"Trina," he called, but it came out as nothing more than a tenuous whisper.

Seconds passed, maybe minutes, he couldn't be sure. It was hard for him to focus.

Trina hadn't heard him. Or, maybe he hadn't said anything. He couldn't be certain one way or another. He felt as if he were floating in and out of a dream. He began to wonder if she were real or another part of his dream. In any event, he had to try again.

"Trina." His voice was somewhat stronger, but still not much greater than a whisper.

Trina looked up suddenly as though she thought she heard something, but wasn't quite sure. She turned her head toward Troy. She saw that his eyes were open.

"Oh, God! Troy, you're awake!" Trina leaped to her feet. "Oh, God! Thank God!" She looked down at him. "Wait!" Trina said excitedly as if he might actually jump out of bed and go somewhere. She ran out of the doorway and down the hallway.

Troy noted the silver-colored rails again. Hospital bed. He was in the hospital. Why? He couldn't remember. How long had he been in here? He had no idea.

Trina came bursting through the doorway breaking his thoughts. A nurse trailed behind her.

She ran up to the side of Troy's bed. By then Troy had managed to turn his head back to stare up at the ceiling. "Oh Troy, I missed you so much," Trina said. She wanted desperately to reach down and give him the biggest hug that her arms would allow, but she was afraid that she might hurt him. "Can you talk?"

Troy heard her clear enough, but couldn't respond right away. She gave him a few seconds as he struggled to form the words. "Yees," the word finally rolled out like the crackle of a dry leaf.

The nurse moved next to Trina. "Hi," she said to Troy. Glad to have you back. How are you feeling?"

It was another couple of moments before Troy squeezed out: "Oh ... kay."

"Good," the nurse said and smiled. "The doctor will be here shortly. Meanwhile, I'll need to get your vitals."

When the nurse moved to get his chart Troy lulled his head the opposite way he had been facing minutes ago. A few yards away was a long window that extended nearly from one wall to the other. The full-length curtains were pulled tight to each side leaving the center window frame open to a panoramic view of the evening sky. Troy looked out at the large sky and noted the splash of orange that was spread across the edge of the horizon. A steadily graying sky was just behind it pushing away the fading colors of evening. With a sudden feeling of dread, he could see that the day was giving way to the coming of dark.

CHAPTER 7

Night had fallen, and most of the visitors had left the hospital as well as a good portion of the staff. The shuffling of feet and faint voices in the hallway had all but disappeared. In the stark silence, Troy could almost hear his thoughts running through his head as if in a loop.

It had been three days since he had awakened from his coma. On the first day, Doctor Wyatt Rauster had examined him. He had been vague about his diagnosis simply stating that now that Troy had come out of his coma he could begin the healing process. He pointed out that he would need a lot more tests as the days went by to determine what kind of treatment and therapy would be prescribed. He ended by saying that in the next day or two he would be seen by a neurologist and other specialists who were better able to determine the best ways to treat him.

Earlier today he had been visited by Doctor Edwin Gramm, rumored to be one of the finest neurologists in the entire southeast. Doctor Gramm had introduced himself with a handshake and a soft smile that immediately set Troy at ease, at least for a time. He had done a thorough examination. Afterward, he offered Troy a tentative smile and proceeded to say how amazing it was that Troy had all his mental faculties intact and that his upper body was healing very nicely. His smile faded as he began the second half of his diagnosis.

He was fairly blunt when he told Troy that it was doubtful that he would ever walk again. After that Troy was only able to digest parts of the doctor's speech. There was something about the nerves and the spine, and some possible surgeries, but the details eluded him.

What was he going to do with the rest of his life? He had always been so active, never one to sit around for very long. He wasn't sure he could cope with a sedentary life. A life that was bound to a wheelchair.

He had always sought to be strong. He hated weakness in himself and had always strived to hide the pain and hurt that he sometimes felt. He never wanted to admit that he needed anyone. He could always find the strength to do what needed to be done. But now ... Now he felt trapped like a caged animal. He was no longer free. It seemed that everything that was *him* was now gone. He had been reduced to a second-class man. No longer was he the headstrong, cocksure person he used to be. Those days had passed. Now he was only a shell of his former self.

He felt the warm tears rolling down his cheeks. He tasted their saltiness as they edged the corners of his mouth. He wiped away the wetness with the sleeve of his right hand but knew that more tears would follow. It didn't matter. Crying wasn't considered a weakness when you were alone. And right now he needed to cry. He needed to drain himself of all these baneful feelings that were eating away at his insides.

Sometime later, worn out by the examination and the many tests he had undergone that day, as well as the deluge of bitter emotions that had flooded his mind, he had slowly sunk into a fitful sleep where he dreamed about a past life that seemed to make no sense.

He was awakened a couple of hours later when he heard a door close. He cocked his head to look over at his room door thinking that one of the nurses had come in. Instead, a child was standing by the door. It was Jamie, his best friend from childhood. "No, no," he whined. "You can't be here. You're dead." He closed his eyes. "You're dead," he whispered. He opened his eyes quickly. No one was there. He closed his eyes once more. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Soon he had drifted back off to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

“How are you feeling, today?” Tommy Waters asked as he entered the room.

“Okay, I guess,” Troy answered. He was sitting up in his hospital bed. It had been tilted to a forty-five-degree angle. The television set, mounted on the wall across from him, had been turned down. A magazine lay open in his lap.

Tommy walked over to the side of the bed and sat in the armchair positioned there. “I imagine you’re getting kind of anxious to get out of here,” he said.

“You could say that. This hospital gets old real quick. I just wish that I was ... that I was walking out of here.” His last words seemed strained.

Tommy ran a hand through his hair. His eyebrows furrowed. “What’s the latest on the doctor’s prognosis?”

“Basically the same. He talks about some surgery here and there that may or may not help, but as far as a full recovery that’s not going to happen. Too much damage to my spine.” He swallowed hard, fighting back the emotion and an onslaught of tears that would follow. He had resolved not to cry anymore. He would be stronger than that.

“Man, that’s tough.” The words sounded lame to Tommy after he had spoken them, but at this moment it seemed no words would fit.

Troy simply nodded. “So, how are you boys doing down at the station without old Troy?” He needed to change the subject quickly.

“Oh, we bust a bad guy now and then. We’re probably down from our quota a little since you’ve been on vacation.”

Troy laughed. It felt better than feeling sorry for himself.

“What about Rock?” Troy asked. “I haven’t heard anything since my deposition. Is he in jail?”

“No. Not Rock. One of his men has been indicted for attempted murder, but even that may be reduced to aggravated assault.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! After killing Lonnie, and then trying their best to kill me, putting me in a wheelchair, destroying my life!”

“They’re going by Rock’s version of what happened. The DA has said that there were too many gaps in your memory. And the fact that you were not even supposed to be there. You didn’t have a warrant and you were not operating under official police business.”

Troy’s face reddened as he clenched his teeth. “Okay,” he breathed, “what is Rock’s version?”

Tommy took an anxious breath knowing that the news was likely to upset Troy. “Rock claims that he was checking out the old mill with a few of his employees with the thought of buying the property to expand his trucking operation. After a few minutes of walking the place, Lonnie began acting strangely. Rock figured that he must be on drugs and started accusing him of that. Lonnie got irate and drew a gun on him.”

“Bullshit!” Troy interrupted. “Lonnie didn’t have the balls.”

“Maybe not. But according to Rock he did. And, according to Rock, he shot Lonnie in self-defense. Furthermore, he has men that back up his story, as well as a gun that Lonnie allegedly pulled on him.”

“The gun? I don’t remember a gun. It had to have been planted. His men will say whatever he wants them to say. And ... someone, or some people, on the force, are on his payroll. I would swear to it. That would explain how they were able to corroborate their stories.”

“It doesn’t matter what you or I know or believe. The district attorney won’t make an indictment for murder until he has some hard, concrete evidence.”

Troy shook his head in disgust. “What about me? How does Rock explain my wounds?”

“In Rock’s statement, he said that just after he had shot Lonnie he and his associates heard a loud commotion. When they went to investigate, someone — you, that is — shot at them. They...”

“Bullshit!” Troy exclaimed.

Tommy continued. “They returned fire believing that you were in league with Lonnie. They got a little overzealous and ran you into a corner in an upstairs storage room. Fortunately for you, before they could kill you — in self -defense — the cavalry arrived.”

“Being overzealous is no excuse for shooting me again and again.”

“No, it isn’t, but it looks like just one man is going to take the fall for that and it isn’t Rock.”

“Damn!” Troy drew his hands into a tight fist. “Damn! It’s not right. It’s just not right.”

“He’ll slip up sooner or later and then we’ll nail him good.”

Troy didn’t hear him. He was seething with an anger that raged through his system. It was a consuming wrath that removed him from his surroundings. He closed his eyes and the effect was complete.

Suddenly he wasn’t in the hospital room anymore. He was somewhere else. He wasn’t sure where. But only a few feet in front of him sat Rock, the son-of-a-bitch himself. He was sitting at a bar sipping at a drink and writing something on a small computer pad.

Troy had no fear of being spotted. He knew that he really wasn’t there. He was back at the hospital. Still, he would enjoy this hallucination, or dream, or plain old mental collapse, if it gave him a chance to hurt Rock even if it was only make-believe.

At first, he thought he was in a barroom. But no. The bar was too small. It only contained four bar stools, and as yet Troy had not seen a bartender.

He looked about. Now he was looking into a living room. A big, padded armchair sat to his left. Almost directly in front of him was a long, brocade sofa. In front of it was a large flat-screen television set.

Rock was at home.

Tommy noticed Troy’s sudden vacuous expression. “Hey, are you alright?” Tommy asked rather loudly.

The question startled Troy and the mental picture quickly dissolved before his eyes.

“What?” Troy asked, somewhat annoyed.

“Are you all right?” Tommy repeated.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his eyes. He half-smiled. “I guess I got a little too angry. It made my head hurt.” It wasn’t a complete lie. He did feel the beginning of a headache coming on.

CHAPTER 9

When Trina stepped into the hospital room with Adrianna and Grayson there were three other visitors already there. She recognized the three men as fellow officers who had worked with Troy.

“Hey guys,” Trina said as she headed toward the bed where Troy lay. The three policemen returned her greeting.

The man seated closest to the head of Troy’s bed stood up. “I was just saving your seat for you, Mrs. Dance,” he kidded. He motioned for her to sit down.

“Thank you, Tex,” Trina said as she stopped next to the chair. Tex’s real name was Allan Pallen, but because he had recently moved to Georgia from Austin, Texas the other cops simply called him Tex.

Tex slipped back away from the bed, closer to the outside door, to allow the three visitors more room beside Troy.

“Everyone,” Trina began, “This is Adrianna and Grayson.” The men extended their greetings. “That’s Tex who gave up his seat to me,” Trina continued, “At the foot of the bed closest to the window is Drake, and the other gentleman is Edward.”

“Nice to meet you,” Both Grayson and Adrianna said.

Edward stood up from his seat. “Why don’t you two take our seats? Me and Drake been sitting awhile. I think we need to stretch our bones a little.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Drake agreed, as he stood up.

“We’re okay right now,” Adrianna said. “I want to talk to Troy a minute, but thank you.”

“Well, the seats will be here when you get through,” Edward said and began heading to where Tex stood. Drake followed behind him.

Adrianna and Grayson moved over to the front of Troy’s bed. Trina had just sat down in the one chair closest to Troy.

“You’re looking good today,” Adrianna said.

“As opposed to unconsciousness?” he asked. At first, his demeanor was stern. Adrianna wasn’t sure how to respond. Then he smiled. “So how are you doing? I hear you and Trina have been tag-teaming these marketing accounts. So am I going to be a millionaire anytime soon?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say soon. But one day.”

Troy laughed softly. He looked to Grayson. “Have we met before? After coming out of this coma I’m not sure if all my memories are intact.”

“No sir we haven’t met. I’m Grayson Langston, Adrianna and I are together.”

“Oh, okay.” He reached up an open hand. “You can call me Troy.”

Grayson shook his hand.

“Are you in the marketing business, too?” Troy asked.

“No sir, I’m a carpenter. I’m not as smart as Adrianna here.”

Adrianna punched him playfully on the arm. “Don’t let him fool you. He’s plenty smart. His smarts are in construction. He could build the Taj Mahal from a stack of two by fours.”

A short burst of laughter spread across the room.

“We’re going to let you two talk,” Adrianna said to Trina. She started walking away toward the two empty seats.

“Nice to have met you,” Grayson said, following Adrianna.

“Has the doctor been in to see you today?” Trina asked.

“No,” Troy answered. “But I got a visit from the physical therapist.”

“Oh, okay. That’s good.”

“You don’t know why he came to see me either, do you?” Troy’s face took on a strange look as though he was stuck between laughter and a burst of anger. “I mean, what kind of physical therapy is there for a partially paralyzed man?”

Trina’s lips upturned into a faint smile. “Eh, actually, I think I have an idea. I’ve been reading about a treatment called FES. It’s where they apply electrical stimulation to the muscles. It’s supposed to keep the limbs from atrophying. I imagine that also includes massages, and perhaps some newer treatments not yet listed.”

“It seems you know as much as I do. It’s too bad this therapy won’t give me back the use of my legs.”

His words pierced her with a sudden, deep sorrow and for a few moments, she couldn’t speak. When she did speak her voice was soft. “So when is this therapy scheduled to begin?”

“He wants to start the therapy right away. If I do good in the next few weeks he said he’d let me go home. After that he wants me to visit a center twice a week to continue my therapy.”

“You’ll be able to come home? That’s wonderful,” Trina beamed. She leaned close to him. “I do miss having you in bed beside me each night,” she whispered. “I love you so much.”

“Don’t expect it to be like before.” His words were somewhat sullen. He took a breath, pushing away some of the bitterness that was trying to spring forward. His next words were much lighter. “Both of us are going to have to make some adjustments.”

“I know. But we can do it. I have faith in us.”

On the other side of the room, Tex whispered to Ed. “Hey, I heard something about some ghost stirring up some trouble in here when you were pulling guard duty for Troy. Is any of that true?”

“I done about three weeks here guarding Troy before they pulled me off. By then they figured there was no danger of anyone trying to assassinate him. Before Troy came out of his coma I had seen quite a few strange things.”

“Like what?”

“Like the TV turning on all by itself. Furniture moved around. Pictures falling off the wall.”

“Wow. So did you ever see a ghost? Like a shadowy form moving about? Anything like that?”

“No. I never actually saw anything move. Sometimes I’d hear a little commotion coming from inside the room, but by the time I got in there to investigate the strange occurrences had finished. Whatever that was going to be shifted, turned on, or fallen had been done.”

“So what about now?” Tex asked.

“I got a lady friend that works up here. She’s a nurse on the late shift. She tells me that once Troy woke up this poltergeist stuff stopped.”

“Wow. That’s odd.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it.”

Two hours had passed when a nurse stepped into the room and announced that visiting hours were over.

One by one they said their goodbyes and began to slowly slip out of the room, first the three policemen, then Trina, Adrianna, and Grayson.

“I had forgotten that you were a carpenter,” Trina said as they entered an elevator to go down to the lobby.

“That’s all I’ve ever done,” Grayson answered. “Started working with my dad over the summer when I was in high school. My dad was a general contractor. He did mostly houses. The first thing he did when I started working with him was to place me with a carpenter so I could learn the trade.”

“You sound highly qualified. Could I hire you to do some work for me?”

“Sure. Like what?”

“I’ll figure out what I need and get back to you.”

CHAPTER 10

She noticed the slight sheen of sweat on Troy's forehead just before she began to gently shake him. "Troy," she said softly, "wake up."

Troy's eyes flipped open. He gasped.

"Troy, are you okay?"

His eyes darted back and forth, searching the room. Finally, they settled on Trina.

"Are you okay?" she repeated in a tense voice.

"I ... I ... "Troy started, then he breathed deeply. "Yes. I was dreaming. It seemed so real."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"It was like the reoccurring dreams I had when I was in that coma. The ones about Jamie."

"You didn't tell me about any dream."

"Oh, I didn't? Well, they were just dreams, not much to talk about."

"You mentioned Jamie. He was the boy who killed himself, right?" She recalled Troy briefly mentioning him when they were dating. It was a get-to-know-you time when they both talked about their past.

"Yes." Troy wiped the beads of sweat off his brow. He sighed. "Okay. Do you want to know what I dreamed about?"

"I think you'll feel better talking about it."

He shrugged. "Okay. In all these dreams I'm the one who discovers the body. He... was in the bathtub ... His ... I mean ... Jamie. Jamie's head was resting against the back of the tub. His " He paused as if suddenly confused. "His long, dark hair was floating on top of the water undulating with the flow of the running water from the faucet. The water was pink from all the blood. So much blood! It was on the top of the tub, on the faucet, some even smeared on the side."

"It was just a bad dream, Troy. You were probably running a fever. Don't let it get to you."

Troy continued, not responding to her words. "Also, there were things in the dream that happened to me that didn't make sense, but somehow felt oddly familiar. I don't know how to explain it."

"Like what, for instance?"

Troy sighed. For a few moments, he seemed lost in his thoughts. "It doesn't matter. It was just a bad dream like you said. The fact is Jamie killed himself. He slit his ... wrists. Why? I don't know. It seems I should, but I don't." He turned his head toward the window. For a moment he could see a part of his past unraveling before him. But it was fleeting like the word on the tip of a tongue that just slips away. He saw something. Something very ugly. Then it was gone.

"Are you okay, Troy? Should I get the nurse?"

Troy turned back to her. "No, no. I'm fine." He smiled dully. "It was a dream. I'll get over it."

Trina started to speak, to say that she was sure he'd get over it, but then decided that it was more complicated than that. She simply smiled and nodded.

"Would you pack up my things for me so we can get out of here?"

Trina smiled brightly. "Gladly."

Troy Dance stared out the passenger side window at the quickly passing scenery. He watched the tall, serried ranks of buildings begin to dwindle as they left the heart of Atlanta.

It felt good to be out in the world again. He had spent four very long months confined within hospital walls. It was as close to prison as he ever hoped to be.

He had spoken very little to Trina since they had left the hospital. It seemed no words would come to him. His mind was deluged with desultory thoughts. There were so many questions looming over him about what he was going to do with his fragmented life. He no longer felt in control of himself and for the first time that he could remember, he was afraid.

Even still, it felt good to be out of the hospital and heading home.

His home was Tieton Georgia, a small town south of Atlanta. Though it had proved to be a long commute over the years he wouldn't have had it any other way. After dealing with the mentality of the mass machinery that was Atlanta each day it felt pretty damn good to come home to a rather modest, historic two-story house in the country where the nearest neighbor was nearly a quarter of a mile away.

The crunch of rocks underneath the car tires interrupted his thoughts as Trina pulled the car onto the gravel driveway. She continued another fifty or more yards following the curve of the driveway as it cut through a dense set of trees on both sides. Finally, she stopped in front of a large wood-framed house. A deeply slanted roof hung over a wood-slatted porch that stretched across the front of the house. The sides and most of the front was enclosed by short, wood railings. At the very front was a set of three steps. Just to the side of the steps was a newly constructed ramp.

"We're home," Trina announced. Troy didn't answer. He continued to stare out the window.

Trina removed the wheelchair from the trunk of the car, unfolded it, and brought it around to Troy's side of the car. She swung the door wide allowing him plenty of room to maneuver.

Troy hesitated. He was content to sit where he was. Sitting in that black wheelchair was too heavy a reminder of his handicap. Though he had been forced to ride in it from the hospital room to the car it did not seem as permanent as it did now sitting in front of his house. In some crazy way, he was afraid that once he sat down in it he would never escape its clutches. He would be a prisoner of this metallic object for the rest of his life.

"Troy," Trina said. "Are you ready?"

He sighed. He had no choice. He grasped the top of the car – ignoring Trina's outstretched hands – and swung himself into the chair.

"Wow," Trina exclaimed. "That physical therapy has done you some good."

"Sure, now if I can just learn how to walk on my hands."

Trina pursed her lips but didn't say anything. She didn't know how to respond. She knew his anger wasn't directed at her, but it still hurt. She told herself that she was going to have to have a lot more patience and understanding with Troy until he was able to accept his handicap and learn to make the best of what he had.

As she pushed him up the ramp to the porch he mumbled "good thinking," but she couldn't tell if this was a compliment or hurtful sarcasm. She decided she would be upbeat and rather assume that it was a compliment on her thoughtfulness.

"I've also converted the guest room downstairs into our new bedroom so you won't have to worry about the stairs. I want to make things as easy as possible for you."

Troy nodded and knew he should be happy about this, but found he couldn't smile.

One thing immediately caught his attention as he was pushed into the living room. The sofa had been rearranged. It had been moved to the right a few feet closer to the wall allowing a large open area to the left of the sofa.

A nice little spot for a cripple chair, he thought. Right in front of the television, where I'll be spending most of my waking hours. A cripple chair. That's what it is. It fit better than any other name. Call it what it is. Call a spade a spade. Call a cripple a cripple.

"Troy?" Trina said. He looked up suddenly. She was standing directly in front of him. "Are you okay?"

"Eh, yeah, yeah. I just kind of let my mind wander."

"Well, how does it feel being back home?"

"Pretty good," he said, but his answer lacked emotion. "Could you put a couple of beers in the freezer for me? It's been months since I've tasted one."

"Sure I will," she said smiling. She quickly slipped the beers into the freezer and stepped back over to Troy. "Do you want to see if there's a game on TV?" She knew that he had been a sports fanatic long before he had met her.

He seemed to ponder her question a moment. "Sure," he finally answered.

She grabbed the remote from the couch and handed it to him. He pointed it at the TV and brought it to life.

"I did some grocery shopping yesterday," she said and began to walk toward the kitchen. "I waited until you were about to be released so everything would be fresh." She smiled to herself. "Are you up for some of my homemade lasagna?"

"Sure, lasagna will be fine." His tone was flat, far from enthusiastic.

She felt hurt again, this time by his lackluster response. She had thought that the mere mention of his favorite food would have brought a little smile to his face. It was her one dish that he had so often raved about, but he seemed to have barely acknowledged it, as though she had asked, 'how about I fry up a burger for you?' It was silly, of course, to get upset because he hadn't reacted the way she thought he would. She had to expect that things would be different. Troy had a lot weighing on his mind. He had lost the use of his legs and his career along with it. His emotions had to be running rampant inside of him. Once again she told herself that she needed to be patient with him. Maybe in the days, weeks, or months to come, he could learn to accept things as they were and learn to be happy again.

She would make the lasagna. She would make it the best damn meal he had ever tasted. Perhaps she could stir up a few of his taste buds, and bring back that familiar smile of his. If not now there would be other times.

While Trina began the long process of preparing scratch lasagna Troy found himself getting lost in a basketball game. For a while, he forgot about his physical disability. For a while, he forgot about the chair. But soon it would be on his mind again like a putrid, festering sore.

CHAPTER 11

Troy Dance took another long swallow from his glass of Jack Daniel Black. The liquid was warm and soothing as it flowed down his throat seeming to wash away some of the dirt of anger, hurt, frustration, and a myriad of confusing feelings. Unfortunately, the anger was not so easily washed away. It lay on the surface, held tenuously there by the liquor's numbing effect.

It had been two weeks since he had left the hospital. This evening was supposed to be a homecoming of sorts. Trina had invited friends and acquaintances here to show their love and support for him. He merely saw it as an intrusion and a chance for others to gawk at the paralyzed man and to thank God that it wasn't them.

That morning he had gone to his first physical therapy session since leaving the hospital. He wasn't too pleased with it. Most of the sessions seemed to be geared toward teaching him how to cope with his handicap and how to lead a 'normal' life. There was a lot of talk about surgeries and new treatments, but he had heard that speech before. Unless they could give him a guarantee he wasn't about to be some guinea pig.

There were a few exercises for him to do, but they were mostly aimed at building his upper body strength. He could do that kind of stuff at home if he wanted to. Right now he couldn't care less.

Coming back from the clinic he had already decided that he wasn't going back. He hadn't told Trina. He would do that later. He knew that she would be disappointed, and probably a little angry, but she would get over it.

He was parked on the edge of the living room, several feet from the sofa where three people were sitting.

"Why don't you come on to church with me this Sunday?" Alex asked. He had stepped up to the side of Troy without him realizing it. He was a tall, bony man with a deep, raspy voice. "We have a great healing service. Maybe God has something in store for you."

"I'm not much on religion," Troy slurred. He remembered a time in his youth when he used to go to church with his parents. They were good times. The accident that killed his parents ended all that.

For a moment Alex looked to be offended, but he quickly shrugged it off.

"There's no pressure to join our church," Alex said, as though that might be a primary reason for Troy not wanting to come. "We can have someone pick you up," he said as an afterthought.

Troy looked around at the people milling about. Some stood around the dining room table where Trina had set up an array of snacks. There were finger sandwiches, tiny shrimp balls, crackers, chips, and an assortment of dips. There was iced tea and soft drinks to drink as well as beer and hard liquor. Troy silently wondered how he had gotten stuck with Alex. This party was supposed to be for him. Trina had felt that he needed a few days to acclimate himself before meeting with his former police buddies. So, if this was his party, why was he being punished? Why was he stuck with this self-righteous fool who thought that only people who believed like him were going to go to heaven?

Trina came up beside Troy and squatted down next to his wheelchair. "How are you doing, honey?" she asked.

"As well as can be expected."

"But you can do better," Alex interrupted. "Give the Lord a try."

Troy ignored him. "Where's Tommy?" he asked Trina.

"He's not going to make it. I just got word that he's tied up on an ongoing investigation."

"I guess that's one thing I don't envy about you guys in the field," Alex began again. "All of them long, boring hours you guys pull. Working in the office I get a straight forty hours most of the time."

Yeah, Troy thought, but you're not a real cop, either. Not in my book.

You've got a nice little house here," someone said to Troy's right. He looked. Paul Willington was standing there with two tiny sandwiches in his left hand and a beer in his right. He was slightly shorter than Troy. His hair was the color of coal, his features dark. According to many, he looked like a young Al Pacino when Al was in his early twenties.

"Thanks," Troy said. He didn't know Paul very well. He had bumped into him a time or two but had never spoken more than just a few words to him.

"I'd like something like this myself." He nodded. "Yeah. No houses right on top of you. Hell, I could turn my stereo up till it blew the pictures off the wall and not have to worry about the neighbors complaining." He grinned.

"Yeah, I like the privacy," he answered blandly.

"Paul," Alex interjected, "why don't you join me and Troy in church this Sunday?"

"I'm not going to your damn church!" Troy said loudly. "Even if I die and they haul me in there in a coffin I will find a way to climb out of there and crawl my sorry ass out the front door."

The place became suddenly quiet when people stopped talking and turned to see what the commotion was about.

"Screw you," Troy said as he maneuvered his wheelchair around and headed a few into the den where other people were milling about. Trina followed him. He quickly finished the last of his drink. "How 'bout getting me another drink," he said to Trina. "And not so much cola this time."

Trina left him to get him a refill. He sat there a moment feeling awkward then headed to a corner of the room where only a couple of people were gathered. He recognized the man and woman from earlier in the evening. They had introduced themselves, but he couldn't remember their names. The man looked to be in his sixties, the woman in her forties. It seemed that the man was some kind of judge and the woman a lawyer, however, it might have been the other way around. He wasn't sure who invited them. The good thing was they probably wouldn't have much to say to him.

The volume of the conversations through the many groups of people had risen to its previous level by the time Trina returned with his drink.

"Thanks," he said, taking the drink.

"How's it going?" Adrianna said walking up to Troy. Grayson was by her side.

"As fine as could be expected."

"Sorry, we're late. There was a wreck on two eighty-five. Two lanes shut down. You know how that goes."

"Yep. I know."

"Looks like you've got a lot of friends," Grayson said.

"Yeah, it looks that way."

Adrianna knelt beside him. "I know this is quite an adjustment for you. If we can be of any help you let us know. Okay?"

"Thanks. I will."

She stood up.

"You two want something to drink or to snack on?" Trina asked.

"I could use a beer," Grayson answered.

"I wouldn't mind one myself," Adrianna said. She placed a hand on Trina's shoulder. "You stay here. I think Grayson and I can find the beers."

Trina smiled. "Thanks."

"We'll see you in a bit," Adrianna said to Troy.

"Take it easy," Grayson added.

"Yeah," Troy said. "And thanks for the ramp."

"No problem," Grayson called back as he walked away.

"What about them Braves," Nelson Tolk said walking up to Troy only moments after Trina and the other two had walked away. He was a big man full of himself. He had always been arrogant, but recently he had been instrumental in solving a big case and all the media coverage and pats on the back had put him over the edge into narcissistic territory.

"How 'bout them," Troy returned. "I guess you got some special seats or something," he sneered.

"Of course. I got season tickets. Great seats. It was a little present for the work I've been doing." He winked at Troy. "I got a feeling the Braves are going all the way to the world series this year. If so, I'm expecting seats for that, too."

"Good for you," Troy said sardonically, swallowing back the urge to spout a few choice obscenities his way.

Nelson reached down and patted him on the shoulder. "Hey, if I come across any great deals that'll help you out I'll let you know. Take it easy now. I should mingle." He straightened up and walked away.

"I'm sorry this isn't turning out very well for you," Trina said.

"Tommy couldn't make it. Tex and Edward didn't show. They're probably working the same case as Tommy. The rest of these people here are just plain butt holes."

"Shhh," Trina whispered. "People can hear you."

"I don't care. All these ..." Troy sighed, deciding not to finish his real thoughts, turned his chair around, and headed back into the living room.

Trina stood up and debated for a moment if she should go after him. In the end, she chose to let him have a little space with his feelings. Troy had never been one to open up and talk about what was going on inside him.

When Troy rolled over toward the sofa once more Alex wasn't there. He didn't know if he had left the party, but he sure hoped that he had."

Troy drank his next two glasses of mixed liquor rather quickly. People came and talked briefly with him and then they were gone as if they were doing the minimum amount of duty that was expected of them.

Gradually people began to leave, but Troy was not fully aware of it. The liquor was doing more than just relaxing him, it was subduing him, numbing him to his surroundings. He slipped into a surreal state. Time passed, and people said their goodbyes, but to Troy, it appeared as if only moments had gone by. Then the party was over and Troy and Trina were alone once again. Troy leaned his head back in his chair and passed out.

He was a kid again. He was wrestling with someone. They were turning over and over again in the grass. Finally, he ended up on top. He held the arms down and gazed deep into the eyes. Slowly he lowered his head to ...

"Troy," Trina called, shaking him awake.

"Wha ..., what?" he said cracking his eyes open.

"You want to go lie down in the bed? I think you'll be more comfortable there." She was kneeling beside him.

Troy ran his hands across his face. "No. How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour."

"It seemed much longer to him. He felt well-rested and relaxed. Even the effects of the liquor seemed to have faded. "Are there any of those little ham sandwiches left?"

"No, but we've got some slices of ham, a loaf of bread, and a jar of mayonnaise. I'm sure I can create a sandwich for you."

"Then, please create me one. I'm suddenly hungry."

"No problem. I'll be right back." She smiled as she stood up and walked to the kitchen.

"Bring me a beer, too, babe," he called. He reached over to the remote and flipped on the television.

"Sure," Trina answered, and the smile on her face faltered.

CHAPTER 12

"I guess that little get-together yesterday evening wasn't such a good idea," Trina said as she sipped at her coffee. They had gotten up to a late breakfast. Trina had fixed herself two pieces of toast with strawberry jelly and a cup of coffee.

"It's not your fault. I'm just not ready for a bunch of people." Troy was working on his second cup of coffee. He had already eaten two eggs, some sausage, and a couple of slices of buttered toast.

"I just thought that the company would boost your spirits a bit."

"I've got what I need to boost my spirits. It's sitting in the refrigerator over there."

"Beer? That's just a temporary fix. In the long run, it will do more damage than good."

"Don't lecture me. What you don't understand is that my long run is the same as my short run. I have no legs. I have no future. It's that simple."

"Oh, no, honey. That's not true. There are still a lot of productive things you can do with your life."

Troy laughed scornfully. "Don't give me all that positive bullshit. This isn't the movies or some overrated, tear-jerker novel. This is reality. And reality says that without my legs I'm only taking up space."

"No, no." Trina shook her head. She got up from her seat and went over to Troy. She knelt beside him. "I think you're wrong. I think that after you get over the shock of what has happened to you you're going to find out that there are a lot of things that you can do."

"Yeah, well. You just don't know what it's like. I was a cop. It was what I liked to do and what I was good at. Do you still think that I can do my old job?"

Trina hesitated a second measuring her words. "Maybe not in the same capacity, but there are other phases of police work that you can do."

"Yeah. I can sit behind a desk all day filling out forms and feeding the computer. But, that's not the same. It's connected, but only in the furthest reaches of my job title."

"I'm sure there are other things you can do that would interest you."

"I'm not so sure." Troy pushed away from the table and rolled over to the refrigerator. He pulled open the door and took out a beer. "A man has got to know his limitations. I've accepted mine and this is the way I deal with it." He closed the refrigerator door and trundled toward the living room.

CHAPTER 13

She stood at the front window of the den looking out at the front yard and the twisting gravel driveway that disappeared through the trees heading to the main highway. She was looking forward to Monday when she would be leaving the house and heading back to work. She had taken off another week to help Troy adjust to his handicap, but it had all blown up in her face. She had thought that she could instill, at least, a small measure of hope and a positive outlook, but instead, he had begun to drag her down as well. It was much like the drowning man taking his would-be rescuer with him. In fact, since his homecoming party, he had become progressively bitter. She thought that a great deal of his hostility was bolstered by his sudden increase in his alcohol consumption.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Wha ...” The voice startled her and she twisted about. “Oh, Troy, I didn’t realize you were awake.”

“The paperboy making a special delivery today?”

“What? What are you implying?”

“You know, for a little extracurricular activity.”

“I’m not even going to answer that.”

He grunted and looked up at her with hard, angry eyes and an unusually haggard face. A week’s growth of scraggly brown beard covered up half his face. “Are you going to make breakfast?”

She was silent for a moment trying to suppress the anger that was building inside her. She expelled a pent-up breath of air. “Yes, I’m going to make breakfast.” She said this as calmly as she could muster, but it still came out stiffly. “I figured I’d make some pancakes and bacon.” She said this a little softer.

He grunted again. “How ‘bout putting a couple of beers in the freezer for me, too, while you’re in there. After breakfast, I’ve got a couple of game shows I want to watch and I can’t stand to see them stone-cold sober.” He twisted his wheelchair around and headed off to the living room.

Reluctantly, Trina placed two beers in the freezer as he had asked. She hated the way his drinking had surged since he left the hospital. Before the assault that had paralyzed him he was the most conservative of social drinkers. He had once told her that he didn’t like not being in control. Maybe now he didn’t think control was important. She had to admit that his whole thinking process had changed.

For a moment she had thought to tell him that he was drinking too much, that his desire to drink the first thing in the morning was a bad sign. But even if she could tell him that most gently and lovingly the chances were it would only lead to another fight. She had tried to talk to him several different times, but he wouldn’t listen. Lately, their discussions had always turned into fits of yelling.

If Troy had treated her this way back before his calamity she was sure she would have left him. But now, under the circumstances, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She kept wondering how she would react to such a devastating injury such as his. Maybe she would be just as bad. He had a lot to deal with. She held out hope that eventually he would come around and accept his handicap and begin to rebuild his life.

She thought of Tommy Waters. He was Troy’s best friend. He had called Troy last night to tell him that he would be dropping by sometime this weekend. She thought that Tommy would be a good influence on Troy. If Troy wouldn’t listen to her perhaps he would listen to Tommy.

CHAPTER 14

“Come on in,” Trina said, opening the door wide. “He’s in the living room perched in front of the television.”

“How are you doing?” Tommy asked.

“I’m okay.”

“You look tired.”

“It’s been a long couple of weeks.”

“I’m sure. But I think it’ll get better.” He smiled and then hugged her warmly before heading off into the living room.

“How’s it going, buddy?” Tommy asked.

Troy twisted his wheelchair around to face Tommy. He held a can of beer loosely in his right hand. “It’s going,” he answered flatly. He turned up the can of beer and took a large swallow.

“Sorry I missed your party, but I couldn’t get away. I had to finish up an assignment.”

Troy shrugged. “Oh, well that’s the way it goes,” he sneered.

Tommy smiled weakly and found himself at a sudden loss for words.

“You want something to drink, Tommy?” Trina asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“I’ll take a Coke if you got it.”

“Sure,” she answered.

“And I’ll take another beer,” Troy quickly added.

As Trina headed toward the kitchen Tommy stepped over to the armchair beside Troy and sat down.

“So,” Tommy began, “I ... I guess it can’t be easy.”

“No,” Troy simply answered.

Again Tommy couldn’t immediately find words. He figured he needed to go at it a different way.

“Let me tell you what happened to Carl Burns,” Tommy began, grinning, instantly lowering his voice as though he were telling a secret. “The other day he busted a hooker over on the south side. No big deal, right? That is until he tried to book her. Then he ran into a slight problem.” He paused for effect, watching the questioning look creep across Troy’s face. “The lady was no lady. She was a man!” Tommy burst into booming laughter.

Troy tried not to ruin his bad mood by laughing, but Tommy’s laughter was too infectious to completely ignore. He smiled and laughed softly.

“Carl couldn’t tell that this ... person, this transvestite, was a man?”

“Man, have you seen some of Carl’s dates?”

Troy grinned. “No, I don’t think I have.”

“Well, believe me when I say that it’s no wonder this guy has trouble distinguishing the genders.” He laughed again, but it was only half as loud as before. “That’s not all,” Tommy continued, “to make matters worse Carl had brought this transvestite into the station in handcuffs, and when he attempted to remove the cuffs he realized that he had somehow lost the keys. He had to get one of the other officers to release the man.” Tommy laughed again, but there was nothing behind it. The incident reminded him of another cop he had met long before he had become a detective. It had been his first year as a cop.

Ned Loughlin was already a veteran cop when Tommy first became an officer. Ned had been on the force for fifteen years then and was twenty years Tommy's senior.

Ned was a good family man. He liked to brag about his boy who played high school football and his middle school daughter who was consistently an A student. He was a moral man who often saw things in black and white. There were good guys and there were bad guys, and Ned, the good guy, took down as many bad guys as he could.

In the first year, Ned had taught Tommy a lot about police work and life in general. The two had bonded as partners quite well despite the disparity in their ages. It was unfortunate that their friendship was cut short.

One night, when Tommy was off duty and Ned was working his beat alone, he made a routine traffic stop on a car with a busted tail light. Ned had no way of knowing that the two men inside had just robbed the convenience store down the street. The two men inside, however, were afraid that if they hadn't been stopped for the robbery that the policeman would at least be suspicious of the two twelve-packs of beer and the many cartons of cigarettes thrown in the back seat. They had grabbed those items to try to make up for the measly fifty bucks that they were able to get from the register.

As it was told later the driver whipped out of the car with a gun in hand taking Ned by surprise. The gunman fired once hitting Ned on the right side of his chest. Ned fell backward against the front of his car. He tried to reach for his gun, but the two men were suddenly on him. They could have shot him dead right there, but they didn't. Instead, they drug him into the woods like some kind of animal and chained him to a pine tree with his handcuffs. They took his radio and keys and threw them further into the woods. They took his gun with them.

The two men walked back up to the road with apparently no thought to the policeman chained to the tree bleeding to death. One of the men took the police car up the road a few miles and dumped it off down a logging trail.

Ned had spent two days and nights shackled to the tree before a couple of hunters came across him. By then it was too late for Ned. He had bled to death. The coroner had speculated that it might have taken as long as twenty-four hours for his life to have finally slipped away.

The two men who had so thoughtlessly left Ned in the woods to die were caught two months later when they attempted to rob yet another convenience store and were thwarted by an off-duty policeman.

Tommy was haunted by the thought of Ned's slow, suffering demise. He couldn't help but think that if he had been able to get out of the cuffs he might have been able to stagger and crawl his way back up to the road where he would have been able to flag down some help. Maybe he would have had the strength to make the trek, maybe not, but he would have, at least, had a chance. Tommy had vowed to himself then that nothing like that would ever happen to him. He would take preventive measures.

Trina was smiling as she walked back into the living room carrying a serving tray. It was loaded with a glass of Coke on ice, a can of beer, and a glass of iced tea for herself. She was smiling not only because she heard Tommy's laugh, but because she also heard Troy's. That made her feel good. Perhaps Tommy would be able to pull Troy out of the quagmire of melancholy and rage as she had hoped he would. So far, so good. She passed the drinks out and then found herself a seat on the sofa, to the right of Troy. She reached out and took his hand and brought it close to her breast.

"How's the physical therapy going?" Tommy asked.

"Okay, I guess. My upper body is getting strong, but as far as my legs go all they can do is shock them and hope it stimulates the leg muscles enough so that they won't shrink. Otherwise, my legs just hang there like two small slabs of beef." Troy hadn't quit the therapy as he had planned. Trina had pleaded with him to continue with it for a

while longer so he could better determine what good, if any, it was doing for him. He had acquiesced. Now, any nagging thoughts that he might have had that this might be a good thing had passed.

“Yeah, but I know you. You’re a fighter. You won’t give up.”

“I use to think that. Not anymore. I’m tired of fighting. I’ve gone to my last session. I told Trina that this morning. She didn’t like it, but it’s my life.”

Trina’s face reddened. She looked down clenching her teeth as she did to keep from saying anything.

Tommy looked to Trina for a moment as if to say something but then figured that this was a family thing.

“There’s another reason I stopped by. A friend of mine gave me a couple of Atlanta Hawk tickets for tomorrow evening. How about joining me?”

“No,” he answered flatly. “I’m not ready to go out in public with this chair chained to me.”

“That’s not a problem. The place is totally wheelchair friendly.”

“No. I don’t want to be seen in this wheelchair.”

“Oh, man, nobody is going to pay any attention to you and that wheelchair. If they do it’s their own damn problem, not yours.”

Troy shook his head. “No. I’m not ready. I can’t handle people staring at me with their pity eyes.”

“I think it would do you a world of good to get out of this house. You might even get a little color back in your cheeks.” Tommy smiled. “You’ve been looking just a bit too white lately.”

Troy only cocked a partial smile that quickly faded, and he didn’t bother to return the ribbing as he once would have.

“Ah, come on,” Trina prompted. “You know how much you love basketball.”

“Maybe another time.” He leveled his eyes on Tommy. “Take Trina. She needs to get out. I sure can’t take her anywhere.”

“Troy,” Trina pleaded. “You ...”

“No,” Troy said, an edge of anger in his voice. “You need to go with him.”

Tommy frowned. “Okay, I can’t let these tickets go to waste. I’ll take Trina if she wants to go. But this isn’t the end of it. I’m going to bug the hell out of you until I finally get you out of this house.”

Troy smiled weakly.

CHAPTER 15

He was alone. It felt both good and bad at the same time. The silence and utter stillness of the room had a calming effect, but the thought of the wheelchair loomed large and dark like some mechanical beast that held him in its grasp.

His handicap was tearing him apart and all he was getting was token help. No one cared about how this was destroying him from the inside. No one. Not Tommy Waters, nor any of the other cops that used to work side by side with him. Not even Trina. Everyone had abandoned him.

He didn't feel like watching television, listening to the radio, or even having the lights on. He sat in the cool gray of the living room, in the early part of the evening, staring across the room at nothing in particular.

Tommy and Trina had gone to the basketball game. He thought now how quickly Trina had accepted his offer. Too quickly. He wondered how faithful she would be now that he was a cripple. He wasn't impotent, but it was obvious that any lovemaking he attempted would be an ordeal. And what about Tommy? A friend is a friend, but maybe he figured old Troy couldn't satisfy Trina properly so why not help him out by giving his wife a little bit of evening delight. He wondered what they were doing.

Tommy held the large plastic cup of beer out in front of him. "For what I paid for this I could have bought a six-pack at almost any store in Atlanta."

Only a corner of Trina's lips raised in a semblance of a smile. "You sure Troy will be okay by himself? Since he's been home he hasn't been alone for more than a half-hour at a time when I would have to run to the store."

"Sure. Troy is one tough bird. And, besides, he's going to be alone tomorrow anyway, when you return to work."

"I know, but ... "

"He'll be fine. Troy has good upper body strength, a strong mind, and a cell phone."

"You're right. I just feel so sorry for him. He's always so depressed and angry. I try to help him, but sometimes I think I make it worse. I just wish he could get back some feelings in his legs. Something that might offer him hope of being able to walk again."

Tommy looked at the tickets. "This is our isle," he said. He let her go first and followed close behind as they pushed past several people to get to their seats. He handed her one of the beers after she had taken her seat.

Tommy took a drink of his beer as he sat down and before beginning to speak again. "I understand that his doctor has indicated that surgery might help."

"Yes. I was told that there was an outside chance that one or more surgeries could help him to walk again. His legs would never be like before, he would still be dependent on a cane or walker, but that would give him a little more freedom. The surgery comes with a risk, however. There is a slight risk that he would die on the operating table."

"Sounds like you and Troy are going to have a lot of decisions to make."

She nodded and suddenly looked very tired. "The problem is Troy doesn't even want to talk about it."

"You know, I'm glad you came with me. I think you need a break from Troy. He's a good friend, but he doesn't seem to be handling this tragedy very well. He's hurting, and he seems to be lashing out at whoever is closest. And that's you."

The tears began to slowly trickle down her face. Tommy put an arm around her. She turned and began to silently weep upon his shoulder.

He wondered what they were doing right now. At first, it was just a passing thought. Then he thought again how quickly Trina had accepted his offer that she should go to the game with Tommy. It was too quick, almost as if it were planned. He wondered what they were doing. He wondered if they had even gone to the game. The thought of them together wouldn't leave him, and the more he thought the more enraged he became.

He saw them. Suddenly. Like some movie screen opening up in his mind. Just like when he had seen Rock a few weeks earlier, though this time Troy was not there he was simply watching at a distance. It startled him. What was happening to him? Was he cracking up? Was he hallucinating? Was he dreaming? Maybe this had something to do with the drugs he had been given at the hospital?

In his mind, he saw Tommy's arm wrapped snugly about Trina's shoulders. Trina's face was buried in Tommy's chest so that Troy could only see a portion of the left side of her face. Tommy was looking downward as though staring at the empty seat in front of him.

Anger coursed through Troy like a raging fire. That sorry son-of-a-bitch! It was just as he had suspected.

He screamed or thought he did, later when he looked back he wasn't sure. In that instant, his eyes fixed on the back of the empty chair in front of Tommy. He suddenly wanted Tommy's face to slam into the top edge of that chair. To his surprise Tommy jerked violently forward, breaking free of Trina, and drove his face hard into the top edge of the chair. The cup of beer he was holding sailed across the seat and into the next aisle.

Troy wanted a close-up of Tommy's face and instantly he seemed to be standing directly in front of him, as though he were only a few feet away.

Tommy sat back up quickly, apparently shocked at what he had just done. A crease was across his forehead and the upper part of his nose where he had struck the chair. A trail of blood was running from his nose down to his mouth. Trina was beside him crying as she dug through her purse. A moment later she came out with a small box of tissue.

Troy was still angry. He wanted it to happen again.

Tommy lurched awkwardly forward as though in a seizure and smashed his face into the seat again. This time Troy was certain that he heard a discernible 'thud' somewhat akin to a baseball bat hitting a tree. This time his head tottered up slowly from the edge of the chair. His eyes were somewhat vacuous, his mouth agape as if he were moaning.

Trina was grabbing him about the shoulders trying frantically to get him to lean back in his seat. Her face was flush and she looked utterly bewildered. She looked frantically about for help, temporarily bemused by what happened to be able to speak. Others nearby looked on but didn't immediately respond because they weren't sure of what was going on.

Troy wasn't finished yet. He willed it to happen again.

Tommy suddenly jerked spastically away from Trina almost knocking her out of her seat. Tommy's head came back down and slammed a third time into the edge of the wooden seat in front of him. A tiny piece of the chair chipped off and blood from Tommy's forehead trailed down the back of the seat.

A pounding pain abruptly cut through Troy's head. He clutched the sides of his head and doubled over in his seat. Abruptly he lost the vision in his mind as the

hammer-like waves assaulted his temples. For a few frightening moments, it seemed that it might last an eternity, but mercifully the waves began to gradually subside, and the intensity of the pain began to ebb.

He held his head in his hands for another minute or two after the hurt had dissipated relishing the absence of the acute, piercing pain. He felt weak and ravenous. It was the first time since he had awakened from the coma that he felt such a ravenous appetite. He finally lifted his head and made his way into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 16

He was drifting aimlessly aboard a small, aluminum boat in Henson's lake. The boat had no motor and somehow he lost the two wooden paddles. The last trace of the sun had just gone below the horizon and he was beginning to get scared.

A young girl was screaming and crying from somewhere onshore. Though she was too far away for him to discern he knew that he knew her, from where he could not recall. It was as though there was no place for her in his memory.

He took note of the water for the first time. It was not a muddy brown as it used to be, but a deep red, almost black, like blood. He wasn't sure why he thought of blood, but it made him very uneasy.

He paddled with his hands awhile trying to direct the boat to land, fighting the disgust at having to place his hands in the bloody water.

He was close to land when something popped up to the surface of the water. It was a towel. One he had seen in a dream, or more correctly, a nightmare. He was about to reach for the towel when he heard a 'click'. For some reason, it reminded him of a bathroom door being opened. That scared the hell out of him.

He jerked, shaking the wheelchair, moaned, and flipped his eyes open. His eyes darted frantically about quickly surveying his surroundings. For a couple of moments he was lost, then one by one things began to fall back into place.

It had been a dream. He expelled a breath of hot air. It was just a dream, he told himself. That was all. Nothing more.

A door closed behind him and he looked around. Tommy and Trina had just stepped into the house. That was what had awakened him. He straightened up and wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"How was the game?" He turned his wheelchair to face them.

Trina flipped on the overhead light.

Troy's jaw fell open. The sight of Tommy's face shocked him. He looked awful. His nose and forehead were heavily bandaged, the right side of his lower lip and jaw were swollen and bruised, and his left eye was blackened.

He hadn't expected it. He had forgotten about his earlier experience of seeing them at the game and his willing Tommy to slam his head into the chair in front of him. It had not seemed real. It was more like one of those crazy dreams he had been having lately. Even now he found it difficult to believe that it had happened. Had he really done this to Tommy?

"What ... what happened?" Troy asked.

Tommy's mouth opened, but at first, he couldn't speak. He staggered over to the sofa and flopped down before he was able to find the words.

"I don't know. Not exactly. We had just settled into our seats when it felt like someone grabbed the back of my head and slammed it into the seat in front of me. Before I could recover from the shock of that inexplicable action my head hit that seat two more times."

Tommy paused and took a long look at Troy. For a moment Troy felt as though Tommy were searching his face for the truth. But that was ridiculous. How could anyone suspect Troy? He was more than forty miles away and confined to a chair.

Tommy took a breath and continued. "I know it sounds insane, but I had thought for sure that someone had grabbed me from behind. After my head had smashed into the chair for the third time I somehow managed to turn my head to look behind me." He exhaled loudly. "There was no one there. Not right behind me, anyway. Two seats

back was a man with two young boys. They were not likely suspects. They looked as horrified as I was. And Trina says it looked like I was doing it myself.”

Troy looked up at Trina to check her response. He could only read the pity and confusion written across her face and nothing more.

“So what happened? Did you go to the hospital, or did they patch you up at the game?”

“I was cleaned up at the game. At first, they didn’t believe my story about me involuntarily smacking my head into the chair. They figured that I had gotten into a fight and made up this story to keep me from being kicked out. When I showed them my badge, though, they took me more seriously. They suggested I go to the hospital. They even offered to send me by ambulance.” He snickered. “Anyway, we went to the hospital to be told that my nose was broken, and the rest of me was just a series of cuts and bruises. They wanted to do an MRI on me to see if they could detect any kind of abnormality in my head, but we would have been waiting around there, for at least, a couple more hours so I figured I’d wait to see my own doctor.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before,” Troy said and had to suppress a grin. “So I guess you didn’t see any of the game?”

“No,” Tommy answered. “Most of the time was spent at the arena’s infirmary and the hospital. The game was almost over by then and we were both hungry so we decided to stop and have a little dinner.”

“You two had dinner?” A sliver of anger ran through Troy’s voice, but Tommy didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, we stopped to get some pizza.” He grinned. “You should have seen the expressions on people’s faces when I walked in. You would have thought they were looking at a monster.”

“Are you in a lot of pain?” Troy asked, and couldn’t contain a trace of a smile that inched over his face. Tommy didn’t notice.

“You might say that. I think I need to head on over to my house and get a little rest.” He stood up. “I believe that I’ve had enough excitement for one day.” He cocked a grin as he headed to the door. It looked more like a grimace of pain.

“Thanks for the evening,” Trina said as she walked him to the door.

“No problem. I just wish we could have seen some of the game.”

Trina smiled. “It turned out okay.” At dinner, she had confided in Tommy about her strained relationship with Troy. He was a good listener and had offered her some good advice and encouragement.

Tommy nodded. “Be patient,” he whispered. He looked across the room to Troy. “Next time you’re coming with me, buddy. One way or another.”

“We’ll see,” Troy answered. There was no humor in his voice.

Tommy opened the door, looked one more time at Trina, then left.

After Tommy had left, a fog of silence seemed to settle upon them as though neither Troy nor Trina knew what to say.

“Have you eaten?” Trina asked after a few moments.

“Yes. I fixed me a couple of microwave meals earlier.”

She smiled tentatively. “Well, I guess I’ll take a quick shower.”

“Is there anything going on that I should know about?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Between you and Tommy.”

“No! How could you even think that?”

“Just the way you two looked at each other.”

She came over to his side and knelt beside his chair. “There is no one in this whole world for me but you. I love you.” She met his eyes as if to confirm what she was

saying. Her lips met his and for a moment he forgot his jealousy and enjoyed the warmth and softness of her embrace. She gently pulled away. "After I shower, maybe we can cuddle a little, or more if you're up to it." She smiled and walked away.

"I love you, too," he called after her. "Now, hurry back."

"I will," she returned and disappeared down the hallway.

Once she had disappeared he wondered how much of that had been an act. Was she simply leading him on to draw away any suspicions that he had about her and Tommy?

He thought about what had happened to Tommy. It was still hard for him to believe that he had done this to him. But what other explanation was there? This was far beyond coincidence.

What was this ... power that he had? He had heard about people who could bend spoons, or move objects with the sheer power of their minds, but never to this degree. Not even close. Then again, maybe it was the same, but his power was so much more evolved. It would be like the bicep of a one hundred and sixty-pound couch potato to his three hundred pound weight lifter. He smiled at that analogy.

But was this a new power that he possessed? He had had some episodes in his youth that now seemed suspicious.

He recalled a time when he was about ten years old. He was climbing a tree near his house intent on climbing higher than any of his friends. He was up about thirty feet when he lost his grip and fell.

At the time he hadn't thought much about it. Now, looking back, there seemed to be a curious thing about this fall. He had shinnied along a thick tree branch, (one that was plenty wide and sturdy for his small body) that angled upward to come within a few feet of a higher branch that slanted downward from the trunk. His idea was to transfer to the other branch so he could continue upward. When he had gotten as close as he could he had to stretch out his arm to barely reach the limb from his seated position. The limb was wider than his hand, though, and since he had to use his other hand to help him to stand all he could do was to use the upper branch as balance until he could bring both hands up to it. He pushed himself up, but before he could use his other hand he lost his footing. If anything, he should have fallen a good fifteen feet before having any chance of catching the next branch in front of him. Instead, he seemed to almost stop giving him the time to spin around and catch the branch directly underneath the branch he had fallen from which was about three feet down. The sudden jerk of catching the lower branch had hurt his shoulder and arms, but he was able to pull himself up and climb down safely.

Something else occurred to him. Could this thing be hereditary? He thought of a time years ago. He couldn't have been more than eight years old, but the memory still stuck to him, though the events that happened seemed so fantastic that he had often played them off as a child's overactive imagination. Now, he wondered.

He was awakened one night by the strident voice of his father. He was yelling a string of curse words. His mom could barely be heard in the background speaking defensively and offering general apologies.

He had slipped out of bed and tiptoed over to his bedroom door. He had opened the door just wide enough for him to peer through to see what was going on.

His mom was sitting on the edge of their time-beaten armchair. She was talking quickly, but softly, her arms moving about as if to punctuate what she was saying.

His dad was pacing the floor like a hungry lion, though not nearly as graceful. His movements were stumbling and awkward. Even at his young age, Troy could tell that his dad was drunk again.

“You don’t tell me when to come home, bitch,” his dad slurred. “I am the man of the house. Haven’t you learned that yet?”

“But, Arthur, rent is due next week and ...“

“Screw the rent!” he shouted. “You don’t embarrass me by calling Bailey’s bar to have me paged!” He balled up his fist and headed toward her.

Troy saw it then but later was unsure of what he saw. The coffee table moved, sliding across the carpeted floor maybe three feet. It was enough to get in the path of his dad, who stumbled over it and fell cursing to the floor off to the side of his mother.

“I was just thinking,” his mom said as she stood up and backed to the other side of the room. “If you miss work tomorrow we won’t have enough money to pay rent next week.”

“I don’t give a damn!” his dad shouted, standing up and holding his right shin. “It’s my damn business!” His dad took a step toward his mom and stopped. He picked up the table lamp off the end table and snatched the cord out of the wall. “I am the damn man of the house and you will respect me!” He reared back and threw the lamp.

The lamp stopped. Again Troy had seen it but later had figured that he had imagined it. He had been half asleep after all. He wasn’t sure of what he had seen.

The lamp stopped, as he remembered it now, only a few inches from his mother’s face. It hovered in the air for an interminable length of time then suddenly veered left and landed innocuously on the floor.

His dad’s mouth gaped open, but no words escaped. After a moment his dad closed his mouth and swallowed. “I’m going to bed,” his dad said softly. When his dad turned to go Troy quietly closed his door and slipped back into bed.

As Troy sat in his wheelchair sadness and confusion contorted his face. He thought of the time just before Jamie’s death. Did he know what was about to happen to him?

CHAPTER 17

It was nine in the morning when Troy woke up for the second time. The first time Trina had awakened him at about six-thirty to kiss him goodbye before going to work. Minutes later he had fallen back asleep.

Last night was a good night. It was the first time he and Trina had made love since his coma. Before then he had been afraid to try. For one he didn't know if he would be able to. And two, he was afraid of how Trina would respond to his limited ability. Overall, however, it had turned out well. It wasn't perfect by any means. It was rather awkward and clumsy, but in the end, they were both satisfied.

Even though Trina seemed to be happy with his performance last night he wondered if her contentment with him would continue. How long would it be before she grew tired of their strictly limited way of lovemaking?

He pushed out of bed and climbed into his wheelchair. For a moment he thought that he should upgrade to a motorized chair as Trina had suggested early on. But no. A motorized one would only make him feel more useless. With the manual one, he felt like he was doing something for himself and not completely dependent on people or machines.

He made his breakfast of eggs, bacon, and coffee. It was no easy task, but he was getting better at it. He could have hired someone to come in and do the cooking, and take care of him. That was one of Trina's suggestions as well. That, however, would have taken away another piece of his independence and driven down his self-worth to almost zero.

After breakfast, he slipped a few long-neck bottles of Coors beers into the freezer. Luckily, the refrigerator was a side by side so it wasn't a struggle to reach.

He watched television and thought about Jamie. Why was he having so many dreams about him? And why were they so strange and distorted? He couldn't help but feel that they were trying to tell him something. But what? What kind of message was his subconscious mind trying to convey?

After a time of feeling frustrated at having no answers about why these dreams had started or what they meant he decided it was time to have a beer. If it didn't clear things up for him it would, at least, induce him not to care.

He retrieved a beer and moved in front of the television once more. Restless and agitated he began flipping through the stations searching for something to distract his mind. He stopped when he came across the movie *Deliverance* just beginning. He had seen the movie on DVD at a friend's house nearly ten years ago. It was a classic even back then. For an old movie, he thought that it was a pretty damn good one.

The movie did the trick by drawing his thoughts away from all these questions that threatened to bombard his mind. After the movie, though, and halfway through his sixth beer, he found his thoughts slipping back to Tommy.

It was still hard for him to believe that he was the cause of Tommy's injuries. Even if his mother had displayed some kind of supernatural power when he was little it didn't compare to his long-distance telekinesis.

He finished the last swallow of beer from the long neck bottle and set the empty on the end table next to him. He thought that now would be a good time for him to examine this newfound power of his.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He concentrated on the kitchen trying to get a picture of it in his mind. The refrigerator was his main objective.

He saw it ... somewhat. In his mind, the kitchen looked to be in the midst of a gray fog. He looked about and could only make out dull outlines of cabinets and countertops. He pushed himself harder and could make out the refrigerator, but it looked to be far away and was shimmering like a desert mirage. He stared at the refrigerator in his mind trying to force it into focus. It did get a bit clearer, but not much. He decided that he should try to open the freezer door on the side by side. It took a real effort that brought a bead of sweat to his forehead. The freezer door slowly pulled open to almost a foot before it stopped. He figured that a few more inches and the door would stay open on its own. Then he would try to bring the beer to him. He put all his mental concentration into it, straining as if he were trying to wrestle a great weight off the floor. Unfortunately, it wasn't good enough, the door wouldn't budge. He abruptly lost it and the freezer door swung shut.

He exhaled a breath of frustration. Why couldn't he do this? He had manipulated Tommy from miles away, so why couldn't he open a refrigerator door from only a few yards away? None of it made any sense. Unless none of it happened. It was a scary thought, but what if he had overheard Tommy and Trina talking about the incident as they entered the house that day. He was asleep which could have allowed the words to get through to his subconscious mind. Their conversation could have triggered a dream in which he was the one responsible for Tommy's injuries. Maybe he had inadvertently created these false memories because he wanted to hurt Tommy for taking Trina away from him and leaving him home alone.

He rolled his chair into the kitchen and retrieved a beer from the freezer section of the side by side. Maybe he even imagined seeing the kitchen from the living room. He laughed bitterly. He just might be cracking up. He screwed the top off the beer bottle and headed back into the living room.

CHAPTER 18

To Troy sleep didn't come easy. Earlier in the evening, he had read a newspaper article where Richard 'Rock' Duffy had vehemently avowed his innocence in the shoot-out at the old mill. He stated again that he had killed Lonnie in self-defense. When they heard Troy sneaking around in the dark immediately after that they assumed that he must be in cahoots with Lonnie and since Troy did not identify himself as a cop they also assumed that he intended to kill them as Lonnie had tried to kill him. Their one fault was over pursuing Troy instead of calling the cops.

In the article 'Rock' went on to say that he was a legitimate businessman who had owned and managed a very prosperous trucking company for nearly ten years and resented any implications that he was in any way involved in drugs.

The article infuriated Troy. The entire story contained only a modicum of truth. Below the surface was a pack of lies. The only truth that Troy could see was that Rock did indeed own a trucking company. Troy knew, as did many law enforcement officials, that much of the money marked as profit from the business was siphoned from illegal activity. The trucking business was only a front to explain Rock's affluent lifestyle. The problem was that knowing what was going on was not good enough. Given that Rock had the best lawyers that money could buy there had to be hard evidence if there was to be any chance of putting him away.

Since going to bed Troy had tried to mentally see Rock much as he did when he was at the hospital. Just like the incident with Tommy a week ago, however, he wasn't sure that what had happened then was real either. But through his doubt, he continued to hope. Without the use of his legs, this was the only way he knew to get even. Crazy or not he had to try.

He thought he saw Rock, but wasn't sure. He saw something or someone. It was a blurry image, a movement. He tried to focus, and for a moment things cleared and he could tell that it was indeed a person. But, who, he couldn't tell, the picture was still too hazy. In another moment he lost the image altogether.

He wanted to believe that he had this psychic power. It was a better option than believing that he was slowly going insane.

Assuming that he did have this psychic power and that he had truly seen Rock while at the hospital, and later, Tommy at the ball game why couldn't he see him now? Was it a distance thing? No, that couldn't be it. A few days ago he had tried to mentally see into the kitchen, which was only a few feet away, with very little success. So what was it? He couldn't think. None of it seemed to make any sense.

He wanted to destroy Rock, to wipe him clear off the map. He was the reason he was in this chair. He was the reason he had lost his career and a big part of his life. If he had his chance he would kill Rock without a bit of hesitation.

For a moment he was stunned by the thought of actually murdering someone. For as long as he had been a cop he had strode to act within the confines of the law, stepping over the line only occasionally when he felt it necessary. What he thought to do to Rock was extreme. It was murder. Though if it were done in a psychic state no one would ever be able to prove that he was responsible. Still, it would be murder. The funny thing was, he was okay with that.

The thought of killing someone, other than in the line of duty, or in self-defense, didn't shock him as it once would have. Rock was different. If anyone deserved to die it was Rock. In a way killing him would only be a matter of justice and in the long run, his death may well save a few lives.

Burning hate festered in Troy's mind and he couldn't let it go. Even after sleep began to drape over him he could feel the rancor seeping into his subconscious, and into his very dreams.

Richard 'Rock' Duffy, took another shot of scotch before deciding to undress and retire for the night. It was after two in the morning and his part-time lover was already asleep, worn out by their lovemaking and the drugs she had consumed earlier. Rock stuck to alcohol, and even then he never allowed himself to get wasted. He had seen too many men with big dreams lose it all by cramming stuff up their noses or putting a needle in a vein. Alcohol was less of a villain, but it could also swallow you up if you didn't respect its power.

He took off his shirt and was about to place it on a hanger when he heard something outside the bedroom. It was a slow, constant patter, as though someone was stepping gently down the hardwood floor of the hallway. It was so faint that if the house had not been so utterly quiet he might not have heard it.

No one else should have been in the house. He wondered how anyone could have gotten past his alarm system. But hell, that was okay. If it were an intruder, he had something to greet him with.

He stepped lightly over to the nightstand and removed the .357 Magnum from the drawer. He checked to see if it was loaded. It was, as he knew it would be. He clenched the gun in his right hand and crept over to the open bedroom door.

The noise abruptly quit, and before he could think of what to do next, a form stepped up to the bedroom threshold. Rock nearly squeezed the trigger, but the unexpected sight before him momentarily froze his trigger finger.

Standing in the semi-darkness of the doorway was a small boy. At first impression, he looked to be about ten years old, but his face was somewhat obscured so he might have been a bit younger or older. The only illumination came from wall sconce lights in the hallway that had been dimmed for the night.

Rock started to speak then noticed a sliver of light reflecting off of something that the boy was holding in his right hand. A knife!

At first, the sight of the knife didn't faze Rock. It was only a small pocket knife. It looked to be a four-inch blade. Rock snickered. He towered over the boy and had a good hundred fifty pounds on him. Some of it was fat, but a lot of it was muscle. What did the kid think he was going to do with that knife? Rock had taken knives a lot longer than this pocket knife from punks a lot bigger than this little boy and with nothing more than his bare hands.

"What the hell are you doing here, kid!?" Rock's voice steadily rose with the question. "You nearly got your fool head shot off!" He shifted the barrel of the gun away from the boy.

The boy didn't answer. His face remained stolid. There was no expression of fear, anger, hurt, or even concern. He could have been a mannequin standing there in the doorway. A mannequin with a knife.

Then something pulled Rock's attention away from the stoic expression plastered across the boy's face.

It was the knife. Something was happening to it. A trace of light began to dance across the edge of the blade, and ... the knife began to grow! It started to swell, to distend and stretch like some kind of metallic creature breaking out from its steel cocoon. When it was all done it was nearly ten inches long.

Rock shook his head in disbelief. This couldn't be happening. This was crazy. His eyes had to be playing tricks on him. Or he was hallucinating. Perhaps it was the alcohol he had consumed earlier. Had his lover spiked his drink with one of her drugs?

“Wha ...” Rock began, then saw the boy suddenly move. The knife came up with blinding speed and the kid rushed him. If not for Rock’s keen reflex the knife might have sunk deep into his chest, but Rock was able to leap backward and the knife sliced empty air, missing him by only a couple of inches.

As Rock backpedaled he swung the gun around toward the kid, but before he could squeeze the trigger the boy had switched the knife to his left hand and quickly swung the knife sideways in an arc. The blade of the knife hit the top of Rock’s wrist digging deep into the flesh, drawing blood, and pushing the hand away from him.

The gun went off in an explosion of sound. A portion of the bedroom door just above the knob blew up in a spray of splintered wood. At the same instant, Rock’s part-time lover screamed and sprung up in bed.

Rock backed quickly. His only thought in this second of action was to avoid the blade of the knife.

The boy rushed him again, not giving him any breathing space. He drove the knife toward Rock’s ample stomach. Rock had no time to bring the gun back into position. He reacted with a left-handed roundhouse punch that slammed into the side of the boy’s face at about the same time that the knife reached him. The blade sunk a few inches into Rock’s belly before the boy was knocked across the bedroom floor, pulling the knife with him. The boy hit the floor, tumbled feet overhead, and banged into the wall. At the same time, Rock stumbled backward, bumped into the side of the bed, and sat down.

“Rock!” The woman’s voice was nearly hysterical. “Are you okay?”

“Damn, son of a bitchin kid! I hope I killed him. If not I will as soon as he wakes up and tells me why he attacked me.” He held his hand against his wounded belly. Blood was seeping through his fingers. “Get me a towel or something before I bleed to freaking’ death!”

The woman jumped up out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom still feeling the effects of the alcohol and drugs.

Rock looked over to where he had knocked the boy. He wasn’t there! It shook Rock to his bones. A hit like the one he gave the boy should have sent him to dreamland and broke a bone or two in the process. But the boy was gone without even a whimper. Where the hell was he?

The bed creaked behind him and his first thought was that Leanne, his lover, had returned. But then he heard her stumbling around in the bathroom. With a start, he realized that it wasn’t her on the bed.

He whipped around in time to see the kid hurling himself at him, bringing the knife straight down. He tried to react, but he was too slow. The blade was plunged deep into his chest, stopping only when the butt of the knife struck his skin. Rock and the boy tumbled off of the bed from the momentum. The gun dropped out of Rock’s hand and bounded a couple of feet across the floor.

Leanne stepped out of the master bathroom with a large bath towel in her hand. She stopped suddenly when she saw the boy and the crumpled body of Rock lying on the floor. Her eyes fastened on the handle of the knife that protruded from Rock’s chest and the rapidly spreading wetness that exuded from the wound. She looked up at Rock’s face, at the hollow eyes that stared blankly up at the ceiling. She screamed.

CHAPTER 19

Troy Dance woke up at nine o'clock in the morning. At first, he simply stared up at the off-white stippled ceiling trying to gather his senses. In the first few moments of his awakening, he wasn't even sure where he was.

He pushed his legs off the edge of the bed as his thoughts began to tumble back into place.

He looked over to the side of the bed where Trina slept. It was empty. She had left to go to work earlier this morning. Had she kissed him goodbye? He couldn't remember.

He looked to the black wheelchair that sat unfolded at the end of the bed. Without being fully aware of it he willed it to him.

The chair started with a jerk, then slowly began to roll toward him. It stopped just to the side of him. For a moment he stared at the black monster, amazed at what he had done without consciously thinking of it. Days earlier when he had attempted to open the refrigerator by simply thinking of it. After that, he had just assumed that this supernatural ability that he thought he had was simply a product of his wild imagination. Or worst, the onset of insanity. He had even doubted that he had caused Tommy's injuries. Now he had to rethink that assumption.

Troy pushed himself up into his chair and rolled the chair into the kitchen next to the refrigerator. He opened the door and slipped out a beer. He screwed the top off the long-necked bottle and let the door swing back shut.

He was acutely aware of the anger that had already begun to fester inside of him. Of late it was a constant that came upon him when he first woke up. Sure, most of it was the thing with his legs, but there seemed to be something more. A hidden something that nipped at his very core.

He thought of Jamie and the dream he had last night. It was really strange. In the dream, Jamie and he were one. The body was Jamie, or at least how he remembered Jamie. But the mind, the thoughts, the essence was him.

Overall, it was a good dream, because in the dream he and Jamie had killed Rock. Rock had finally been made to pay for all the pain that he had caused him. A good dream, yes, but it didn't make him feel as happy as he thought it would. Seeing Jamie, and being Jamie had caused a sad undertone to settle on him and a sudden realization that Jamie was at the very root of his anger. He didn't know-how. But just thinking of Jamie was filling him with confusing emotions. There was a deep emptiness and longing for Jamie, a wave of anger at him for leaving him, and a pang of guilt that seemed to fuel the anger that he felt. The feelings had hit him hard lately. Before the assault on him, he rarely thought of Jamie.

To make matters worse he felt like he was losing Trina. He could sense that the passion she had once felt for him was fading. It was going the way of his legs. He felt that what love she still possessed for him was turning to pity. Sometimes he hated her for that.

What was she doing right now? Was she working? Or, was she standing around the coffee maker flirting with some tall stud with chiseled features and a quarter of a million-dollar bank account? And why wouldn't she? He had nothing to offer her anymore.

He wondered if he could see her in his mind like he had seen Tommy at the game. A couple of days ago after he failed to use telekinesis to retrieve a beer from the

refrigerator he would have said no. But now with the ease that he had commanded the wheelchair to come to him this morning those doubts had begun to dissipate.

He closed his eyes and thought of her. He drew her in his mind trying to capture the details of her face. He could imagine her large, sultry brown eyes that always made his heart quiver, and her silky auburn hair that lay long and soft and curled in gossamer strands that gently touched the sides of her face. He searched for her trying to make the image of her into something concrete, something real.

Seconds began to slip by quickly without any hint of success.

A minute, then two, passed by and he still had not locked onto her. It angered him and he shut his eyes tighter, concentrating with all that he had. He leaned forward in his seat as the tension mounted.

More minutes faded away.

At once he could see something. A fuzzy outline; a distorted face. The features were indistinguishable. It could be her, but he wasn't sure. The whole picture was much too blurry, as though he were looking through frosted glass.

He strained trying to see clearer. A thin coat of moisture broke out on his forehead. An obtuse pain began at the center of his forehead.

Ten more minutes passed. The pain in his head had increased significantly. He wasn't able to focus his entire will on the distorted face, and it began to crumble, falling into gray ashes. He could no longer sustain the concentration.

A sharp pain, much like the slice of a knife, ran through his head. He screamed, sprung his eyes open, and fell back against the seat of the wheelchair. He sat there a minute breathing heavily, his mouth wide open. He slowly closed his mouth as the pain began to ebb in tiny increments. He moaned, feeling somewhat like a boxer trying to rise from the canvas after being knocked down. After another couple of minutes, the pain in his head began to dwindle even further. It was now a dull pain, but not deep. He closed his eyes in frustration.

He hadn't been able to reach her. This time he didn't doubt that he had the power. There had to be a reason it didn't work. As he had once considered distance could certainly have been a factor. That would make sense, though in this case, he doubted that distance was the only element. Trina's office was probably a little bit closer than Phillips Arena where Tommy and Trina had gone for the basketball game. He had easily focused on Tommy then, but couldn't make out Trina now at all. Other factors had to be the answer. There may be several factors that contributed to the strength and ability of his power. Maybe it was the structure of the building where Trina worked that kept him out. Maybe it was because he was angrier when he was able to focus on Tommy. Maybe it was simply his body, his mind, and/or his spirit, adapting to this newly developed power. Perhaps, he just had to have time to learn how to properly manipulate it. A lot of maybes but no clear answers.

He couldn't count on being able to keep tabs on Trina once she was out of the house. It would be a hit-and-miss proposition for him. So, in effect, Trina was a free woman when she was away from home. Chances were that she could screw around on him and there was nothing he could do about it.

He couldn't bear the thought of her with another man. He couldn't live from day to day wondering if she were faithful or not. No, he would be a total wreck. There was only one thing he could do. As the man of the house, he would insist that she quit her job and stay home with him.

They would miss the money that she made, but with his disability income and the money they had already saved, they could make it. At times it might be a struggle, but in the end, she would begin to love him again. Without the distraction of other people, she might even begin to see him as a whole man.

CHAPTER 20

Tommy Waters took time out after his preliminary investigation of a rather unusual homicide to swing by Troy and Trina's place. He couldn't wait till the end of the day, nor did he want to tell Troy over the phone, though at other times he would have called first. Today he wanted it to be a surprise. He wanted to tell him about this homicide case that he had been assigned to. He was anxious to see the look on Troy's face when he told him that 'Rock' was dead.

He strode up to the door, suppressing a grin on his face, and knocked. A minute later he saw the doorknob turn and the door slowly opened. He stepped in and was surprised to see that Troy was across the room beside the sofa. No one else was around. "How did...?" Tommy started. He looked quizzically at the door before closing it. "How ..." he started again then discarded the question. It wasn't important. His news was overpowering right now.

Tommy looked back at the door one more time and then walked over to Troy.

"How's it going, Troy? I've got some news for you that I think you're going to like and I couldn't wait to tell you."

Troy took a long swallow of the beer he was holding. He looked up at Tommy. Tommy's nose was still slightly swollen and the bruises had not quite faded. "Oh yeah, Mister Waters. Did they suddenly find a cure for my paralysis?"

Tommy ignored his question. "Drinking kind of early, aren't you?"

"That's my business."

Tommy absently nodded, then seated himself on the sofa a few feet from Troy.

"I was called in on a murder investigation early this morning. Does the address two seven four Southland Drive sound familiar to you?"

Troy suddenly tensed. He remembered his dream. "Rock's house?" he asked, knowing the answer, but not sure he was ready to accept the implication.

"That's right. Rock is dead." Tommy restrained a smile unsure of what he was supposed to feel. He was glad that one more bad guy was permanently off the streets, but how could he be happy when another crime had been committed to achieve that end.

"How?" Troy asked tentatively.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to be talking about it, but you can bet it'll be all over the news within an hour or two." He took a breath. "Our one witness, a lady friend of Rock's, to put it mildly, claims that someone broke into the house without setting off any alarms, and came after Rock with a large knife. Sounds crazy, huh?"

"Yes," Troy said slowly.

"It gets crazier. During my investigation, I observed three wounds to Rock's body. One was what appeared to be, a defensive slash across his wrist. This was not a deep cut. There was also a superficial stab wound to the stomach. What killed him though, according to the initial investigation, was a stab to his chest with a large knife. Incidentally, the knife has not been found."

"All right!" Troy suddenly burst out. His dream had finally come true. Literally. "That son of a bitch needed to be sliced up for all the hell that he put me through. Guess he never expected a young boy to be the one to do him in."

Tommy quickly sat up on the edge of the cushion. "I didn't say anything about a boy."

"Eh ... " Troy began, but couldn't find the words right off. "It sounds crazy, but I dreamed about something like this." At once Troy was afraid to admit that he was a

part of the killer. “In my dream, the killer was some dope-crazed kid. And in my dream Rock was stabbed many more times. Bizarre, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said slowly. He nodded his head as he looked quizzically at Troy.
“Yeah, that’s bizarre all right.”

CHAPTER 21

It was almost seven o'clock in the evening when Trina came through the front door. Troy barely heard her. He had been drinking since morning and was close to the point of passing out.

Trina carried the bag from KFC to the dining room table before directing her attention to Troy.

She scrunched up her face at the pungent smell of alcohol that permeated the air, and from the disgust at seeing Troy inebriated again.

"I got us some chicken," she said. She tried not to show her anger or displeasure at seeing him this way. "Are you hungry?"

For a moment he seemed to be searching for the words. Slowly they began to come out. "No. I ... I ate a couple of bologna sandwiches earlier," he slurred.

"You need a little more than that."

"Well, if you would keep your ass at home once in a while maybe you could cook me something."

The anger quickly rose in her, but she willed herself to be calm. At least, to speak calmly. She had to remember Troy's situation. He was still trying to deal with his handicap. He would get better. She had to keep telling herself that.

"I just went back to work. I have to work because we need the money." She didn't want to tell him that she also wanted a break from him. She needed a break from him.

"No, we don't. I've got it figured out. With my disability and our savings we can make it."

"For how long? A few months? A couple of years? And when I am forced to go back to work to help support us my skills will probably be obsolete. It's not likely I'll be able to find another job that pays this well."

"You're wrong damn it!" Troy shouted, and seemed to shake away a little bit of his drunken state. "You just want to be free of me! Free, so you can screw whoever you want, anytime you want!"

"You're crazy, Troy!" She blew up. She could no longer contain herself. "I don't know why you have to put me through this hell!"

She started toward the living room, but abruptly changed her mind and headed to the refrigerator for the pitcher of tea. She didn't want to fight. Too much hurt would be inflicted. Nothing would be gained. She would let it drop and hope that he would do the same.

She was about to open the refrigerator door when something hit her hard from behind. She was thrust face-first into the door. A scream of surprise barely escaped her mouth before it was muffled by her impact. She was utterly stunned. At first, she thought that Troy had thrown something at her. But that didn't make sense. This felt different. It was as if a hurricane-force wind had jerked her forward and slammed her into the face of the refrigerator.

That wasn't all. She was pressed against the appliance like some kind of refrigerator magnet. She couldn't move. Her right cheek was pushed hard enough against the raised Whirlpool letters that they were beginning to bite into her flesh. The tips of her toes were barely touching the floor.

Troy was behind her. He had trundled into the dining room and was facing the kitchen. She wished that she could see him. To see what he had done to her. But that was crazy. How could this have anything to do with Troy? How was it possible that he

could have done this? She had no answer. Her mind was reeling trying to make some kind of sense out of all of this.

“I don’t like it when you’re away from me,” Troy groaned. “You’ve got too many temptations. There are too many normal men out there who would love to take you away from me.” He paused a second and Trina could hear him breathing heavily. “I swear, though, if you ever cheat on me ... I’ll kill you.”

Trina wanted to say something - to scream at him - but found she couldn’t speak much above a whisper because of the great pressure against her back.

“I want you to quit your job.” Troy’s voice had modulated to a pleasant, but strict tone. “I’m not requesting. I’m telling you to.”

Trina struggled, and with all the might she could summon she was able to push her face a few inches off of the refrigerator.

Troy’s face suddenly grew red and sweat began to seep through the pores of his skin.

He couldn’t hold her. The alcohol had weakened him. He let her go and felt the weight fall off of him as though he had been physically holding her in his arms. At once he felt exhausted. He could hardly catch his breath.

Trina’s feet fell flat to the floor and she backed away from the refrigerator, free of the invisible force that had held her to it. She looked at Troy. He looked exhausted as if he had just run a marathon.

She didn’t know what to think about what had just happened. It was too unbelievable. Yet, she knew she hadn’t imagined it. She had been thrown into the refrigerator and held there, as surely as if someone had stood behind her and done this. She didn’t know how, but, as crazy as the thought was, she believed that Troy had somehow done this to her. How? That was the question. He was too far away. And if, by some miracle, he had managed to accost her without her hearing him approach, where did he get the strength to hold her against the refrigerator door? Troy was fairly strong, but without the use of his legs how could he perform such a feat? Provided, however, that he was able to do this, how was he able to retreat to the living room so quickly? It was impossible. Still ...

Her mind kept rolling over and over what had happened to her, searching for a plausible explanation, while her body moved about the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of tea and fixing a plate of chicken and mashed potatoes. A few minutes later she took her meal into the bedroom to eat and to think some more.

CHAPTER 22

Trina Dance lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. She couldn't sleep, her mind was churning like an upset stomach. Troy was on the other side of the bed snoring away. He no longer even looked like his old self. Stubby patches of two days' growth of beard smeared his face like coarse sand. Lately, he shaved at random, using the razor only when the mood struck him. The bags under his eyes had grown heavy. His face had become haggard. He had become someone she didn't know and didn't like. Sometimes she searched deep inside herself looking for the love she once felt for him, but could only find a shell of her former feelings.

Troy's threat to kill her earlier in the evening had put her over the edge. She never thought that she would hear it from his lips, no matter what situation might befall them.

She thought of the other thing that had happened to her. The bizarre scene of her pinned to the refrigerator. It was surely irrational, but she couldn't escape the idea that Troy had done something to her. But what?

She should leave him. There was nothing between them, anymore. If only his disability was purely physical, she believed she could handle it. But he had become pessimistic, bitter, and cruel. He was not the man she had fallen in love with.

She should leave him, but could she? It would seem as though she were walking out on him because of his paralysis. He would argue that. Most everyone would assume that. But could she keep living this lie, and this life of unhappiness just so she wouldn't be judged?

She found the decision too difficult to make on her own. Her thinking was too muddled, too tied up with her emotions. It was hard to separate the two, and she wasn't so sure that she needed to. What she felt she needed was an outsider's opinion. Someone who was not so close as to be weighed down by a cluster of mixed emotions and facts, but did have an emotional attachment to both of them. Someone who wouldn't be so judgmental. Someone familiar with their situation.

She thought of Tommy Waters. At the basketball game, and afterward, when they stopped for pizza, he had listened sympathetically to her and had offered some sound advice. He was very perceptive and didn't mind telling you how he felt. Though he was a closer friend to Troy, she believed that he would be fair and impartial.

She decided that she would call him tomorrow to see if he could meet with her. Just the thought of being able to talk to someone close to both of them made her feel a lot better. Her thoughts began to wander after that, trailing softly away, until sleep finally slipped over her.

Something woke her. A sound. A gentle creak of wood, as though someone was walking across the floor. It was gone now, but she was certain she had heard it. She was on her side facing Troy so she knew it wasn't him. Besides, she knew when he got up out of bed because he was never gentle about it. He would inadvertently shake the bed while getting into his chair, then rumble down the hallway like a freight train to the bathroom.

She looked toward the bedroom door. She gasped.

A small child, looking to be about ten years old, stood in the doorway. The child's hair was rust-colored, short, and disheveled. It lay scattered across the forehead down to the eyebrows. On the side of the head, the hair was matted and extended as far as the bottom of the earlobes. The eyes were dark and Trina could sense a deep

sadness in them. The child wore tattered jeans and a light-colored pullover shirt. At first, Trina thought that it was a boy, but then she noticed the delicate facial features and the rounded shape of the small breasts that pressed against the fabric of her shirt.

She moved fluidly from the doorway like a soft breeze, as if in one easy motion.

Trina slid out of bed and raced toward the door. What was this girl doing in their house? How did she get in? She stepped into the hallway. There was no sign of the girl. She hurried down the few feet of the hallway that turned into the living room. She stepped inside and looked about. The girl was at the top of the stairs. Trina couldn't believe how quickly the little girl had moved.

She ran to the stairs, her heart racing as fast as her legs. She nearly yelled to the girl, but she had the strange feeling that if she spoke aloud the girl would vanish like so much smoke.

None of this made any sense. A part of her was warning her not to go after the girl but she saw no other option. She had to know if the girl was real or if it were all a dream.

As she made her way up the stairs she saw the girl slide into the bathroom shutting the door behind her. She quickened her pace and stopped beside the door. Her heart leaped in her chest. A part of her was terrified. Sure this was just a small girl, but this was far from a normal situation. Again she wondered how did this girl get into the house? Why the middle of the night? And why was she standing at the doorway to their bedroom staring at her?

A line of chills ran down her arm as she grasped the doorknob. She took a deep breath, turned the knob, and slowly pushed the door inward. As she swung the door open she stared through the expanded opening. No kid near the toilet or sink. The door touched the backstop at the wall. She could see that the shower door was partially open, but because the door was frosted she was unable to see through the glass. It was, however, the only place left for the child to hide.

Her heart was pounding. She suddenly felt weak, drained of energy. She had to pause to will herself to relax. "Alright, honey," she said, her voice soft and as soothing as she could muster. "It's over. Come on out so we can talk." She waited, listening for movement. Nothing.

She stepped gingerly into the bathroom and inched her way up to the shower door. She grasped the end of the door, half expecting another hand to reach up and grab hers. For a moment she felt paralyzed. She wasn't sure if she had the strength and the nerve to open the door all the way. She felt like turning and running back down the stairs and into her bedroom as quickly as possible. But that was crazy. She shivered as if her body was saying no that's not. She shook herself. She had to be sensible. The girl was in there. She was probably curled up in a fetal position, more scared than she was. A cold wave seemed to hit Trina just before she forced her arm to move and to swing the door open wide.

It was empty. She quickly looked around. There was nowhere else for anyone to hide. A small window was above and to the side of the toilet, but it was locked.

She could have sworn that she had seen the girl go into the bathroom, but the girl wasn't there. She must have been mistaken. She checked out the two upstairs bedrooms, which was the extent of the upstairs, making sure to thoroughly search underneath the beds and into the closets. There was no trace of the girl.

She proceeded to search the rest of the house in case the girl had somehow gotten behind her. There was no sign of her. She checked the outside doors and windows to make sure they were all locked. They were.

She went to bed not knowing what to think. Had she been dreaming, perhaps walking in her sleep? Had she been hallucinating? For a moment she considered

waking Troy but figured there was no sense waking him from a good night's sleep to tell him about a girl that had somehow vanished. Besides, she wasn't in the mood to talk to him after what had happened earlier.

She stared at the door and listened to the normal creaking sounds of the house settling for the better part of an hour. Finally, her mind began to relax and she drifted back off to sleep.

CHAPTER 23

The day had been unusually long. She had cried that morning on the way to work. Before going into the office she had gained a bit of composure, fixed up her makeup, and put on a happy façade. The rest of the day she had spent fending off the emotional bouts that tore at her heart. She resisted the urge to break down into a fit of crying. She could do all that later. Not at work.

She had called Tommy Waters and arranged to meet him at a coffee house not far from the job. Knowing he would be there to talk to her was the boost she needed to help her make it through the rest of the workday.

There were only a few patrons at the coffee house when she got there. She spotted Tommy almost immediately sitting at a table in the back. She sat down in the chair across from him. "Hi," she said and constructed a weak smile. "I'm glad you could meet me."

"No problem. I just hope I can be of some help."

A waitress stopped by their table. She quickly took their orders of two coffees and left.

"I'm thinking about leaving Troy," Trina said. She had decided to put it all out front.

"Oh?"

"It's not because of his paralysis," she said defensively. She sighed heavily. "It's a lot of things. Troy has changed. To start with he has become cynical, cruel, and abusive. I just don't know how much more I can handle."

The waitress stopped at their table setting their coffee before them. She asked if there would be anything else. They both said no. "Okay, then," the waitress said smiling and slipped away again.

Tommy took a sip of his coffee before speaking. "It seems Troy's not taking his handicap very well."

"No, he's not. But, there's more to it."

"What do you mean?" Tommy leaned forward as though she were about to reveal some deep, dark secret.

She pursed her lips and looked down at the table. She shook her head. "I don't know exactly. I understand that it is perfectly normal for Troy to feel some hostility. I won't argue with that. But the anger that he has been displaying to me seems out of the ordinary. It's as if the anger goes far deeper than his injuries." She paused and took a drink of her coffee.

Tommy leaned back in his seat quietly examining what she had just said and how to make sense of it.

"He's become insecure and paranoid as well," Trina continued. "He seems terrified that I'm going to start running around on him, or that I'm already having an affair. And, I swear, I've never given him one iota of a reason to be suspicious of me."

"I'm not excusing his behavior," Tommy began, "but people handle these things differently. Some handle them well, even learning and growing from them, but others Well, others handle them poorly, or not at all. Maybe Troy fits in this last category. What seems extreme to you may be Troy struggling to cope."

Trina was silent for a moment staring past Tommy, but at nothing in particular. "Yesterday," she began slowly, "Troy threatened to kill me if he ever caught me fooling around on him."

"He came right out and said he would kill you?"

"Yes. He said he would kill me. And I believed him."

"Has he ever threatened you before?"

"No. Never"

"Has he ever hit you?"

"Well, eh, no. He has never hit me." She thought of the force (or whatever it was) that had thrown her into the refrigerator. Against all logic, she had begun to believe that Troy had something to do with it. There was no other explanation.

"Look, I can understand you being upset. I don't blame you. But, if I know Troy he would never physically hurt you even if he could."

She opened her mouth a bit as if to object.

"Do you know where Troy keeps his guns?"

"He's got a handgun in our bedroom downstairs in the nightstand and there's another one in our old upstairs bedroom. Oh, and there's a shotgun upstairs as well. Why?"

"If it makes you feel any better, take the gun out of the bedroom downstairs and hide it."

Trina shook her head. "I'm not worried about him shooting me." She paused, debating whether or not she should say anything more.

"So then, what are you afraid of?"

She paused another moment. "He's ... he's got some kind of ... power. I can't explain it."

Tommy took a slow sip of coffee trying to absorb what she had said. "I don't understand," he finally said.

"It's going to sound crazy to you. Maybe I shouldn't have..."

"No. Don't worry about how it sounds. Let's talk about it. You don't need to keep things bottled up. It's not good for the system."

She smiled tentatively. "Okay. Yesterday after work I brought us home some chicken for dinner. Troy looked to be almost out of it. He had been drinking, which had become a daily routine for him. I asked if he was hungry. He gave me some smart-ass reply. Then he demanded that I quit my job and stay home with him. We argued." She stopped and turned her gaze to the window, to the street outside the coffee house. For a moment she debated whether or not she should continue.

"And ...?" Tommy prompted after another moment.

She turned back to him. "This is the crazy part."

"Okay."

She took a breath. It seemed to take the edge off. "After we had exchanged a few words I had decided that I wasn't going to argue with him anymore. I was just going to pour myself a glass of tea to go along with my chicken and mashed potatoes and take it into the bedroom to eat. When I went to the refrigerator something hit me from behind. It lifted me off my feet and slammed me into the refrigerator door. I don't know what it was. It felt like ... like a hard, compact, gale-force wind had hit me." She shook her head. "That's the best I can describe it."

"A gale-force wind?" Tommy repeated. His voice was peppered with skepticism and concern for Trina.

She ignored his tone. "I was held there on the refrigerator. My toes barely touched the floor. For a while, I couldn't even move. I could barely breathe. It was then that Troy threatened to kill me. I never thought Troy would ever say anything like that to me. Never. Never." Her voice faded away and she seemed to muse on those words a moment before continuing. "It was a minute or two after that that I was able to break free. Or, maybe Troy let me go. I'm not sure."

Tommy slowly nodded. "So, you believe that Troy is responsible for this ... thing that happened to you?"

"Yes. I guess. I don't know but there's no other explanation."

Tommy took a long sip of his coffee. He placed the cup back on the table and leaned back in his chair before he spoke. "I'll have a little talk with Troy. Maybe he'll open up to me and let me know what's going on with him. Maybe I can even get him to agree to some counseling. Would that make you feel better?"

Trina nodded. "Yes. That would be great." Her big brown eyes moistened and she dabbed at them with her napkin.

"Now, about you ... freezing up on the refrigerator. I find it hard to believe that Troy had anything to do with it. I think, maybe, because you've been under such an emotional strain, that your muscles just kind of locked up on you."

Trina shrugged. "I don't know. I've never had anything like this happen before."

"Stress can do some weird stuff. And I doubt that you've ever been under this much stress before."

For a time she seemed to ponder that point. "You might be right." She suddenly smiled. "That might also explain the strange dream I had last night. Though, even this morning it seemed so real that I wasn't ready to admit that it was only a dream."

"A dream, huh? They say that a dream is the subconscious mind trying to tell you something. Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's not much to it."

"Then it won't take too long."

Trina's smile slowly faded. "Okay. Well, I dreamed that I awoke in bed sometime in the middle of the night. At least I think that it was a dream. It had to have been a dream. Anyway, in the dream, something woke me. A sound. In any event, when I opened my eyes I saw a little girl standing on the threshold of our bedroom. It frightened me at first and I couldn't seem to move. The girl stood there looking at me for a few moments then walked away. When I could finally move I went after her. I followed her up to our upstairs bathroom. I thought that I had trapped her in there, but when I went into the bathroom to look for her she wasn't there."

Tommy looked at her a moment before speaking. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

"That's strange. And a little spooky. I'm not sure what to make of it." He propped an elbow on the table and cradled his chin. He sat up suddenly. "It wasn't a boy, was it? You said it was a girl."

"Yes, it was a girl. Why?"

"I was thinking about the young boy who killed Rock."

"The child had breasts. Small ones, but obvious. And besides, the child disappeared. That should prove that it was merely a dream. Right?"

Tommy nodded. "Sure. Sounds just like a dream."

The waitress stopped by just as Tommy finished his coffee. She filled his cup while Trina finished the rest of her coffee. The waitress filled her cup and asked if they wanted anything else. They said no.

"You know," Tommy began, "I'm thinking that this dream you had might be related to that thing that happened to you earlier in the evening. Two unusual incidences happening so close together seems awfully coincidental."

"I can see that, but how could they be connected?"

Tommy smiled and shook his head. "You got me there."

"This talk of children and dreams made me think of something else," Trina said.

"And that is?"

"When Troy was little his best friend killed himself."

“Yeah, I remember Troy telling me something about that.”

“Before Troy left the hospital he had a dream about the boy. I don’t know the details, Troy wouldn’t talk much about it, but judging from his reaction it was more of a nightmare.”

“So, you think that this dream could be somehow affecting him?”

“Perhaps. I know it’s very traumatic for him to even talk about it. It could be what’s eating at him.”

“This boy,” Tommy began, “this boyhood friend of Troy’s, what was his name?”

“Jamie. Jamie Kramer, I think.”

“How did this boy kill himself? Troy may have told me before, but I don’t remember.”

“He slit his wrists while taking a bath. His parents had gone somewhere. They found him in the tub when they got home.”

“Why did the boy kill himself? Did he leave a suicide note?”

“I don’t know. Troy doesn’t talk about it much. He says that a lot of his memory of that day is spotty.”

“Do you know where this happened?”

“Silverstone. It’s just a small dot on the map, a little north of Atlanta.”

“Can you tough it out with Troy a little longer? I’d like to check out a few things and then talk to Troy.”

“Yes. I really don’t want to leave him.” She sighed. “I guess I can make it a little while longer.”

CHAPTER 24

It was nearly ten o'clock in the morning when Troy finally wrestled himself awake. He moaned at his throbbing head, then groaned when he saw that Trina was not in the bed beside him.

He swung his legs off the side of the bed and willed his chair to roll over to him as he had done for the last couple of days. After climbing into the chair he worked the chair into the living room to the end table that sat on the left side of the sofa. He took the bottle of aspirins that sat on the table and dumped three of the tablets in his hands as was his routine of late. He rolled himself into the kitchen where he poured a glass of water and took the pills one at a time, emptying the glass of water.

She had gone to work anyway. He shook his head. He hadn't scared her enough with his little display of power. Little, yes, that was the operative word. He was so drunk he couldn't hold her to the refrigerator.

"Damn," he muttered. He could try to reach her mentally focusing his mind on her. But no. At least, not until his headache was gone. Then again what was the sense? He had tried to see her before but had failed. That was one of the reasons he had demanded that she quit her job.

He needed a beer. That would help him to think straight. Too many things were happening. Too many emotions and thoughts were clogging his brain.

He rolled into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

Both vegetable crispers and one shelf were packed with bottles and cans of his favorite brew. All the food that had at one time been neatly placed so one could get to it easily was now stacked and crammed into the two remaining shelves to make room for his alcohol. He wasn't sure why he had done it. It seemed crazy now, but last night he had this strange obsession. He had to make sure that there was always a cold beer ready at all times, as though he might go into convulsions or something if he didn't have one when needed. Now, the idea seemed rather insane.

He started to reach for one of the beers but hesitated. If he started now it would be exactly like every other day. By the time she got home, he would be sufficiently inebriated. And like last night he would be weak and unable to carry out his threats.

He couldn't help but think of that first swallow of beer, though. It always seemed to be the best. He could imagine the cold liquid running across his dry throat. He could almost taste the slight bitterness of the hops and imagine the warmth that would ensue after a few minutes, as well as the mellowness that would gently touch his thoughts, his emotions, taking the edge off the anger and stress that often tore at him.

He rubbed a hand across his face. It was rough where he hadn't bothered to shave in the last couple of days. He swallowed hard. He desperately needed a drink. His hands were already beginning to shake. One beer would begin to soothe him, two would calm the jangled nerves that made his hands shake. More beers would follow simply because he would be unable to stop.

The alcohol would help him for a while to calm him down, but that was only temporary and only one side of the potent liquid. It had the soothing effect of medicine in the morning, but the sting of poison in the evenings. In the evenings his anger and frustrations always came back with a vengeance. His thoughts would be muddled and his power weak. How could he expect to control his life that way? And, how could he expect to have the power to keep Trina from doing him wrong? He could no longer depend on his physical strength.

Two sides to the same coin. But the backside – the poison side – was draining away any of the good that the other side was doing.

He had to stop with the alcohol. He had to.

He stared at the many tempting, thirst-quenching cans of beer. No! No more. He would be strong, he told himself. He could resist. Not a problem. He would not allow himself to give in. Too much was at stake.

He knew that he should close the refrigerator door and push himself away, but he didn't move. His mind told him to, but the craving was so deep. He thought about one beer. Yeah, just one. The last one for old times' sake. Then that would be it. He started to reach for one then pulled his hand back. He shut his eyes so he couldn't see the drinks lying in the refrigerator calling out his name. He groaned. "No, no, no, no!" His voice rose in pitch and frustration, filling up his very essence. "No! No!" he continued. His eyes sprung open. "No!!" he shouted.

The cans and bottles of beer began to explode like firecrackers. Troy shielded his face against the onslaught of glass and beer, and the occasional can that popped up at him. Inside the refrigerator bottles busted, and cans blew their tabs off. A few of the cans were split down the middle at the seam.

Three soft drinks pressed against the food also succumbed shooting off its syrupy liquid into the shelves and onto the floor.

A jar of mayonnaise shattered. The top half of the jar fell crashing to the floor. Thick, yellow globs of mayonnaise rolled out into the door where the jar had sat. Some fell out of the door and splattered onto the vinyl floor.

Then it was over.

For a couple of minutes, Troy simply stared at the exploded contents of the refrigerator. Slowly, he reached out a hand and closed the door.

CHAPTER 25

Trina sensed that something was different when she first stepped into the house. For one the television volume was turned to a comfortable level. Since she had started back to work the television was either blaring when she first came in, or the sound had been muted. There seemed to be no in between. At the times that it was blaring she would quickly trek across the living room floor to turn it down.

Something else came to her attention. The pungent aroma of stale beer didn't accost her as it had so often done before. There was still a scent of beer, but it was light, not the brewery smell that she had grown to expect.

Troy was looking at her from his wheelchair in the living room. She just noticed him. Her bewilderment left her speechless for a moment.

"Hello, baby," Troy said. "How was your day?"

"Eh ... fine. I..."

"You seem surprised." He grinned. "Well get used to it. This is the new me. Or, maybe just the old me before I lost the use of my legs. Anyway, I've decided to give up drinking. I've decided to regain my position as the man of the house."

Trina smiled tentatively. She was unsure of what to think and what to believe. Furthermore, she was confused about some of what he was saying.

"You've always been the man."

"No, no. But that doesn't matter. I've got a surprise for you?"

"More than this?"

"It's all part of the same surprise. I called out for Chinese food. It should be here any minute now."

"Oh? What Chinese restaurant did you find to deliver way out here?"

Troy laughed. "I called this restaurant owner I know in Atlanta who owed me a favor or two and persuaded him to drop us off a couple of meals after he knocks off work tonight. He doesn't live too far from us so it's not too big an inconvenience for him."

Trina was at a loss for words, temporarily stunned by this side of Troy that she hadn't seen in a long time.

"We haven't sat down and had a good meal together in a good little while. I thought that it would be nice."

A smile stretched across her face. "Yes. I think it would be nice."

She stepped slowly over to Troy, somewhat cautiously, as if in a dream and afraid that too sudden a move would wake her. Afraid that this dream would pop like a balloon and things would be the same as they were yesterday and almost every day since Troy's release from the hospital. She knelt in front of his chair and hugged him. He hugged her back with equal enthusiasm.

He smelled fresh. There was a light scent of cologne about his neck. Something he used to splash on when they were going out. Gone was the sharp, tangy odor of alcohol on his breath, and the rank smell of beer seeping through the pores of his skin. There were only good smells, like the smell of skin after a good shower. It reminded her of a cool morning after a night of rain when the impurities in the air were washed away and a brand new day was beginning.

They both reluctantly broke their embrace.

"I'm glad to have the old Troy back," Trina said. She smiled, and her eyes began to cloud over with a mist of tears. If the damn broke it would be the first time in a long time that she would be crying because she was happy.

"I'm not quite the old me. I've got a little less in some respect, but a little more in others." He smiled back at her and it looked good to her, but there seemed to be something enigmatic in his words. She quickly dismissed such thoughts. She didn't need to ruin the evening with her paranoia. This could truly be a positive turnaround for their relationship.

"Do I have time to take a shower before the food gets here?" Trina asked.

"Sure. It will probably be another forty-five minutes to an hour before the food gets here."

"I'll try to hurry," she said as she stood up. Her smile was exuberant. She strode away with excitement bubbling up inside her.

Troy watched her cut across the living room, and dip into the short hallway leading to the bedroom. He knew that she would be in there a few minutes deciding on what to wear after her shower. Something comfortable he was sure. Something sexy, partially see-through, he hoped.

It will be nice to have you home, he thought. Yes. He imagined how wonderful it could be. They could sit down at breakfast again, and just talk. They could have conversations about a TV show or a movie they had watched the night before. They could discuss the news or a book that one of them was reading. It could be a number of things. The important thing was that they would be talking and getting close together like they use to be. Some mornings, before or after breakfast they might even make love. At least that was one ability he hadn't lost. Yes. Things were going to be good from now on.

Trina stepped into the dining room only minutes after their meal had been dropped off. Troy was pleased to see her wearing loose-fitting pants and a shirt of his that she left unbuttoned down to the tops of her small breasts, revealing a great deal of cleavage. Back when his legs were good he would have gotten up and gone over to her to cop a feel or two before she could sit down. Now, he sat there smiling broadly. "Wow. You look hot!"

"Maybe later I'll see if I can't get a little hotter."

A short, nervous laugh escaped his lips. "I look forward to that."

They ate supper while often gazing and smiling at each other. They talked very little, commenting mostly about the meal and some spots of news that Troy had seen on TV. Trina was reluctant to talk about her job. Troy wasn't real pleased about her working so she didn't want to stir up any conversation that might break this good atmosphere that was surrounding them. Fortunately, their moments of silence weren't bad. There was a nervous excitement in those times as if this was their first date. As if their hearts were just now beginning to reconnect.

After supper, they retired to the living room. Trina put on a mixed CD of romantic love songs to enhance their already sexually charged mood.

For a while they merely sat close together holding hands, kissing, talking softly about how much they loved each other and how things were going to be different from here on out. After a time she convinced him to dance with her, pulling his wheelchair to the middle of the room. She held his hands and moved her body slowly, undulating her hips to the music, sometimes exaggerating the moves, playing, and teasing.

They danced and played like young lovers until late in the evening. Finally, they went to bed.

They made love. She positioned herself on top and made the rhythm for both of them. It was only the second time they had made love since Troy's injuries. Though she thought that their first lovemaking session had gone well, she had begun to think that Troy was no longer interested in having an intimate relationship with her. Or maybe he felt like he hadn't been good enough the first time. She could see how a

debilitating injury such as the one Troy had suffered could leave him feeling inferior and insecure, even doubting his successes, convincing himself that he was mistaken. Perhaps telling himself that he had not pleased Trina, that she must have been faking it. For how could a paraplegic, such as himself, sexually please a woman as vibrant and alive as her? Troy was wrong. She was thoroughly satisfied.

Later, they both lay in bed pressed against each other in exhausted silence feeling the heat of each other's nude body. After a few minutes, Trina sat up in bed. "As much as I hate to," she began, "I need to wash up and get some sleep. Six-thirty comes awful early."

Troy placed a hand lightly on her lower back. He chuckled. "Those days are over. We'll sleep till about nine, maybe make love again, eat a little breakfast, and ... well, whatever we want."

Trina smiled. "Maybe we can do that this weekend. I've got a very important day tomorrow. I can't be laying out of work." She stood up and headed toward the bathroom.

"You're not going back to work," Troy called after her. "I thought you understood that."

Trina suddenly turned around in the bathroom and returned to the bedroom. "Troy, I thought after yesterday that you understood that I needed to work. But even if we could afford it, I would still want to go to work. I was never cut out to be a housewife."

"Things have changed now. I need you at home."

"No, you don't. You can get around fine."

Troy gritted his teeth. His face flushed red. It took him a moment to speak. "I am not going to set you free so that you can screw around on me!" His voice rose steadily with each word.

"I wouldn't do that." She walked over to Troy. "We had a good evening so far, and we could have some more, but please don't ruin this one."

"You'll like it at home with me. This could be like our second honeymoon. Why not try it for a few weeks. I think you'll grow to like it."

"I can't do that. I love you but, this work of mine is not just a job, it's a career. It's something that I chose for myself. I like the challenges and all that goes with them. At the rate that I'm moving up in a year, maybe two, I'll be making twice what I am now."

"I've been forced to give up my career, and all you can think about is money! You should be willing to give up your career for your husband!"

"That's crazy! I'm not going to quit work. You don't need a babysitter."

Troy opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. A rage, like a dark shadow, enveloped him and left him without the power to speak. Instead, something rushed out of him as if he had just flexed a muscle. He felt the power leave him without him consciously willing it.

It felt to her like she had just walked out into a hurricane, but without the wind. She was suddenly struck by something invisible, yet solid. Not like a bat, but more like a huge pillow swung by a giant. She was lifted off her feet and hurled back into the wall five feet away. Her breath was knocked from her lungs as her back and head crashed simultaneously into the wall. The force dissipated quickly and she fell forward off the wall landing on her forearm. She gasped, trying desperately to draw the air back into her lungs.

Troy sat in bed watching, amazed at what had just happened. He was not so amazed at the actual physical manifestation, but that it had been done without him

consciously willing it. It was a reaction to his anger, totally independent of any conscious effort. That gave him one more thing to ponder about this power that he had.

He watched Trina struggling up to her knees, finally catching her breath. She looked stunned. She moved as though she were trying to awaken from a dream.

Though he didn't will it, he was glad that it had happened. She wasn't going to stay home unless he let her know that he was serious. And this could best be shown by presenting her with a small demonstration of what he could do.

Trina looked up at him from her kneeled position on the floor. "I don't know what you ..." her words trailed off as she shook her head.

"That was only a sample of my abilities," Troy said, an edge of pride evident in his voice. "Maybe now you will know that I am serious about you staying at home with me."

"No. I can't explain what you did. It doesn't make sense. But you can't force me to stay home."

At once Trina was violently jerked upward. She hollered in surprise and pain. When her movement stopped she was positioned straight up, her feet dangling a foot off the floor.

"You will stay home," Troy spoke low but severe. "Believe me. I can make you."

For a time words wouldn't come to her. She looked downward at her feet and the gap between them and the floor. She instantly felt lightheaded. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

She looked at Troy. A sadistic smile was etched across his face.

"No," she said. Her words came out as a mere whisper. "You ... can't hold me forever. As soon as you're asleep I'll be gone."

She was hurled back against the same wall. Her body hit almost the same spot, but not with as much force. She groaned on impact and fell once again to the floor. This time she was able to keep her footing, fighting off only a slight daze.

For a few moments, Troy simply looked at her. She was stubborn no doubt about it. He had seen her stubbornness rear its ugly head a time or two. She was not always the soft-spoken, easy-going person that most people saw. And that could be a problem. Her stubbornness would indeed compel her to leave him once he was asleep. And, as he had found out earlier, his powers were limited by either distance or other unknown factors. So the big question was, what could he do about it?

"I'll make a deal with you," Trina said. "Let me go to work and give them a notice. It's only right. I'll tell them Friday is my last day."

Troy laughed. "That might have worked an hour ago, though I doubt it." He abruptly quit laughing and shook his head. "I have to think of what to do with you until you come around to my way of thinking."

This is insane, Trina thought. No one can have such power. It was some kind of illusion. Or, maybe she was having a nightmare. That made more sense than what was happening.

"I'll have to lock you up at night," Troy said in an unusually calm, matter-of-fact tone. "But it can't be here. Too many windows. I can't watch you all the time. I have to sleep sometime as you said. So, at least until you come to your senses, I think the best place for you at night is going to be the basement."

"No. You're not serious. You can't do this to me. It's not right."

"Hey, you did this to yourself. I asked you nicely to quit your job, but you refused. What other choice do I have? Should I just sit idly by while you screw around on me?"

"You should know I wouldn't cheat on you!"

"Anyway," he said calmly. "The basement's not a bad place. It's fixed up pretty nice. At least part of it is. And the good thing for me is that the outside door is no

longer accessible, and the one window is up high and I figure too narrow for you to fit through, even if you could reach it.”

A poignant stab of fear suddenly washed over her. He seemed serious about locking her up down there. A part of her said that there was no way he could force her into the basement. But a greater part could still feel the pain of her slamming into the wall thrown there by some, strong invisible wave. In the end, she believed he could do it.

She thought about the open bedroom door. If she could make it around the corner, into the hallway, and out of view of Troy, he may not be able to stop her. From there she could run for the front door and hope that she could make it before Troy could get out of the hallway.

“In the daytime, of course,” Troy continued again, “You would be free to roam the house.”

She darted through the bedroom door into the hallway. Nothing stopped her. No unseen force grabbed her leg or threw her down. In the living room, she quickly glanced back to see if he had made it into the hallway and if he was close enough to use this psychic power on her. There was no sign of him. She bolted through the den and to the front door. She grabbed the doorknob, twisted it, and pulled. The door wouldn’t budge. She checked the deadbolt. It hadn’t been engaged. She pulled on the door once more calling up all the strength she could. Nothing. She was breathing hard as she quickly looked about, considering a window for escape, or maybe the back door.

“That was me,” he said, sitting in his wheelchair just inside the den. “I made that door so you couldn’t open it. It’s unfortunate that I have to resort to these things.” He sighed. “You know, I think someone needs a time out.”

CHAPTER 26

This was her third night in the basement. She had not thought him capable either physically or emotionally to do this to her. She had maintained that below his façade of anger and bitterness he was the same man she married. She had foolishly thought that he would suddenly realize how bizarre his behavior was and find a way to stop himself. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. As to the question of could he force her into the basement, that question was affirmative. Cuts and bruises over her body accentuated that truth.

On the first day after the first night in the basement, she thought that she could get to the house phone without him seeing her. As it turned out that didn't matter. The cord attached to the wall plate was gone. When he spotted her with the phone he laughed as if he had just heard a good joke.

He had either hidden or destroyed both their cell phones. She hoped that he had just stashed them somewhere. Then she would, at least, have a slim chance of finding one of them and calling out for help. She suspected that he had called into her job offering some excuse for why she hadn't been in. She didn't think he would tell them that she had quit. That might lead to someone stopping by to explore her reason for quitting and maybe trying to talk her out of it. More than likely he would have told them that they were going out of town for some kind of treatment or surgery that he needed. Maybe even telling them that she would call later.

The biggest question on her mind was where had this power that he wielded come from? Was this in some way related to his injuries? Perhaps he had gotten into some trace chemicals lying around in that plant? Or maybe this power had been in him all along, lying dormant until a powerful enough shock to his system came along to stimulate these seeds of power within him? Good theories, but probably none of it mattered at this point. She was a prisoner and that was that.

At least she had a bed to sleep in. It had been sitting in the basement since Troy's single days along with another bed which Troy had since gotten rid of. These were for the overnight party guests who got smashed and had no sober driver to take them home. Like most young single guys Troy occasionally got wild. Unlike a lot of people, though, Troy also thought ahead to maintain control and keep people safe. Troy was a rookie at the time and didn't want to ruin his career because of a drunk driver that left one of his parties.

It had been a long time since anyone had slept in the bed. It was doubtful that any diseases that might have been deposited there by one of Troy's drunken partygoers still lingered, but for her peace of mind, she cleaned everything, even going so far as spraying the mattress with Lysol. Troy had allowed her to throw away the old sheets and pillowcases to replace them with ones they had bought. At least he had retained that much decency.

The basement wasn't as bad as she had first thought. It had been a while since she had been down there. It was just a short time after they were married. At that time the visit to the basement was merely a part of getting to know the new house she was moving into. New to her, Troy had bought the house a few years before meeting her.

Most of the basement had been renovated by Troy several years ago, not long after he had moved in. Originally it had simply been a large rectangular space consisting of the house's utilities, such as a water heater, the heating and cooling unit, and a utility sink. Other than that there was an outside door at the far end that at one time opened up to some concrete steps that led up to the backyard. That door had

since been boarded up and sealed because Troy had had trouble with water getting in when it rained hard. At the opposite end across the basement, there was a long, narrow window close to the ceiling that looked out on the front lawn.

Near the center of the basement was an old wooden plank-like staircase that led upward to the far wall of the kitchen.

Troy had divided the basement by installing a wall constructed of two by fours and Sheetrock. A little off-center of the constructed wall he had framed out a section for a door but had never gotten around to putting one in. He had covered the block wall with Sheetrock as well. In this room, he had installed an overhead light and a couple of power receptacles. In one corner of this room, he had installed a small bathroom consisting of a bathtub, sink, and commode.

If it wasn't for the fact that she was imprisoned down here the basement wouldn't be a bad place for her to spend a night or two. Besides the bed, she also had a dresser, a little closet, and a television to watch.

She had been thinking about the one basement window that looked out over the front yard. She thought that it might be a means to escape, even though Troy had told her that it was too narrow for her to fit through. There seemed to be no way to open it, however. There was no knob or handle to roll it up or out. It was just a simple pane of frosted glass. It seemed rather odd, but perhaps it was built simply to let the light in and nothing else. She wasn't sure if the window was like this when Troy moved in or if he had remodeled it making it smaller, or if he had just added it to give the room some natural light. Either way, it would be a tight fit if she could manage it. She might even need to break out some of the framings around it to give her that extra inch or two. Even if she were able to squeeze through the opening it was all dependent on whether she could even get to the window. Standing on the dresser might only get her to the bottom of the glass.

The window would have to wait, though. She would have to make plans. It might be disastrous for her to get halfway through and Troy discover what she was doing. At one time she might have felt safe in the basement away from Troy. He was still in the chair and wouldn't be able to navigate himself down the staircase. But, judging from what he had already done to her when he was not even close enough to touch her, she couldn't assume that he wouldn't be able to hurt her from afar.

She figured that she might not need the window. If during the day, Troy's attention was diverted for a short time she might be able to sneak right out the front door. He hadn't thought to take her car keys away. If she could make it to her car and out the driveway that should be far enough away that he couldn't hurt her. The next time he would see her after that would be in a court of law.

She finally settled into bed and tried to push away the thoughts of escape to another day. She watched television in an attempt to relax but found herself unable to get into the program, distracted by the sounds above her head as Troy watched television himself and occasionally rolled his chair across the hardwood floor.

Eventually, when Troy went to bed and the sounds above her head went away, she found her thoughts drifting and thinning. Her frustrations and fears slowly crumbled and faded as sleep finally overtook her.

She awoke with a start as though someone had shaken her, but when her eyes opened there was no one around. She sprung up to a seated position and looked about anxiously. Someone had touched her. She would almost swear to it. But there was no one. And who could it be anyway? It was only herself and Troy in the house and she knew Troy wouldn't be able to make it down the steps. She glanced at the television. She had left it on, but the volume was so low it was almost muted. Could a spike in the

volume – perhaps when a commercial came on – have awakened her? Perhaps, but it didn't explain the feeling of being shaken, or at least, touched.

She shivered as if an icy finger were running down her spine. She didn't believe it was the television that had awakened her. She had a distinct feeling that she had been touched. What's more, she had this unexplainable sense that someone was still down here with her.

She was glad that she had left the light on when she had dozed off to sleep, otherwise, the fear that was gripping her might suddenly turn to full-blown terror.

She didn't want to get out of bed, but she knew she had to. If she didn't investigate the rest of the basement to prove to herself that her fear was unfounded then she would be jumping at every creak and groan that the old house would make. The sounds would likely gnaw at her nerves the rest of the night like a horde of hungry rats.

She gingerly set her feet onto the tiled floor. The floor felt unusually cold. She bent over and slid her house slippers out from underneath the bed and put them on her feet. For a long moment, she stared at the open door frame half expecting to see some kind of movement from the unfinished part of the basement. Maybe a darkened form scooting across the floor, or a wayward shadow that seemed to come from nowhere. At last, after seeing no movement of any kind, she reluctantly stood up and slowly made her way to the doorframe.

She took a single step through the doorway and began to visually search through the semi-darkness. The only light that made it to that part of the basement was what light seeped out from her bedroom. At first, her eyes only found the familiar sights bathed in shadows: The water heater, the furnace, a few boxes packed with discarded items, and a shelf full of nuts, bolts, and assorted materials. To the right of the shelf, though, there was something else. Her first thought was that it was simply another shadow. But then it moved. It began to move slowly forward, out of deeper darkness.

Trina gasped. It was the girl she had thought she had dreamed of. She stood there now, bedraggled, her rust-colored hair clinging to the sides of her head as if it were plastered there. As before her eyes were filled with a vast sadness. This time there was no doubt at all as to her gender. She was nude.

"Wha ...?" was all that Trina could manage. Too many questions were coming to her all at once. The girl stopped, and Trina thought to turn around and bolt to the sanctuary of her lighted bedroom, but she felt as if her legs were sunk in quicksand. She couldn't move. Then, something began to happen to the young girl.

A slash suddenly began to run across the girl's throat from ear to ear as if an invisible hand was drawing it with a wide permanent marker. Rivulets of blood began to flow from the open wound, down the top of her chest and over her small apple-sized breasts. The blood dripped from her nipples in big drops, some to her stomach, and some to splash onto the floor.

Other streams of blood quickly followed the length of the cut across her throat. Lines of the thick, dark liquid began to race downward over her chest. More blood followed, drenching her in rushing streams of blackness. The once white, naked body, was suddenly bathed in the dark, syrupy liquid. The breasts were no longer distinguishable. The small body at once seemed flat and one-dimensional like some black and white photograph.

Trina's mouth gaped as though frozen in mid-scream. What had happened to the little girl had happened so quickly. It had all unfolded in a matter of seconds.

The girl wasn't real. She couldn't be. She couldn't. But then what? She looked to her left at the stairway that led up to the kitchen. She needed someone to verify what she was seeing. If Troy were at the top of the stairs he might be able to see the

girl, but even if she yelled for him would he be able to hear her from his bedroom? Her only choice would be to run up the steps and bang on the door in hopes he would hear her. But would the girl stay around for that long? She turned back to the girl.

The girl was gone.

Trina shook her head in disbelief, then began looking about as to where the girl might have gone. There was no sign of her. She moved slowly forward. She halted at the spot where the child had been only moments ago. She bent down and swiped her hand across the floor half expecting her hand to come up with a glutinous coating of blood. Instead, there was nothing but dust and dirt.

She began to cry. Tears ran freely down her face. At once she didn't even seem to have the strength to wipe her eyes. She was cracking up. That was all there was to it. First, Troy with all his supernatural tricks, and now she was seeing little naked girls that weren't there. What was next?

Somehow she was able to garner enough strength to turn around and trudge her way back to her bedroom. She grabbed the remote from off the mattress and climbed back into bed. She flipped the TV off. She didn't want the distraction. For the rest of the night, her eyes kept veering back to the opened door frame as she listened intently for any sounds that might be straying from the other side of the basement.

CHAPTER 27

Trina shuffled into the kitchen in an old gray, tattered housecoat that she had thought she had thrown out. She had found it amid some clothes that she had haphazardly gathered from the upstairs bedroom closet while Troy was rushing her to come down. He didn't like her being out of his sight for too long. Beneath the housecoat, she wore only a pair of black panties. Her hair was disheveled and there was a distant look in her eyes. She looked the way she felt: beaten and uncaring.

Just like the previous mornings she was let out of the basement to prepare breakfast. If today was like the other days she would be free to roam the first floor until Troy was ready for bed that night.

Though it was a bit of freedom, to her it seemed like no freedom at all. It seemed to her to be a slow poison. She didn't know how much more she could take before it destroyed her.

Today, however, Trina's discontent was not as focused. Her anger and frustrations were somewhat diffused by thoughts of the young girl she saw (or thought she saw) last night. Her mind kept returning to the sight of the streams of blood rushing down the girl's bare body. It had all seemed so real, but then suddenly it was all gone.

That was the second time she had seen the girl. What did it mean? The girl wasn't real. At least, not in the flesh. So, what did that leave? Was she some kind of spirit? The thought had entered her mind, but she had tried to dismiss it. She had always considered ghosts and such to be the product of someone's overactive imagination. But now that it had happened to her ... she wasn't sure what to think. She saw only two possibilities. One was that the girl was some kind of spirit being. The other was that her mind was beginning to snap. Both possibilities were a bit scary.

If the girl was a ghost, why did she appear to her? Was she trying to tell her something?

She absently raked off a pile of scrambled eggs onto Troy's plate while she tried to work out this puzzle in her head. In the good old days before Troy's paralysis, she would have been able to discuss this situation with him, but now it seemed those days were gone. She retrieved two slices of toast from the toaster and added them to his plate. Was the girl someone from her past? And what was with all the blood? She poured them both a cup of coffee. Normally she added sugar and cream to her coffee, but this morning she felt she needed it extra strong.

Troy ate a fork full of eggs and took a short sip of coffee before looking up at Trina who was propped against the counter sipping at her coffee.

"This basement thing is temporary," Troy began, snapping her thoughts. "When I feel like I can trust you again and I truly believe that you are accepting me as the man of the house despite my inability to use my legs then we can live as husband and wife once again."

"What kind of bullshit is that?" Trina said, as her anger began to surface.

"I no longer have legs to speak of, but you will respect me. For better or worse, remember?"

"Then you respect me. Release me from this basement prison and allow me to go back to work."

"No. As long as you're working and I'm at home shackled to this chair it appears that you are supporting me. I will not have people thinking that I cannot take care of myself. No matter what."

"That's crazy. Everyone needs help sometimes. Besides, with the money you're receiving from your disability pension you're covering your part. My income is just helping us to get the extras, to make our life more comfortable."

He was silent a moment studying her words. "That's not the main problem," he finally spoke. "I don't like you being around other men. It might be too tempting for you."

"I've worked around other men ever since we met. Why is it a problem now?"

"Because I'm not the same man I was when we met. I am a cripple. No matter how much you deny it I know that you would rather have someone whole. It's just a matter of time before you go looking for someone else."

"What! Damn you! I've never given you a reason to doubt me."

"In any case, if you're here at home with me like you should be, there will be no others to tempt you and no reason for me to doubt you."

In a fit of sudden rage, she threw her coffee cup over Troy's head. It hit the cabinet shattering, spraying shards of porcelain and hot liquid across the vinyl floor and over the breakfast table. A piece of the porcelain bounded off of his head, and a gout of the hot coffee splashed over his bare arm.

He jerked in response to the piece of cup hitting him in the head and the hot coffee spilling over his arm. "Damn!" he shouted. "You bitch." He growled out the words.

Trina's anger overwhelmed her and she ran at him. She crossed the floor quickly, nearly getting to him with a wild, swinging right fist.

It hit her before her arm had completed its swing. Like a large beach ball shot from a cannon, the invisible force struck her in the midsection. She was picked up off her feet and slammed backward into the counter. Her lower back caught the edge of the countertop. She yelled in pain upon impact and fell to the floor.

"I will not put up with this!" Troy shouted. "You will learn your place!"

She was hurting, but a mixture of her anger and frustration revitalized her with a shot of adrenalin. She came up off the floor grabbing one end of the dinner table. With a sudden, maddening yell she upturned the table, spilling Troy's breakfast and knocking his coffee off the table and all over him. Troy hollered as the hot coffee, soaked the front of his shirt, and the cup, as well as the remaining coffee, dropped into his lap.

Trina dashed through the kitchen, tripped once in the living room, almost fell, caught herself, and hit the door before completely losing her balance. She fumbled with the one lock at the top of the door for what seemed like minutes but was in reality only a couple of seconds. She finally pulled the door open.

She had just begun to step through the door when the door shut with a crushing force catching her left leg. She screamed at the sudden intense pain. The door opened slightly then and she fell backward, crying and yelling. The door banged shut, and for a moment strained against its very frame, as though it were about to burst into the front yard before the pressure was released.

She stumbled to her feet, then fell against the wall as her left leg gave way. She hit on her right shoulder and was able to shift the brunt of her weight to her right leg to keep from toppling back to the floor. She had ceased yelling and crying, and now merely mewled softly to herself. The bottom of her housecoat came to just below her knees and she thought of pulling it up to view how badly her leg had been injured but was afraid to see the results. Most of the pain was in her left knee. That was where the force of the door had struck.

Through a thin veneer of tears, she saw Troy wheeling himself into the living room. He stopped only a few yards from her. "When you get through whining get back into the kitchen and clean up the mess you made."

Trina stiffened, straightening herself against the wall. When she did her head touched a glass picture frame that hung on the wall. It was an eight-by-ten studio portrait of her and Troy. In the picture, Troy was in a navy blue suit, a white shirt, and a tie with stripes of alternating shades of blue. She was wearing a flowing, silky green evening gown. The picture was taken before a fundraising ball that was set up by the policeman's union. In the photograph, they looked like the ideal couple. A regular Ken and Barbie.

She didn't think about it. She simply snatched the picture frame from off the wall and threw it sidearm at Troy. Though she didn't aim, the frame sailed corner over corner like a rectangular Frisbee and struck him square in the center of his forehead. The frame buckled and bent, the glass fractured, then the whole thing fell to the floor scattering glass and metal.

His head jolted backward from the impact. Blood began to ooze from a cut across his forehead, trickling down toward his forehead. His head lolled forward and he moaned.

She could see that he was stunned and was not about to waste the opportunity. She hobbled at him with all the speed she could muster. The pain was excruciating but she pushed it to the back of her mind. She grabbed the side of Troy's chair before he could regain his senses and with every bit of strength that she had she lifted the one side until it toppled over onto the floor. Troy spilled out rolling over onto his stomach. He didn't move.

She turned and began to limp toward the door, clenching her teeth each time she had inadvertently put weight on her injured knee. Finally, breathing hard and heavy, and groaning from the pain, she made it to the door. She set one hand on the doorknob for temporary support and to catch her breath before proceeding. It was only for a second, but it was too long.

Something grabbed her from behind, squeezing her as it lifted her off the floor. She felt the air being pushed from her lungs. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't speak. Darkness was quickly encroaching her as she struggled. She was suddenly flying sideways. She was slammed into the wall, and for a few moments remained glued there, resembling a smashed bug on a car windshield. Finally, she slid down the wall to the floor leaving a thin swath of blood.

Troy lay on the floor, blood smeared over his face, watching Trina, inanimate and crumpled, and felt good that he had been able to stop her.

CHAPTER 28

Tommy Waters parked outside the Fulton County Library in College Park. He had meant to drop by here three days ago and get right back to Trina with whatever information he had found, but it hadn't worked out that way. His work had swamped him and this was the first chance he had to get away from it. He figured there was no harm done. If there had been any real trouble Trina would have phoned him.

It had been a while since he had been to a library and it brought back a few good memories of his mom. His dad had not been around since he was about four years old. Tommy only had a faint recollection of him and he wasn't sure if it was a real memory or a memory made up from what others had told him. Either way, his dad wasn't around for him, because he had left. His mom had told him that his dad went to work one day and never returned. So it had been his mom who had raised him.

When his dad left his mom got a full-time job down at one of the mills to support them. It was brutal work that drained her energy and took away a lot of her time. Somehow she was still able to muster enough energy to keep him and his brothers close to the straight and narrow. She worked hard and expected her children to do the same. She wouldn't allow them to slack up on their school work, and there were always chores around the house to do. "If you want something," she used to say, "You've got to work for it. I ain't raisin' no junkies, or drug pushers, or plain out lazy ass bums. If you want to ride the train free, get the hell out of my house."

She required a lot from them. She expected good grades in school and house chores done well and on time. She wouldn't accept anything less than their full effort.

She made sure they went to Sunday school each week. She believed in a good Christian background. "God ain't white, and God ain't black," she would say. "God is a spirit, and spirits don't have no color. Make the spirit your foundation and your house will stand."

She made Tommy and his brothers get library cards and every other Saturday she would drop them off at the local library. She expected them to read at least one book a month. "The mind is part of your spirit. When your mind grows your spirit grows. The mind dreams and your spirit makes the dreams come true." This was another one of her great sayings.

He thought fondly of his mom. She had done a damn good job. He and his brothers had all turned out pretty decent. His oldest brother was a very successful businessman for a high-tech corporation, while his younger brother made a good living as a certified public accountant. As for him, he was living his dream as a police detective. Sure, it didn't pay a hell of a lot, but it was a dream he picked up when he was very young. One that had been started, incidentally, by reading one of the books he had gotten from the library.

He had seen another dream come true when he married his high school sweetheart. It was a good marriage to the end. It had lasted six years, then God called her up to heaven. She died of breast cancer. For a long time, he wanted to blame everyone from the doctor to himself and finally to God. He sunk into a mire of anger, depression, and self-pity. It seemed he couldn't scratch his way out no matter how hard he tried. It was his mom that finally pulled him free. Not from any of her pithy sayings this time, but by being there, having someone he could talk to, and bitch to, and cry. She offered hard words at times, but it always seemed to be at the right time. At a time when he needed a little shock to keep him from giving up.

Thinking of her made him realize that it was time he visited his mom. Last year she suffered a debilitating stroke that left her partially paralyzed and unable to care for herself. He and his brothers had felt it necessary to place her somewhere where she would receive the medical attention that she needed. But, that was then. She had been steadily improving since the stroke. Soon, she would be well enough that one of her boys could take her into their home to live. He thought that it would be good if she were to stay with him.

He shook away the memories. There would be time for them later. He got out of his car and made his way into the library.

He wasn't a psychiatrist by any means, but in the police business, if you kept your eyes and ears open you couldn't help but learn a thing or two about people and their responses to certain types of pressure. As Trina had suggested it sounded like something was eating away at Troy, besides the obvious, physical paralysis. Like Trina, he had a strong suspicion that it might be linked to the suicide of Troy's best friend many years ago. He surmised that somehow the trauma of his recent near-death experience, coupled with his devastating injuries, had triggered emotions that he had kept buried deep inside. He hoped that by getting some kind of overall view of what had happened back then he might have some idea of how to talk to Troy.

He realized that it would be much better if he could persuade Troy to see a real psychiatrist, but at this point, he didn't believe that he could make that happen. If he could play amateur psychiatrist well enough, however, he might bring a few things to light that Troy had not realized. It may, in turn, convince him to seek professional help.

Before coming to the library Tommy Waters had gone on the internet. He quickly discovered that Silverstone, the little town Troy was from, did not have a newspaper when Troy lived there. If the story made the news it could have been printed in one of several smaller papers in the surrounding area, or the much larger Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Another one of the problems in his internet search was that he wasn't sure of the date this suicide happened. After some time of futile searching for this suicide story, he decided to visit a library.

With the help of the librarian, he was able to search through some old newspapers from neighboring towns that might have carried the story. It took some time but finally, he came across an article that related to Troy. The newspaper was from a small town about thirty miles north of Silverstone. The paper had gone out of business many years ago, but luckily, the library had obtained copies of the paper shortly before the business closed. The article surprised Tommy and he had to reread it one more time to be sure he understood.

He perused the next day's paper as well to see if there was a follow-up article. There wasn't any concerning the death of Troy's friend, but another article quickly grabbed his attention. It involved an explosion and subsequent fire of a local house that killed a husband and wife. Their twelve-year-old boy had managed to escape with only first and second-degree burns. That boy was Troy Dance.

Tommy leaned back in his chair. Questions and more questions. He needed more information.

He skimmed through several more weeks of papers, occasionally finding a related story, but it provided him with no more information than what he already had.

Later that day he gave Troy a call to see if he could drop by to speak with him. He let it ring until the voice mail prompt came on. He left a message.

He had a bad feeling. He placed the cell phone back into the holder on his pants belt. It could be that Troy didn't have a signal, or that he wasn't near his phone. Simple

explanations. So why did it bother him? Now he began to wonder why Trina hadn't called.

He retrieved his phone again and called Trina's number. The call went straight to voice mail.

After sitting in the car a few minutes mulling over his options, he decided that he would go ahead and drop by the Dance's house. He hated to show up unannounced, but besides having all these questions to ask Troy, he had the unsettling feeling that something was dreadfully wrong.

CHAPTER 29

At about the same time that Tommy Waters was entering the library, Trina groaned and her mind clicked back into consciousness. Her eyes opened and she looked across the cold, gray, basement floor. She was numb, both body and mind. What she saw didn't immediately register, nor did she try to figure it out. For a while, she just lay there staring.

Many minutes passed before thoughts began to tumble back into line. Where was she? She felt coolness and hardness beneath her. A concrete floor. She was back in the basement. Yes. But how did she get here? The answer wouldn't come.

She drew up her arms and pushed herself up to her knees. The agony rushed through her as her left knee seemed to collapse on the unyielding floor. She screamed and flipped over onto her back.

She lay there, eyes squinted, letting the sharp, cutting pain in her knee begin to subside. She felt pain and soreness in other places as well. Her face, her arms, and her chest, all hurt.

She wondered, as she stared up at the ceiling, how much damage had been done to her. She remembered the injury to her knee as it was slammed in the door. She remembered throwing a picture frame at Troy and hitting him in the head then rushing him to turn over his wheelchair. After that, she limped back to the door. Then something grabbed her from behind and began to squeeze the very life from her. Then, in the next moment, she was flying across the room. After that, it was all blank.

Her mouth was dry and tasted of stale blood. She swallowed hard. She brought her hand up slowly to feel her face. When she touched her right cheekbone she jerked. It felt like a shock of electricity. It was badly swollen. She hoped that it was merely bruised and nothing more. She ran a finger across her lips. They were puffy, and to the inside of her lip, she felt a ridge of dried blood that covered an ugly gash.

She looked down at her housecoat. The cotton belt that had once held it closed had been torn loose leaving the housecoat partially open to reveal her small, left breast and the white of her stomach down to the edge of her black panties. Spots of dried blood dappled her skin as well as her housecoat.

She looked down at her clothing in disgust. The ugly black marks of blood and dirt would never come out. She grunted. It was finally time to throw the old coat away for good. And she needed to clean up. She desperately needed to rinse away the blood. It was an obsessive thought. A part of her subconscious mind, now somewhat disturbed, wanted to believe that by wiping away the evidence of the problem the problem itself would dissolve.

She thought that she must be quite a sight. At first, it was a simple, light thought, as though she were more embarrassed by her appearance than anything else. She imagined that she looked like she had been in an auto accident. An accident? A deep despair washed over her. What she had been through was no accident.

She began to cry. She never thought it would come to this. She never believed that Troy would have hit her. She chuckled dryly. Actually, he never laid a hand on her.

She was surprised, even startled, by her actions. Desperation had given her a certain strength and courage that she hadn't known she possessed. It was good to a point, but it was stupid to let it get out of control. That was blind desperation. What she needed was a burst of desperation driven by a bit of wisdom. She needed a plan.

She definitely needed to use her head more. Troy was now more powerful than when he had the full strength of his two legs. Compounded with this supernatural

power that he possessed was the fact that he seemed to be losing his grip on reality. Those two things were a lethal combination.

She couldn't go head to head with him. Troy had convinced her of that. She would have to consider more surreptitious means.

She grunted, moaned, and pushed herself up to a sitting position. The pain in her leg was intense and for a few moments, she saw gray flecks floating before her eyes. She fought it off by sheer willpower, and gradually her vision began to clear.

Her housecoat had slipped open and she could fully see the extent of the injuries to her leg. Her left knee and a wide area about it were swollen and yellow with splotches of black and purple. Compared to the other leg it was near twice the size. Not broken, she told herself. Just badly damaged. It would take some time to heal, but it would be okay. She hoped.

Her biggest obstacle now was getting to her bedroom where she could tend to her wounds and refresh herself. She needed to rest and let her body start healing itself. But, she didn't want to move. She knew the pain that she would have to endure.

It took her a few minutes to convince herself that she had to move. Lying there on the floor was doing her no good. Finally, she forced herself to move, to crawl slowly, torturously over to the stairway only a few feet away from where Troy had carelessly dumped her. Grabbing the end post she was able to clamber up to a standing position. She gritted her teeth at the strike of pain that radiated down her leg, and the smaller pains that seemed to crisscross her body. She paused for a few moments to gain her composure and courage to move on despite the pain. She edged along the staircase to the wall moving incredibly slow as she tried to maneuver mostly with her right leg. She continued along the wall until she got to the open frame of her bedroom. Tears were filling her eyes from the pain and the myriad of emotions that assaulted her. She pressed on and finally made it into the bathroom.

Once in the bathroom, she gingerly pushed off the old housecoat and let it fall to the floor. She removed a washrag from the cabinet, soaked it with cool water, and began to wipe away the dirt and blood from her skin. She longed for a good bath but wasn't sure she would be able to get back out of the tub when she was finished. She would have to postpone that luxury.

She left the old housecoat on the bathroom floor and limped over to her bureau. She removed a loose-fitting pullover shirt and stretch pants. For a few moments she wrestled with the clothes, but finally managed to get them to cooperate long enough for her to slip them over her body.

She limped the few feet over to the bed and sat down on the edge. Slowly, painfully, she pulled her legs up onto the mattress. She lay back, sinking into the softness of the bed. For a while she stared up at the ceiling, trying to think about what she was going to do, but she kept losing her train of thought. She was too worn out. Her mind began to drift. It wasn't long before she gave in to sleep.

It was nearly two hours later when she began to hear a doorbell ringing in her sleep. Ringing, and ringing, and ringing. Reluctantly, she began to waken.

CHAPTER 30

Troy rolled his chair over to the door. He unlatched the one lock, then cracked the door open a couple of feet.

“What’s up Tommy? What brings you to my side of town?”

“Can I come in and speak with you?” Tommy asked. His tone was staid and even.

Troy paused a moment before answering. “Sure. Come on in.” He produced a faint smile and pulled the door open wide, backing up as he did.

Tommy came in and gently closed the door behind him. “I tried to call you earlier, but never got an answer.”

“We’ve been having trouble with our phones. Can’t get a good signal, that kind of thing.”

Tommy nodded. “Yeah, that could be a problem.”

“Have a seat.”

Tommy started that way.

“Can I get you something?”

“Not right now.”

Troy watched Tommy seat himself at the end of the sofa before trundling his way over to him.

“Where is Trina?” Tommy asked.

“She’s not feeling well. She’s lying down.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that.”

“Do you need to speak to her, too?”

“No, not really.” He paused. He clasped his hands as if he didn’t know what to do with them. “There have been some questions that have popped up and ... eh, I’d like to see if you could answer them for me.”

Troy stiffened. “What kind of questions?”

Trina pushed out of bed, using one hand to grasp the corner of the headboard for support. She had heard a doorbell only minutes ago, and now she could hear faint voices coming from the unfinished portion of the basement. The air duct she guessed. The voices were carried from upstairs down through the vents. This did not sound like the television.

She began to slowly, awkwardly, make her way toward the other side of the basement. Her leg had stiffened even more since her little nap. The good news, or bad news, was that her leg had numbed somewhat. The pain in her leg was more of an obtuse pain than the acute one she had experienced earlier. The other pains, the ones in her arms, her chest, and her face were still there, but they were tolerable.

She reached the air conditioning/heating unit half out of breath. She leaned a hand against the ductwork and shifted most of her weight to her right leg. She listened.

It was Tommy Waters’ voice. A spark of hope ran through her. Tommy would get her out of this mess. After he saw how Troy had treated her he would be furious. And then ... A trace of fear began to dampen her hopes. What if Troy still refused to let her go? Knowing Tommy he would try to release her himself, before calling for backup. But could he? Was he any match for this strange power that Troy possessed? Maybe not. Then again it might not come to that. Tommy had been friends with Troy for a long time. If anyone could convince Troy that he was doing wrong it was Tommy.

"I remember," Tommy began, "not long after we met, you told me that a boyhood friend of yours had killed himself when you were about twelve."

"So? What about it?"

"Then, several days ago Trina mentioned to me that while in the hospital you had had some kind of nightmare involving this friend."

"Why were you and Trina talking about me?" A trace of anger began to surface in his voice.

"She was concerned about you, that's all."

Troy leaned back in his chair. His eyes narrowed in a hard stare. Tommy didn't seem to notice.

"Anyway, I decided to visit a library and look through some old newspapers to find out more about Jamie's death." He paused a moment to see the expression on Troy's face to see if he understood where he was heading. There was no change. Troy still looked on with anger and annoyance. There was no look of embarrassment or fear as Tommy had half expected.

"So you went to a library. I'm proud of you. Now, if that's all you wanted to tell me then ... thanks for dropping by."

"No. I've got questions."

"Oh, yeah. Like what?"

"Like why you didn't tell me that Jamie was a girl."

Troy chuckled lightly. "What are you talking about?"

"According to the newspaper account, Jamie was a girl, not a boy as you had led me to believe."

Troy appeared confused. He rubbed absently at his right temple. "No. They got it wrong. Jamie was a boy," he said, but there wasn't a lot of conviction in his voice.

"Jamie was most certainly a girl because the paper said she was nearly two months pregnant."

Troy stiffened as though he had been slapped. He looked past Tommy as though he were seeing something that wasn't there. Something in his past. Something he had forgotten about.

"I ... I ..." he trailed off. He went quiet for a minute. "I remember something." He appeared disconcerted as if awakening from a dream and trying to separate reality from the dream.

"Another big bombshell. Jamie didn't commit suicide as you had said. She was murdered. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear. The murder weapon was never found. Does any of this sound familiar?"

Troy's confusion turned to shock. He shook his head very slowly.

His reactions were not at all what Tommy had expected. He had expected outrage, denial, and perhaps some explanation as to why his account differed from the papers. What he seemed to be getting instead was a look of total surprise. He was unsure of what to make of this. He decided to proceed and see what came of it.

"Something else," Tommy began again. "There was an article in the newspaper the day following the murder that I found very interesting." Troy had grown pale, his eyes were looking down. "There was a house fire about two miles from Jamie's house. It was an explosion. The fire marshal attributed it to a faulty gas stove and possibly the spark of a cigarette lighter. The house burned to the ground." Tommy paused to take a deep, nervous breath. "Your mom and dad were killed in that accident, while you, miraculously, sustained only a few minor burns. Do you remember that? Can you explain it?"

“Yes,” Troy answered, quickly remembering the past that he had shut out for so many years. “It was an accident. I should have been the one to die that day. Things ... just didn’t go right.”

“What do you mean?” Tommy prompted.

“I mean,” Troy started, then caught himself. He laughed. “No. I think our conversation is over. I don’t know what you hoped to accomplish.”

“The truth. I’m sorry, Troy. I just don’t know what to believe. I can’t tell if you’re outright lying to me or if this is like some kind of suppressed memories. Either way, this needs to be dealt with. I figured you might want to talk to me before anyone else.”

“No,” he answered flatly. “I’m not talking to anyone, and I want you to leave.”

Tommy started to object but thought otherwise. He stood up. “Okay, I’ll leave. If you won’t talk to me ...” He shook his head “I’m a friend, but I’m also a cop. I can’t ignore what I read and what you’ve said to me.”

Troy didn’t answer. His face displayed both anger and an underlying sense of sadness.

“I’d like to see Trina before I leave.”

“No,” he answered angrily.

“I assume she’s here.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Okay. I’ll find her myself.” He strode past Troy in the direction of the downstairs bedroom.

Trina felt her heart sink at the conversation she heard through the vent. She had learned that there were even more disturbing things about Troy that she hadn’t known. She wondered how much of the man she knew was true, and how much was a lie.

When she had first heard Tommy’s voice she had thought of yelling to him, but as she listened to them talk she found herself enthralled by the conversation. When it ended it caught her by surprise. If she understood correctly Tommy had headed off through the house looking for her.

She suddenly felt panicky. She needed to let Tommy know where she was. She was afraid that Tommy might make a quick survey of the house, (not realizing there is a basement) assume she was not in the house, and leave. With his departure, he may be taking away the one chance she had of escaping this dungeon for good.

Tommy glanced about the bedroom, then turned around and walked back into the living room. “Where is she?” he asked, his voice somewhat steady, but infused with anger.

“None of your damn business!” Troy shouted. “Now get the hell out of my house before I get pissed off.” His face flushed as his hands squeezed tightly on the wheels of the chair.

“Trina!” Tommy shouted near the stairs to the second floor. He heard something. Maybe a voice, he wasn’t sure. It sounded far away. Not upstairs, though. From another part of the house. He cut back into the living room.

“I’m warning you, Tommy,” Troy breathed.

Tommy ignored him. He paused in the living room to determine if he had heard something, and if so where was it coming from. Nothing at first. Then something faint. He walked over to where he had been sitting. He heard a sound that seemed to be coming from the floor vent. He knelt and placed his ear near the vent. The words ‘the basement’ came clearly through the vent. That was all he needed to know.

“Where’s your basement?” he asked standing up. Before Troy could answer he hurried off into the kitchen.

It was a large kitchen. Tommy had been here before, but it had been a long time ago and he hadn't remembered a basement entrance. He may have seen the door to the basement when he was here, but because Troy had never mentioned a basement, that he could recall, he thought nothing of it. Now he saw a door off to his left, near the corner. It was locked with a slide bolt.

"You son of a bitch!" Tommy blurted out. "I don't know you nearly as well as I thought I did."

Troy had rolled his chair into the kitchen behind Tommy. "If you unlock that door," Troy said, his voice warbling a bit from a quickly building anger, "you will regret it."

"Screw you!" Tommy yelled as he cut between the kitchen table and the wall to get to the door. He unlocked the door and started to pull the door open.

It hit him like a concrete block, suddenly, and with such force that Tommy was lifted off his feet and slung backward to the far wall, where he slammed his right shoulder first into it. He toppled over backward and landed heavily on his upper back with a 'crunch'. Upon impact, the air was instantly snatched from his lungs. A sea of black spots flooded his eyes. He groaned and wheezed and fought for consciousness.

Trina pushed through the door straining to stay on her feet. "No, no," She cried. She turned to Troy. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," he said wearily.

Tommy's vision began to slowly clear, the spots fading like settling dust. The cream-colored ceiling came into focus above his head. He heard Trina's voice and Troy's reply as if they were talking to each other via a long tunnel. He figured that Troy must have thrown something at him. It had to have been something big and solid. And he must have thrown it with incredible force because he felt like a baseball bat had pounded across his body.

Trina limped across the kitchen to where Tommy lay gritting her teeth at the stabbing pain in her leg. She looked down at him. She was afraid if she knelt beside him, she might not be able to get back up. "Are you okay, Tommy?"

"Yeah," Tommy groaned. He pushed up to a seated position. As he looked up, he noted Trina's battered face. "Did Troy do that to you?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Bastard!" he shouted at Troy. He looked at Trina. "What did he do to you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "What the hell did he do to me?" He looked about for something that Troy might have thrown at him. He didn't see anything out of place.

"It's hard to explain. Do you remember me telling you about the refrigerator incident?"

He clambered to his feet against the pain in his shoulder and upper back as well as fighting off an edge of faintness that came upon him as he stood up. He groaned. He suddenly felt like he was a hundred years old.

"Eh, refrigerator? Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" He looked to Troy who was still in his chair at the edge of the kitchen. If he hadn't thrown something at him then what did he do? Could he have rolled over to him, unnoticed, hit him with something, then rolled back to where he had started? It seemed impossible.

"It's some kind of power he has. Psychic energy, I guess. I don't know a lot about that kind of stuff."

"Power? Psychic energy? I don't understand."

"I wish you would have simply left when I told you to," Troy interrupted. "Now you present me with yet another problem I have to deal with."

"You have a problem, all right," Tommy said. "I might can overlook the assault on myself, but I cannot overlook what you've done to Trina."

Troy laughed. "You still don't get it, do you? You look at me and think that I'm just another commonplace cripple. Just another impotent hunk of flesh. But don't let appearances deceive you. My power doesn't come from my legs."

"Whatever," Tommy snapped. "We're leaving. A car will be around for you later. Maybe you can answer my questions better at the station." He took Trina's hand.

He saw it first out of the corner of his left eye as they started around the kitchen table. Tommy stopped, unsure of what he saw. On the opposite side of the table, the end chair had begun to slide out from underneath the table. Clearing the table it began to rise off the floor. He let Trina's hand drop and stared at the chair unbelieving. "What kind of trick is this," he mumbled, more to himself than to anyone.

Trina grabbed Tommy's hand. "Tommy," she said nervously, as she tugged at his hand.

The chair flew at them, wobbling up and down toward them like a seesaw. Trina fell to the floor jerking on Tommy's hand. Tommy dropped down a second later, but not in time to completely evade the flying chair. The chair leg nicked the side of his head cutting a gash in his skin just above his left ear. The chair crashed into the wall behind them knocking a hole in the drywall.

Troy laughed. "How do you like me now, Tommy? Am I still just a cripple in your eyes?"

Tommy struggled up to his feet, along with Trina who had begun to softly cry. He looked behind him to see the chair upside down, one leg wedged in the wall. He turned back to Troy who was still laughing. Quickly, before thinking it out, his anger seething, he pulled the chair out of the wall and hurled it back at Troy. If he had thought about it for more than an instant he never would have considered it. He would have thought it wrong. Troy was still a paraplegic no matter what he seemed capable of.

The chair flung sideways, came at Troy, legs first. It looked as though it were about to hit him, but it suddenly diverted at the last minute and dove harmlessly into the floor at the edge of the kitchen.

Tommy stared wild-eyed. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. "What the hell are you?"

"I'm just a man. A man who has lost his legs, but gained a formidable power. Or, perhaps just brought it out of hibernation and enhanced it. I have a feeling that I've always had this ... supernatural ability. Telekinesis is what I think it's called. But whatever you want to call it I think that the sheer trauma that took away the use of my legs somehow triggered this power, awakening it from its dormant state."

Tommy shook his head. "I don't know what to think of this power of yours, but whatever it is, and wherever it came from, it still doesn't give you the right to hold Trina captive."

"Maybe not, but it was the only way to ensure that she wouldn't cheat on me."

"That's insane!" Trina retorted. "You don't have the right to lock me up for something you think I might do."

"What's right is in the eye of the beholder, but that's a rather moot point right now. The issue I'm concerned with now is what do I do with Tommy? I can't let him go. He'll just run back to the authorities. Not that anyone would believe either one of you. The thing is when Tommy starts bringing up my past – as I'm sure he will – questions are going to come up. Granted, I may be able to weave my way out of any trouble, but that's not a guarantee."

"So what are you going to do?" Tommy asked.

"Not sure. I can't hold you captive in the basement with Trina. I can't trust either one of you to behave yourselves."

Tommy turned to Trina. She looked unusually pale. "We're leaving," he whispered. Abruptly he bent over, pulled up his right pant leg, and slid out a thirty-eight handgun from the holster strapped to his leg. He straightened up and pointed the gun at Troy.

"Can you deflect a bullet?" Tommy asked.

"No. Probably not."

The gun suddenly swung upward, toward the ceiling. Tommy clamped both hands tight around the handle of the gun trying to pull it down. It wouldn't budge.

"I can't stop a bullet, that's true, but I can keep you from sending it in my direction."

Something invisible suddenly wrapped around Tommy's hands. It squeezed, vice-like, pressing his flesh hard against the metal contour of the handgun.

"You should have shot me right away. Your problems would have been over. Now ..."

Tommy groaned as the pressure on his hands began to manipulate the gun. He strained against the pressure, but couldn't stop his own hands from shifting the gun about. He turned the gun around until it was pointing down, to the top of his head. Slowly, unwillingly, Tommy lowered the pistol until the barrel rested upon his forehead.

"No!" Trina screamed. "Please, Troy, don't do it. He's your best friend."

"A best friend who was going to shoot me."

"Please, Troy," Trina pleaded. "Please."

Troy looked disgusted.

Abruptly, Tommy's arm jerked away from him. The gun sailed through the air and landed a foot to the side of Troy. He reached down and picked it up.

"I know you have a couple of pairs of handcuffs on you," Troy said to Tommy. "They're either on your person or in your car. I'm going to need them both till I can figure out exactly what to do with you two."

CHAPTER 31

Halfway up the stairway, Trina snapped one end of the handcuff around her right wrist. She took the free end and wrapped it once around the banister, then snapped the cuff on her left wrist as Troy had instructed her. A few steps below her on the stairway Tommy had done the same thing.

“Okay,” Troy said. “That’s a start.” He thumped gently on the arm of his wheelchair. “I’m going to bet, Tommy, that you didn’t tell anyone where you were going. You would want to make certain you were correct before making accusations against a handicapped man such as me. Especially a former police detective and an ex-partner.”

Tommy didn’t answer him. He simply glowered at him.

“I’ll have to get rid of the car—that should be a real test of my powers, but I think I’m up to it—that way if someone should happen to stop by asking about you I’ll simply say that you had dropped by for a while to visit then left. I should probably reconnect the house phone also to keep people from coming by unexpectedly.”

“It sounds like you’re planning on killing me,” Tommy said.

“I don’t want to.” Troy met Tommy’s eyes. “You should have stayed away and minded your own business.” His tone was infused with a sense of genuine sadness. He turned slightly to gaze out the living room window.

Trina, who had been staring down at the steps looking utterly beaten, slowly lifted her head. “Troy,” she said softly, “how come you never told me that Jamie was a girl? What difference would it have made?”

Troy smiled ruefully. “Because I had forgotten. I guess the trauma of ...” he stopped short, considering how to proceed. “I think a part of my mind, the subconscious part, blotted out certain facts and replaced them with its version. I know it sounds like some kind of psychobabble answer, but it’s the only answer I know that makes any sense.” For another moment he was silent as he studied their faces to see if they were understanding him. “The facts, the real memories, didn’t begin to surface until I was in the hospital fighting for my life. I guess being so close to death kind of triggered something inside of me. Still, I was only getting fragments, like tiny pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces didn’t fall into place until Tommy introduced the fact that Jamie had been a girl. That was the jolt I needed. The real memories began to tumble back into place replacing the erroneous bits of thought that I mistook for memory.”

Trina shook her head. “I still don’t quite understand.”

“Neither do I,” Tommy added. “What does that mean? Does that mean that you forgot you killed the girl?”

Troy looked angrily at Tommy. At once the chain on Tommy’s handcuffs jerked viciously toward the living room ceiling pulling his arms around the banister. His head struck the front of the post hard nearly knocking him out. Then just as abruptly, the power was spent and the chain and cuffs dropped back down to rest against the banister.

“Shit!” Tommy yelled, shaking his head against the pain and the lightheadedness.

“You don’t understand,” he muttered angrily. He took a deep breath to calm himself. “You see, I guess, subconsciously, I figured that if Jamie had been a boy then I would have had no reason to...”

“To what?” Trina asked softly.

He breathed heavily for a few seconds before beginning again. “I didn’t mean to kill her. I didn’t.” His voice was enveloped in a sense of deep sadness. “In the

beginning, we were friends, you know, buddies, pals. She was a tomboy. It wasn't like a girl, boy thing. We played ball together, we fished, and we climbed trees, everything that two boys would do together." He was silent again as his mind drifted back to those days. When he spoke again his voice was a bit lower. "For the longest time, I never thought of Jamie as a girl. She had never appealed to me that way. But, one day we were playing around hitting rocks into the woods with our baseball bats when we got into an argument about whose rock went further. We started shoving each other. Nothing really serious. The next minute we were wrestling. After a little rolling around on the ground, I ended up on top of her." He paused again and a smile crept across his face as he reminisced. "Anyway," he continued, "when I looked down at her face something came over me. I suddenly realized how beautiful she was. I ... I leaned down and kissed her. And she kissed back. And we kissed, and we kissed. I don't know how long. Things kind of run together. But before too long we had taken our clothes off and were making love. I wasn't just sex. We were really in love."

Silence settled heavily on the room like a dense cloud. It was a good minute before Troy began to turn his chair and head toward the window. He stopped within a couple of feet of the window and looked out into the stand of trees located some fifty feet from the side of the house. He stared, trance-like, for another minute or two before turning his attention back to Tommy and Trina.

"About a month and a half, maybe two months, later Jamie told me that she thought she was pregnant. She said that she would have to tell her parents. And her parents would, in turn, tell my parents. I argued with her, though I knew she had no other choice, I just couldn't let my father find out. He would have beat the hell out of me." His eyes shimmered with tears. He looked back out the window trying to gain his composure.

"Anyway," he started again, "that day I had gone to see Jamie so that I might tell her something very important. I had made up my mind that we should run away together. That way neither one of us would have to face our parents with the news of her pregnancy, and we could start a new life together.

"When I arrived at her house her parents' car was gone. I figured the whole family was gone, but when I tried the front door it was unlocked. I stepped in to see if Jamie had been left alone. If so, I figured it would be an ideal time to talk to her." He paused, seeing the memories of that day develop in his mind. He continued. "I heard the water running upstairs as soon as I had walked into the heart of the living room. I made my way upstairs and to the bathroom door. I knocked to let her know that I was there and then began to tell her my plans for the both of us through the bathroom door. She listened for a minute or two then started laughing. 'That's crazy' she kept saying. 'We're too young, we'd never make it.' She was too damn practical. That wasn't the kind of reaction that I had expected. I grew instantly angry. I couldn't take her laughing at me. I remember drawing my knife from my pant pocket. I burst into the bathroom. Though I was angry, I still only meant to scare her. That was all.

"Again she fooled me. She wasn't afraid. She was furious. She started screaming and cussing at me. And then. I'm kind of hazy on the details, but the next thing I remember I was right there at the bathtub. I suddenly had the back of her hair in my hands and I ... I slit her throat." He paused to dab the tears from the corner of his eyes. "I still have empty spots in my memory after that. My next recollection is stopping by Henson's lake about a half-mile from Jamie's. I placed my pocket knife and a few fist-sized rocks in a towel I had taken from her bathroom. I tied the towel up good and threw it into the lake at a point where I knew the water dropped off to a good twelve feet or more. I know that I rode home on my bike, though I don't recall doing it."

He trailed off into silence. He was looking toward Trina but seemed to be looking through her.

Tommy was overwhelmed by a mixture of pity, anger, and disgust that washed through him and he was unsure of how to feel from one moment to the next.

“So what about your parents?” Tommy asked.

Troy refocused his attention from Trina to Tommy.

“Later that evening,” Troy began again, “I was feeling guilty as hell and about as depressed as I have ever been. After my mom and dad went to bed I decided that I was going to take my own life. At first, I didn’t know how I was going to do it. I thought about getting a kitchen knife and slitting my wrists, but I didn’t like the idea of sitting around watching and waiting for my life’s blood to run out. And, I was afraid that I would chicken out in the middle of it. I decided that I needed a quick way out. My first thought in regards to that was getting one of my dad’s shotguns and blowing my brains out. But that would have proved to be very difficult. My dad kept his guns locked up in a gun cabinet in his bedroom. I would have had to sneak the key from his pants pocket which he kept stretched across the bureau near his bed when he slept. Then I would have had to unlock the gun cabinet and remove one of the guns. I would have had to do all this without waking him or my mom. That didn’t seem possible. My next idea was to use gas. I figured that it would be a somewhat peaceful way to die. But, being young I didn’t want to just pass away quietly out of existence. I wanted to go out a little differently.”

“Like taking your parents with you,” Tommy added.

“No. That wasn’t supposed to happen. I closed their bedroom door thinking the gas wouldn’t get to them.” I just figured they would wake up in the morning and find me dead.” He sighed. “I’ll admit it wasn’t the brightest thing to do, but I was still a kid. In the end, closing that door didn’t make a difference one way or another. Anyway, I got out my radio. I turned the station to a rock station that I knew jammed out at night. I turned the volume on low. I opened the stove door and blew out the pilot light. I stuck my head inside. Unfortunately, the gas wasn’t as quick a death as I thought.” He stopped talking as though he had run out of words, or as if none of it mattered anyway.

“So how did your parents die?” Trina asked.

He didn’t answer right away. He turned and looked back toward the window as if he hadn’t heard her.

“Troy,” Trina said. “What happened?”

“I started getting lightheaded from the gas. I began to feel like I was drunk. Not thinking about it I began to turn the radio up. I didn’t realize how much, but it was enough for my dad to hear. The next thing I knew I heard him grumbling and growling in the bedroom. Then he yelled, ‘what the hell is that racket!?’ I got scared and ran staggering into my bedroom forgetting to grab my radio. The gas had done a toll on me. I was dizzy and I felt sick, but mostly I was terrified that my dad would find my radio and come after me. I scrambled underneath my bed. I know it was stupid, but at the time I just reacted. I knew that when my dad discovered my radio near the stove he would be utterly pissed and once he found me, beat the hell out of me. But he never got that far. I remember hearing a ‘click.’ It was the sound of my dad’s cigarette lighter.” He exhaled a heavy breath of air. “A second later the whole house blew up. I’m not sure what happened next. I was told that they found me wandering down the road, my clothes singed, first and second degree burns over parts of my body.

“When I was picked up I couldn’t remember a thing, not even my name. I was put in a hospital for my burns and underwent some psychological counseling. After I was released from the hospital I was put in an orphanage, because I had no other relatives that I knew about. Sometime later, maybe a month or two, I was able to get a

lot of my memory back. What I couldn't retrieve was the last couple of days leading up to the explosion and the day itself."

"Did anyone ever suspect you of the fire or Jamie's murder?" Tommy asked.

I think that everyone thought that the fire was just a horrible accident. As did I. That memory had been blocked from me. As for Jamie, I don't believe her parents ever suspected me of knocking their little girl up. We were never affectionate when they were around. If they did suspect me of being the father I never heard about it. As far as the murder goes I remember hearing that the cops were looking at a drifter, who was also a suspect in a couple of other unsolved murders. I too was convinced that the drifter was the one who had taken Jamie from me. Sometime later, I'm not sure when I began to believe that Jamie had killed herself. How that lie got in there I just don't know." Without another word, he bowed his head and began to roll his wheelchair toward the kitchen. He suddenly needed a beer real bad.

CHAPTER 32

It hit him like a hard slap in the face. He wasn't about to find a beer in this house. In his moment of zeal, he had destroyed them all and wiped away the memory of them from out of the refrigerator and off the floor. And now, in his moment of dire need, there wasn't any to be found.

For a couple of minutes, he sat and simply stared at the refrigerator, feeling numb and depressed. He had recalled too much. He needed to dull the pain. Frustration, like the weight of a big blanket, had begun to settle on him when he remembered the quart bottle of vodka that he had seen in one of the kitchen cabinets. It was Trina's. She seldom drank, but when she wished to celebrate, or just push away the day's stress, she sometimes liked to indulge herself in a Bloody Mary or a Screwdriver.

He opened three of the cabinets before he found the bottle. It was nearly full. It looked like Trina had only taken one drink out of it. In that same cabinet, he found a can of orange juice. He could drink the vodka straight, but he enjoyed it more with a little bit of orange or grapefruit juice.

He poured himself a large glass of orange juice and vodka over a bit of ice. He took a big swallow. He had a lot to think about. Namely, what was he going to do about Tommy and Trina? He couldn't just let them go, no matter how much they might swear not to tell what went on. The sad thing was if he could have had Trina to himself for just a few more days he was sure that she would have come around to his way of thinking. But not with Tommy around. He was a bad influence on her.

Troy sat in the kitchen where he had made his drink. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He didn't want Tommy nor Trina to offer their opinion, distorting his logic.

He thought that he could get rid of Tommy easily enough and make it look like an accident. He could send him on his way, and a few miles down the road wrest the steering wheel from his hand. He could force the car into a head-on crash with another car, or simply run it into a tree. After the wreck, if Tommy should still be alive, he could mentally snap his neck.

The problem with allowing Tommy to leave with the idea of wrecking his car was that the plan was far from foolproof. There were too many variables. Too many unknowns. Could he stay in mental contact with someone in a moving vehicle? Perhaps the constant change of location would be too much for his power. He wouldn't want to wreck Tommy too close to his house, either. That might lead the authorities to his house with questions assuming that Tommy had visited Trina and himself. Given the initial distance that he would have to give him what if Tommy could fight off his influence long enough to get out of range?

He finished his drink and made himself another.

On the flip side of this thing, he could let them both go free and wait for the cops to come to arrest him. He could deny his confession that he had killed Jamie and it would be nearly impossible to prove otherwise. As far as the charges that Tommy and Trina would bring, who would believe them? Everyone would see him as a cripple and nothing more. Especially not as a captor with fantastic supernatural powers. Most likely he wouldn't even be charged with anything. The only hole in that idea is that Trina would not return to him, and he wasn't sure he could face life in this old house alone.

For the next few minutes, he bounced the ideas around in his head but became more and more confused as he thought.

He finished his second drink and poured himself a third.

“What do you think he’s doing in there?” Trina asked.

“I don’t know,” Tommy answered. “I’m not thinking too clear right now. I’m kind of numb. I can’t get used to this new Troy I’m seeing. I guess I never really knew him.”

“Do you think he’ll kill us?”

Tommy looked up into Trina’s eyes. He debated whether or not she could handle the truth. He decided she could. “I think the possibility is there.”

Trina’s face turned a chalky white. She swallowed and nodded her agreement.

“But,” he continued, “if we can hold out until tonight we might have a chance of getting away.”

Her eyes brightened a bit. “How?”

Troy suddenly rolled out of the kitchen, a fresh drink in his hand.

“Later,” Tommy whispered back.

Troy looked at them a moment then maneuvered his chair over to the sofa. He picked up the remote, pointed it at the television then pushed a button to bring the set to life. He flipped through the channels until he found a sports talk show.

For a good while, no one spoke. Troy sat staring at the TV, sipping on his drink. At first, Tommy simply watched Troy wondering what he might do next. Later, his attention was diverted to the sports show. Trina watched Troy for a bit herself, before leaning back on her side against the wooden railings and bowing her head.

When Troy had finished his drink he turned his chair around and rolled it over to the stairway. “You two hungry?” he asked. His tone was unusually friendly as if everything were perfectly normal.

“Sure,” Tommy answered. “Let us loose and we’ll all sit down at the table like civilized people and have ourselves a good meal.”

Troy laughed as though he had heard a genuinely funny joke. “No, no. I was thinking about just letting Trina free to make us some hamburgers.”

“No!” she shouted. “Make your own damn burgers!”

“I’ll make the hamburgers,” Tommy said. “I’m a pretty good cook if I say so myself.”

“No. I want Trina.” The tone in his voice had turned hard.

“Trina,” Tommy said softly, “please do what he wants. We don’t need any more trouble. Okay?” He winked at her with his left eye, out of Troy’s eyesight.

“That’s exactly right,” Troy added.

Tommy noticed the slight slur in Troy’s voice for the first time. The way he was going at it he would be drunk by nightfall. That could prove to be a giant break for them.

Trina didn’t speak for several seconds, pondering what Tommy had told her and what the wink meant. “Okay,” she finally said. “I’ll make us some supper.”

Troy trundled over to the stairs and threw her the keys.

Trina unlocked her cuffs and then rubbed at her wrists. For just a moment she considered rushing down to Tommy and releasing his cuffs, but quickly dismissed that idea. Troy could still overpower them. Reluctantly, she threw the keys back to Troy’s waiting hand.

“Good girl,” Troy remarked catching the keys in midflight.

Trina shot him an angry look, then with the help of the stair rail pulled herself up to her feet. She limped down the few steps and stopped beside Troy’s chair. “Does it make you happy knowing that you screwed up my leg?”

“It was unavoidable. Besides, it’ll heal up in a few days.”

She stared at him a moment in disgust, before turning and heading toward the kitchen.

“Oh,” Troy began, “don’t try anything foolish. Next time you might end up like me. Minus the power, of course.”

She paused for a second, thought of spouting something back at him, thought better of it, and then continued her slow limp into the kitchen.

“Troy,” Tommy called. “It’s going to be very hard for me to eat like this. Do you think you could take off one of the cuffs? As long as one arm is chained to the banister I can’t go anywhere.”

He smiled. “Sure. What are friends for?” He threw him the keys. “Don’t try anything funny now. Remember, I can reach you from over here.”

He turned to the kitchen. “Trina, honey, how ‘bout fixing me another drink.”

They ate supper mostly in silence. Troy ate only one hamburger with none of the canned baked beans or chips Trina had fixed. His drink was the screwdriver Trina had made for him.

Tommy ate enough to feel comfortably full, but not stuffed. He figured he might need his strength later on, but didn’t want to be slowed down by a bloated stomach.

Trina ate half a burger but could tolerate no more. Her emotions seemed to be rolling around in her stomach like a bag of rocks. For a while, she thought she was going to be sick.

Later, when the last light of day began to fade from the evening sky and the two were shackled back up to the staircase banister, Troy began to work on his last few ounces of the vodka. He had run out of orange juice so now he just drank straight from the bottle.

He thought of Jamie. They had had some good times together. Some very good times. He missed the hell out of him, eh ...her. He wished that ...that Jamie wouldn’t have ... that ... he couldn’t remember how Jamie had died. In his mind, he could see him, then her, in the bathtub bleeding. Bleeding. So much blood.

He drank the last swallow of vodka from the bottle. He threw the empty bottle across the room. It hit the wall, shattering, spraying chunks of glass over the floor.

“Ahhhhh!” Trina screamed. It had startled her. She had sat there and drifted into a mentally numb state

Tommy looked up sharply. It had startled him too.

Troy looked over to the two handcuffed to the banister. Why were they handcuffed? He thought a moment. He had handcuffed them. Why? It seemed like it had something to do with Jamie. What? He couldn’t think. His mind was too muddled by the alcohol. He must have had a good reason for chaining them, though. He could ask them, but then he would feel like a fool for forgetting. No. When the alcohol started to wear off he would remember. He just needed to be patient. Maybe get a little sleep. Yes. That was it. He was a little tired.

He trundled past Tommy and Trina, who looked over at him. He rolled into the hallway and his bedroom.

CHAPTER 33

“Are you okay?” Tommy whispered. The way Trina was staring at the floor he thought that she was slipping into shock.

She nodded. “Yes, I’m okay.” She didn’t bother to look up.

“Try holding on a little longer. I think Troy went to bed. I hope so, anyway. If that’s the case I can get us out of here. We just need to wait a few minutes to make sure he’s in deep sleep or passed out. I wouldn’t want him to catch us in the process of escaping.”

Trina looked up. “And how are you going to do that?”

He grinned. “I’ve got a spare key.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yes. I always keep an extra one on me. I don’t usually like to admit it, but I have a phobia about being bound like this.” For a moment he looked embarrassed. “Anyway, I have a small slit on the inside of my belt where I keep a key. I guess I’ve been expecting something like this most of my adult life, though not so extraordinary.”

She suddenly looked better. A smile creased her face for the first time in several hours.

“As soon as we get these cuffs off,” Tommy whispered, “we need to see about getting a weapon.”

“A weapon? You mean like a gun.”

“Yes. Look, I don’t understand this power, this telekinesis, or whatever you want to call it, but I know that it’s more powerful than the two of us. We need something to even the odds if he should catch us escaping.”

“But that didn’t work the last time. He just turned your gun around on you.”

“I know, but that’s because I gave him the time. If I would have shot right away he couldn’t have stopped the bullet. Now I know what I’m up against.”

She shook her head. “No. You can’t be serious. You can’t just shoot him. That would be murder.”

“No, you’ve got me wrong. That’s not what I meant. I wouldn’t aim to kill him, just to wound him. Hopefully, it would be enough to break his concentration. Maybe then we could put enough distance between us and him that his powers would be ineffective.” He hoped that what he said was true, but knew that in the end killing Troy might be the only way to stop him.

She nodded. “It probably won’t come to that, anyway. Troy sleeps quite heavily when he’s been drinking. We ought to be able to slip right out of here without waking him.”

“You may be right, but I would feel better with a little insurance.”

“Troy has turned into a son-of-a-bitch for sure, but ... I don’t think he can help it. Not all of it. He’s sick. He needs psychological help.”

“I agree, but there is no way he will get the help he needs unless we can get free. He’s going to have to be forced to face these demons of his. And I feel sorry for the ones who will have to bring him in.”

She sighed. “I know. I know.” She looked frustrated. For a time she was silent as though wrestling with her thoughts. “Troy’s got a handgun in the upstairs bedroom,” she finally said. “In the drawer of the nightstand.”

“Like you said I’ll probably never have to use it.”

Her eyes glistened as the tears began to form. She struggled to hold them back. She knew she had to be strong.

“Let’s give him about five or ten more minutes to get into a deep sleep. Just to be sure.”

The tears slid slowly down her cheeks. She couldn’t hold them back any longer.

“It’ll be okay,” Tommy assured her, even though he wasn’t so sure himself. “This will work.”

Trina nodded and leaned back against the railing. Already her heart was pounding against her chest walls. She was scared. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but Troy had begun to terrify her. Pushing back all the emotional attachments she had to him she had to conclude that Tommy was probably right. It would be better if they were armed. She had to believe that with his mental disposition Troy was capable of almost any atrocity. She shuddered to think of what he could do to them with this strange power of his. He might be able to rip their head off their shoulders. For a few seconds, she envisioned her head bouncing down the steps, her torso falling lifelessly upon the stairs, blood spewing forth from the cavity where her head had been. She quickly shook that vision away. She didn’t need those kinds of paralyzing thoughts. Especially now.

Tommy’s plan was simple. When he was fairly certain that Troy was in a deep enough sleep he would unlock himself with his key, then Trina. He would slip quickly up the stairs and get the gun from the nightstand. He didn’t think Trina would be composed enough to get it. She might hesitate and waste some of the precious little time that they had. When he returned from upstairs the two of them would quietly sneak out the door to his car. Troy had not bothered to take away his car keys. The one part of his plan that made him especially nervous was when he started the car up. Would merely cranking the engine wake Troy up? If so what could he do about it? He had witnessed firsthand how he had directed his energy across the kitchen. Could he extend further than that? If so, how far away would they have to be safe from him? He wished he had some definite answers.

He looked at his watch. Only about three minutes had elapsed. It seemed longer. He had not heard any sounds coming from the bedroom. Hopefully Troy was in the midst of an alcohol-induced concussive state. He would give him just a few more minutes to be sure.

Another series of questions came to mind. Assuming that they got away would anyone believe their story? Would they even be able to convince someone to investigate? He could imagine the laughter when he tried to explain that they had been held captive by a paraplegic with supernatural abilities.

Five minutes later he decided that it had been plenty of time. If Troy had not gone to sleep he would have been back to check on them. He was about to go for his key when he spotted something in his peripheral vision at the archway to the dining room from the living room. He turned quickly and saw a slight movement just inside the living room. His heart began to thump inside his chest like a big drum. Something was wrong. He could feel it.

He stared, and saw a very subtle movement, but couldn’t make out what it was. It seemed to be a shadow within a shadow. Very gradually, however, the movement increased and began to take a rough shape, readily distinguishing itself from other things about it. He saw the shape coming together as if his eyes were adjusting to the grayness of the living room. And at once it was there. It stepped completely out of the shadows and into the lazy rays of a setting sun that shone through the part in the living room drapes.

It was a boy. He looked to be about four and a half feet tall and no more than eighty pounds. He wore an Atlanta Braves cap canted to one side. Light brown hair,

almost blonde, spewed out the side of the cap and covered most of both ears. He wore a dirty white tee-shirt and faded blue jeans.

Tommy was shaken. Where had the boy come from? It seemed to him that the boy had suddenly developed inside the shadows. That was ridiculous, of course. He must have come through the back door or the kitchen window. That had to be it. His eyes were simply playing tricks on him.

“Who are you?” Tommy whispered, not wanting to awaken Troy.

The boy didn't answer. He simply stared. The vacuous expression on his face was unwavering. He took a step forward.

Trina looked up when she heard Tommy speak. She noticed the boy, and at first thought that it was the girl she had seen (or thought she had seen) crying in the basement. But no. This child was a bit larger and his face a bit rougher. The girl she had seen was petite, and her face, though she seemed to be in pain at the time, contained a softly contoured loveliness.

Tommy began to feel for the split in his belt to retrieve the hidden key. The kid made him nervous. He thought of the description of the kid who had stabbed Rock to death. The two kids were a match.

“What do you ...” Tommy began, then abruptly cut his words short. He suddenly noticed a glint of light at the boy's hand. He gasped. He could describe the long, angle of a knife.

Tommy's fingers probed the opening in the belt. Pushing the split in the belt apart and retrieving the key with only his left hand was a lot more difficult than he had imagined.

The boy took another seemingly wary, step forward. He watched the two on the stairs as though trying to decide what to do.

Tommy was finally able to push the split apart and pry the key out using his index finger. The key came suddenly free. He tried to close his fingers over it, but he was too slow. The key slipped between his belt and jeans and fell to the steps just below his feet.

The boy looked suddenly curious as though he thought he had seen something but wasn't certain what it was. He raised the knife to waist height and began to slowly inch forward.

“Oh, God!” Trina exclaimed, her voice rising louder than Tommy would have liked. “He's going to kill us!”

Tommy stretched his left hand down to the steps to recover the key. At first, he didn't think that he could reach it. It was an inch away from his outstretched fingers. He pushed harder and the right hand cuff, wrapped around the banister, strained at his hand just below the wrist, biting into his flesh. He groaned. With his middle finger, he was able to touch the key and slide it a bit closer. Another second and he was able to work the key between his index finger and thumb. He pinched his fingers closed and lifted it.

“Tommy!” Trina screamed.

The boy was almost upon him. Just as Tommy looked up the boy lunged at him. The knife, which looked to be about a ten-inch butcher knife, had been raised above his shoulder and was coming down at him.

He didn't have time to think. Reflex took over. His knees came up to his chest and he kicked as hard as he could. Tommy's two feet caught the boy just below the chest. The boy was driven backward, tumbling and falling down the set of stairs before finally coming to rest several feet from the staircase.

Tommy quickly unlocked his cuffs and slid his wrists free. He left the set of handcuffs dangling from the railing. He quickly took a couple of steps up to Trina and removed her cuffs, then slipped the key into his pocket.

The boy was coming at him again, not with any haste, but with a stubborn relentlessness.

“Get the gun,” Tommy whispered. “I’ll hold off the kid.”

“No. I can’t leave ...”

“Hurry!” Tommy cut her off.

Trina turned and began limping up the stairs as quickly as she could, clenching her teeth at the onset of the throbbing pain that had begun again with her sudden movement.

The boy came to the first step. He poised the knife in front of him and began to ascend.

Tommy’s first idea was to try to kick the knife out of the boy’s hand, but that would require a bit of accuracy. And, if he should be lucky enough to hit the boy’s hand there was no guarantee that the boy would lose the knife. No, his second idea was better. Kick the boy square in the balls. That provided a better target. A good kick would disable him. If the boy didn’t immediately lose the knife from the devastating kick at least it should be a somewhat easy procedure for him to then remove the knife from the boy’s hands.

The boy moved inexorably closer, climbing the stairs as if he were relishing every step.

Tommy made fists and raised his hands in front of him as though he intended to box his way out of this predicament. He needed to divert the boy’s attention from his feet.

Trina slid the drawer to the nightstand all the way open. There was some change scattered about: a couple of quarters, a couple of dimes, and some pennies. A comb and an old set of keys were also there. But no gun. “No,” she moaned. “No, it can’t be.” Despair washed over her and for a few moments, it paralyzed her.

She shook herself. She had to think. He must have taken that gun with him the night he was shot. What else to do? What else?

When the boy got close enough Tommy hauled off and kicked with all the strength he could call up. His right foot found its mark and landed hard in between the boy’s legs. His foot should have slammed into the soft flesh of the boy’s balls, but in that split second, it seemed to him that he was hitting a piece of hard plastic. It was as if the boy had no genitals. As if he were a storefront dummy with nothing more than a smooth, rounded slab where the sex organs should have been.

Though there seemed to be no pain to the boy, the sheer force of the blow brought the legs out from underneath him. He fell to his knees onto the steps just below Tommy. Almost instantly, he regained his balance and plunged the knife forward, driving it deep into Tommy’s thigh. Tommy screamed and at the same time slammed a right fist into the center of the boy’s face. The boy tumbled backward pulling the knife out of Tommy’s flesh as he fell, rolling backward down the stairs.

Trina remembered a shotgun that Troy had kept upstairs in a closet just as Tommy screamed. He had used it on occasion to hunt pheasant. She ran to the closet and swung the door open wide. She slid over a rack of clothes. The shotgun was propped in the corner. It was a twelve gauge over and under. She picked it up and checked the chamber. It was empty.

She skimmed her hands along the top shelf of the closet until they came across a small box. She pulled it out. It was a box of shotgun shells as she had hoped. She quickly inserted two shells into the chamber and two more into her pocket.

Tommy looked down at his wounded leg. Already blood was saturating his pant leg, rapidly expanding into a dark, roughly circular stain. He grabbed the banister and began to pull himself to his feet. He clamped his teeth shut to bear the pain. It felt like his whole leg was on fire. Warm, viscous blood trickled down his leg and began to drip onto his shoes and the stairs. For a moment he thought that he was going to fall out, right there on the spot. But somehow he managed to stay the darkness that loomed over him until it began to dissipate like a thinning mist.

He had to get away or he was finished. He didn't think he had the strength to put up a decent fight. And Trina hadn't returned. What was taking her so long?

Tommy looked down the stairs. Every muscle in his body seemed to stiffen like rusted metal springs. The boy was headed back up the stairs.

What the hell was this kid made of? Why won't he stay down? Why couldn't he be hurt? It was insane.

Tommy's mind was racing, but each thought he came up with immediately hit a dead end. Trying to kick the boy again was a waste of energy. Even if he were able to stand on his bad leg for a few seconds to deliver a kick he doubted if there would be any power in it. He could try to punch, but for him to get in a decent lick, he would have to get in close to the boy. Too close. The boy would probably slice and dice him before he could make contact.

He froze, realizing he couldn't climb the stairs fast enough to get away from the boy. All he could do was wait for the inevitable.

"Hold it!" Trina's voice cut through the dead silence. She stood at the top of the stairs peering downward. "Or ... or I'll shoot."

The boy stopped and looked up at Trina for a brief moment then proceeded up the stairs.

"Shoot him!" Tommy shouted. "Shoot the son-of-a-bitch!"

Trina moved to the corner of the staircase to get a better shot at the boy, but she just couldn't shoot him. After all, this was just a boy. Just the sight of the gun should be enough to scare him.

"Stop!" she shouted again.

The boy had moved within three steps of Tommy. He stopped again and looked up curiously at Trina.

"If you don't shoot him," Tommy called to her, "I'm a dead man."

The boy slowly, deliberately, raised his knife, took another step, then lunged at Tommy. The knife cut through the air toward the center of his chest. Tommy gasped and fell backward trying to get out of the way.

The blast of the shotgun exploded through the house. Trina fell backward from the recoil, landing square on her butt.

The boy was hit on the right side of the head and shoulders. He was tossed about from the blast and tumbled headfirst down the stairs.

From his recumbent position on the steps, Tommy watched the boy falling down the short stretch of stairs. To Tommy, he seemed more like some ventriloquist's dummy. There was no blood from the successful shotgun blast, nor screams of agony from the wounded boy. There was not even a hint of groaning or crying. There was only the thumping of the body as it hit the stairs, and a final 'whoomp' as it landed flat on the floor at the foot of the stairway.

The boy lay still like some inert shadow. Tommy half expected him to get back up. Then he knew he wouldn't.

The boy began to dissolve. Not like melting, but more like a shadow retreating from the light of day. The substance of the boy gave way to light and soon there was nothing left but the bare floor.

Trina grabbed hold of the banister and staggered and hobbled her way down the stairs to where Tommy sat. She held the shotgun loosely in her left hand.

"What happened?" Trina asked. "Where did the boy go?" She stared down the steps not sure of what she saw.

Tommy twisted to face her a moment. She was on the step above him. "I think back to the place he came from." Tommy grabbed opposite sides of his torn pant leg where the knife had penetrated and began to rip the fabric to get a better look at his wound. He moaned and gritted his teeth at the pain. He took a breath. "If I'm not mistaken he's the same boy— or whatever that thing was — that killed Rock. Maybe some sick creation of Troy's." He looked at the wound. Blood was seeping out, but not spurting out like it would have if the knife had hit an artery.

"I don't understand."

At once Troy came rolling into the living room from the hallway. He stopped at the opening. "He's a dream," Troy said. They both turned and were momentarily frozen by indecision. "I can't consciously control him," he continued, his voice only slightly slurred by the vodka he had consumed. "He only appears in my sleep when certain emotions of mine seem to reach a peak."

"It seems to me," Tommy began, "that this power of yours is beginning to overtake you. I think if you don't get help soon it may destroy you as well as those around you."

"Nonsense. You're just trying to talk your way out of this situation that you've gotten yourself into."

Tommy pushed his way up to his feet. He put most of his weight on his good leg, but couldn't help but move his injured leg in the process. He bit his lip at the shock of pain that struck his leg. For a moment his world went black, and he thought he would fall. Then the world came back to life around him. He took a deep breath before trying to speak. "This is a situation that you made, not me, and not Trina. It would be a good idea for you to let us go."

"I think not. I just have to figure out a more secure way to hold you. At least, until the morning when I reach my decision on what to do with the two of you."

Trina was to Tommy's right. The shotgun was only a few inches from his right shoulder. He had a decision to make. "You're not locking us up again."

"Is that right? And why not? Are you going to stop me?"

"Yes," Tommy said. He reached around quickly and snatched the shotgun from Trina's hands. He began to swing it over in Troy's direction, but at once something stopped him and he was unable to get him in his sights. Immediately a strong pressure on Tommy's index finger caused the gun to go off prematurely. The shotgun roared. A portion of the wall exploded off to Troy's left, spraying chunks of wallboard into the air and across the floor.

Tommy's trigger finger was jerked violently out of the gun's ring by an unseen force. That same incredible force shoved the index finger backward. Tommy screamed as the bone snapped. He released his hold on the shotgun. The gun fell from his hands, the barrel hit the railing, the gun canted, and dropped to the steps. Just as it hit it rose instantly back up again. For a couple of seconds, it hovered in midair before it shot upwards cartwheeling toward the second floor. It bounced across the floor of the

upstairs and into the hall wall. It flopped over and landed on its side, the barrel facing the stairs.

Tommy struggled to keep conscious above the searing pain in his leg and the newly broken finger that now pointed at an absurd angle. But not for long. An unseen force took hold of him and flung him straight up into the overhead ceiling with enough force that it left an immediate impression on the ceiling. At once it let go and he dropped to the steps like a rock. He hit face first, tumbled down a couple of steps, and came to rest sprawled across the stairs.

Trina screamed and limped down to where Tommy had fallen. She knelt beside him, crying. His face was battered. Blood flowed freely from a nose that was twisted and broken. His mouth was bloody and swollen and a single tooth lay on the step next to his slightly open mouth. She was sure he was dead, but to her surprise, he was still breathing. He was unconscious, though, and she wasn't sure what other types of injuries he might have sustained. "Tommy," she called. "Please wake up." She placed a hand on his back but was afraid to move him. "Oh, God, Tommy," she wailed.

"It's amazing," Troy began, and there was only a slight slur in his words. "I should still be wiped out from the vodka, but I'm not. I believe this is part of the change I'm undergoing. This power of mine is growing. I'm metamorphosing. I believe that before long alcohol will not affect me at all." He laughed. "I'll tell you, I am finding out something more incredible about this power nearly every day. It is a very enigmatic thing, but I can't complain. At the rate my power is growing I will be a freaking god before long."

"Look what you've done!" she screamed. "You bastard! Tommy is hurt bad and all you can do is talk about yourself!" Her voice softened somewhat. "You have to do something. He used to be your best friend. Call an ambulance. Please."

"You want me to do something? Okay, your words have convinced me."

Tommy began to move. At first, she thought he might be waking up, but then his whole body began to rise off the steps as though invisible arms were lifting him at the stomach and chest. His arms and legs hung down limply toward the stairs. His head was bowed down so that his chin nearly touched his chest. Soon he had risen several feet above the banister.

Trina assumed that Troy must be transporting him to a flat surface like the floor or the sofa so he would be a little more comfortable. Still, she would have preferred him not to move Tommy at all not knowing the extent of his injuries. Right now, though, she wasn't in a position to make demands. She was just happy that he had conceded to help Tommy. She would feel a lot better, however when he finally made that call for an ambulance.

"I was very disappointed in Tommy," Troy began. "He pissed me off trying to kill me. I thought he was a friend. I was wrong."

Trina wasn't sure how to respond. She didn't want to antagonize Troy. He might decide not to help Tommy.

"Well, I promised I would do something."

Tommy's body zipped through the air, across the living room, and slammed headfirst into the wall, nearly the same spot that the shotgun pellets had hit. The body fell bent over down to the floor.

A loud gasp escaped Trina's mouth. She closed her eyes at the same time because she did not want to see the result of Tommy's violent collision with the wall.

"Did you hear that?" Troy asked. "It was like a little 'snap' sound. You know, I believe Tommy just broke his neck." He laughed.

"You're a sick bastard!" Trina cried. "Damn you!" Tears were rolling freely down her cheeks. She felt on the verge of passing out.

“Hey, you wanted me to do something, and I did. I put him out of his misery. He wouldn’t have made it anyway.”

He had killed Tommy with no remorse at all. She wondered how easy it would be for him to kill her as well. She thought of the shotgun shells still in her pocket. She saw it as her only chance. She turned and began to run, hobble, up the stairs as quickly as she could, trying desperately to ignore the pain that came with each step. If she could make it to the shotgun she might have a chance. Maybe he would hesitate a second longer with her than with Tommy giving her the chance to make the fatal shot.

She almost made it to the top of the stairs before her ankles were seized with a tremendous force immediately stopping her momentum. She fell forward catching herself on her forearms. She yelped as she hit the steps.

“You’re just not quick enough,” Troy said.

The force that had seized her legs began to drag her back down the steps. She didn’t resist. It seemed futile to even try. When she was midway down the stairs the gripping force dissipated like so much sand being blown off her ankles. She lay there not bothering to get up, crying softly, her mind not wanting to register all that had happened.

“Try it again,” he challenged. “Maybe you’ll make it this time.” He smiled wryly and began to roll himself toward the foot of the stairs. He was playing with her. It was just a game to him. He was the proverbial cat taunting the trapped mouse.

She couldn’t quit. Even if he let her live, for now, once again confining her to the basement, what kind of life would that be? Not only would she be living the life of a captive, but she would also always be living with the nightmare of him killing Tommy and the threat of him extinguishing her sometime in the future. Given his state of mind killing her would not be such a moral problem to him.

Poor Tommy. Oh, God, she wished that she hadn’t gotten him involved. She felt like something vital had dropped from her very soul as she thought of Tommy lying dead on the floor like he was trash just waiting to be thrown out.

She breathed in and tried to stifle a few of her tears. She had to get hold of herself. She wouldn’t let Troy beat her without a good fight. Tommy wouldn’t have wanted his death to be for nothing.

She tried again, but this time she was much slower than before. With one long stride, she landed too hard on her injured leg and it sent shockwaves of pain coursing through the leg. She hollered and almost fell on her own before the invisible hands clamped about her ankles and dragged her back down the ridges of steps.

He laughed loudly. “Ha! Ha! Ha! You got to try harder than that! How do you expect to beat me with such a weak effort? He continued to laugh as he straightened his chair to face the center of the stairway.

She cried harder than before, partly due to the agonizing pain in her left leg, and partly due to the sheer frustration she was experiencing. She tried desperately not to cry, to give him the satisfaction that he had broken her, but couldn’t stop.

“Try again,” he taunted. “You’re getting closer. Next time you just might make it.”

Troy was right about one thing. Though she hadn’t gotten further up the stairs on her last try her distance to the upstairs landing was shorter simply because he hadn’t pulled her back down to where she was the last time.

Every fiber of her body wanted to quit. She wouldn’t let it, even though the chance of her making it to the top of the stairs and to the shotgun was extremely low. What other choice did she have? She knew of no other way to stop him, no viable means of escape, and she had no hope of anyone dropping by anytime soon.

She had managed to quit crying for the most part but was still sobbing as she pushed herself to her feet. This time she wouldn't try to run, not at first anyway. She took a tentative step forward. Nothing happened. He was allowing her that much. Slowly, she took one more step. Again, nothing happened. Two more steps would put her on the second floor. From there the gun was approximately six feet away. If she could take one more step and leap for it she'd probably make it. But would she have time to load the shotgun, swing the gun around in Troy's direction as she stood up, and pull the trigger? Would she have the nerve to shoot him, or would she freeze up? She had no choice, but to try. She would have to face each of those questions as they came up.

She took a single, wary step then dove for the shotgun. In the split second that she was in the air the invisible force snapped about her ankles. She dropped to the floor like a lead weight, hitting hard on her face as a muffled yell broke through her lips. The dam burst in that instant and she began blubbering uncontrollably. For a while, it seemed she couldn't catch her breath as her stomach heaved in convulsive fits. She sobbed, moaned, and mewed, verging on the brink of hysteria. Yet a thread of strength, an indomitable strain, wouldn't allow her to venture past that line. Gradually she began to come back up. Her near breakdown began to wane.

She hurt all over. Her whole face felt swollen and tender to the touch. Her head hurt. Her leg throbbed as if the blood itself were boiling inside her veins and about to explode. She could taste the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. She had busted her lower lip and chipped off a front tooth. She spit out the tooth along with a gout of blood.

She couldn't go on. She couldn't. But she had to. Tommy was dead. How could she fare any better? She had to try. Troy was too powerful, he wasn't about to let her get to the gun. But she couldn't just give up. Giving up would mean the end. She had to keep trying.

She struggled up to her knees, an angry stubbornness quickly welling up inside of her. Through her stream of tears, she could make out the shotgun only a few feet from her reach. Luckily for her, he hadn't drugged her back down the stairs.

"You can do it," Troy goaded. "Just push yourself forward a little bit and you'll be able to reach it."

His voice startled her because he sounded so close. She twisted around to look behind her. She swallowed hard. He was halfway up the stairs. The wheels of his chair were churning slowly, relentlessly, pulling their way up the steps. Troy sat in the chair with his hands folded in his lap. A look of triumph, or arrogance, of unmitigated confidence, was etched across his face. And there was yet another look written in the cold glint of his eyes and the deep furrows of his forehead. It was the look of madness.

She turned back to look at the gun. If this was to be her last chance she needed to give herself every advantage possible. At this point, 'time' topped the list.

She slowly, as inconspicuously as she could, slid her hands into her pant pocket and removed the two shotgun shells. If, against the odds, she were able to get to the gun she needed to load it as quickly as humanly possible. She only needed to stretch out the full length of her body and she would have the gun.

She dove straight from her knees stretching her whole body across the floor to the shotgun.

She thought she had it. Her hands almost grasped about the barrel of the gun, just before it darted away as if propelled from a slingshot. It settled adjacent to her old bedroom door more than ten feet away.

Peals of laughter burst forth from Troy once more. "You are just too slow. I almost wish you had gotten it. You were so close." A more somber tone quickly

replaced the humor in his voice. "Unfortunately, you didn't. Now you force me to make a difficult decision." He paused a moment, sighing heavily. "You saw what I did to Tommy. It probably doesn't make any difference. Who would believe you? Still, there is a remote possibility that someone might. Is there any kind of test that would prove that I possess this power? I don't know. There might be. In any event, I'm not willing to take that chance, as slim as it might be. I think that it would be prudent of me to do away with you as well. Just in case."

The wheelchair he was riding in rolled up onto the landing and stopped.

She pushed up to her knees. She had stopped crying. The shock had successfully taken away her tears. For the moment she bore the pain like a stoic. A total resignation had encompassed her. She pushed the two shotgun shells back into her pocket. If this were to be the end she would accept it. She fought her way to her feet clenching her teeth as hard as she could against the pain. Finally coming erect, she turned to face Troy.

"I've come to the decision," he began, "that the best way for me to get out of this predicament that I have gotten myself into is to use you and Tommy as scapegoats. I will set things up so it will look like you and Tommy had some kind of ... I don't know ... ferocious fight, or something. I'll figure out the what and the whys later. Anyway, in the end, you two wind up killing each other. Me, I'm going to be devastated. I'm going to barely be able to punch out nine one one on the telephone." He bowed his head as though remorseful. "I'm so sorry".

She felt like attacking him right then but knew that it would be useless. He'd probably bounce her off the wall like a big rubber ball before she could take two steps.

"I don't enjoy this," he said, "but circumstances and all, you know."

He reached his hand out to his left side. She stiffened. She figured he was about to put an end to her life right now with a burst of psychic energy.

It was halfway up the stairs when she saw it. Tommy's handgun floated up the stairway and sat down in Troy's outstretched hand.

At almost the same time that the gun landed in Troy's hand, Trina heard something off to her left, in the area of the bathroom. The sound started as an almost imperceptible noise, but it was strengthening in tiny increments. It sounded to her like a child crying. It temporarily diverted her attention from Troy.

"Here's how it's going to go," Troy began, "I'm going to use this telekinesis thing of mine to bring Tommy up here to the second floor. I will put the gun in Tommy's hand and have him shoot you. Then I will have him turn the gun on himself and ..." he noticed Trina's curious look and how she stared toward the bathroom. "What are you looking at?" He cocked his head toward the bathroom.

"Someone is crying," she said. "It sounds like a child."

"The only child who has ever been in this house is the one I created in my dreams." Then he heard it. There was sobbing and a soft keening sound.

"She's crying again. I think it's the girl I've seen a couple of times. The last time was in the basement. The first time I followed her up here to the bathroom where she just vanished."

"No. You're lying. You didn't tell me about a girl. There is no girl. I don't hear anything," he lied. Even so, he looked toward the bathroom.

The door to the bathroom inched open. Troy stared at the darkened opening, wondering what might step forth into the hallway, and if this might be his creation. Perhaps this was the boy in his dream that he gave life to, who had somehow escaped his sleeping world to become a lifeform all its own. He was suddenly afraid. If this boy was able to slip out of his dream would he still be able to control the boy?

He was immediately shaken when a young girl stepped out into the hallway instead of the boy. The girl was naked and bedraggled as though she had just gotten out of the bathtub and hadn't bothered to dry off. Rivulets of blood flowed from a slit that extended from one end of her neck to the other. The thick, dark streams ran down her body, and over her small breasts, dripping globs of blood that fell both to the floor and her stomach. Her face was the epitome of hurt and pain. She was crying softly from deeply dark and lifeless eyes. Eyes that purveyed both sadness and an accusing tone.

"Ja... Ja... Jamie?" Troy whispered. "It ... it ... it can't be."

So this was Jamie, Trina thought. Of course. She should have put it all together after Troy had admitted that his boyhood friend was a girl. She looked at Troy. He seemed petrified. She had never seen him this scared. She took a tentative step toward him.

The girl began to cry louder as she looked pleadingly at Troy, inching steadily closer.

"No!" Troy cried. "Stay away from me. I'm sorry!"

Trina took another step toward him, then another.

The young girl continued to creep toward him.

"No. You can't hurt me. You're not alive!" he shouted.

But I can, Trina thought.

She rushed across the few feet left between them. She grabbed the seat of his chair with both hands, and with adrenalin pumping overtime, pulled the chair upward and backward. A cry broke in his throat at that instant. His hands flailed at her as the chair tilted back, but only snatched handfuls of empty air. The chair rolled and toppled straight backward. The top of the chair banged against the edge of the top step and Troy's head and shoulder slipped over the headrest from the momentum. One leg got tangled up in the armrest. The chair began to flip, grinding and bending his head into the ridges of steps as it fell. He wailed a single time. The chair canted over on its side and began to twist and slide down the length of the stairs.

The chair came to rest at the bottom of the stairway. Troy ended up half in and half out of the chair that was now bent and broken. His left arm was twisted behind him at an unnatural angle. His eyes were partially open but stared blankly up at the line of steps. His face seemed to be frozen in a rictus of pain and fear.

Trina looked toward the bathroom. The girl was gone. She wondered if the girl hadn't been a part of Troy's psychic energy just as the boy Jamie had been. Perhaps she had been a subconscious product of his guilt. Of course, there was the other possibility; that she was the spirit of the real Jamie.

She stared down at the body of Troy. She had finally done it. She had stopped him. She had felt no joy in it, however, only a sense of relief. She hadn't wanted it to end this way. Somehow, despite all that he had done to her, she still loved him. But he had given her no real choice. She had done what ... her thoughts were suddenly interrupted.

Troy was moving. His head was jerking back and forth like some kind of nervous tick. His eyes had partially closed and he had begun to drool at the corner of his mouth. She figured he was going into convulsions. The fall hadn't killed him after all.

She was about to descend the stairs when a great rumble, like the onset of a great earthquake, ripped through the house. She fought for her balance as the floor shuddered beneath her. Above her, and throughout the house, the light fixtures shook violently, threatening to release themselves from the electrical ceiling boxes that held them bondage. Windows rattled as though a winter storm were slamming into them. Doors vibrated on their hinges, swaying open or closed depending on which way the

vibration drove them. Inside the upstairs bathroom, the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet opened and most of the contents spilled out in a cadence of crashes. The cold water faucet in the bathtub suddenly came on at full velocity spewing out a rush of water. The toilet flushed. The light fixture above her head exploded showering her with glass and debris. She screamed, and stepping quickly backward she fell to the floor, landing on her butt. For an instant, she lost her breath, and a gray sheet swept across her eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” she cried to herself as she rolled over to her stomach and then to her knees. She was afraid to stand up. She wasn’t sure she could keep her balance. As bad as it hurt she began to crawl across the floor against the constant trembling of the house. She made it back to the edge of the stairway. The house shook as if it were about to collapse on top of her. She had to get out of the house, and from all the signs, she needed to get out quickly.

She stopped her crawling cold when she caught sight of Tommy downstairs. He was floating at the top of the ceiling, bouncing around as if he were some big helium-filled balloon. The sight of his dead body bouncing around like that made her feel sick. She placed a hand over her mouth and fought nausea.

At once windows began exploding in a cascade of erupting sounds. The living room window burst first. It exploded inward shooting darts of glass across the room. Other windows began to explode in succession. Some exploded inward. Some exploded outward. Others managed to do both.

Trina hugged the floor at the awful sounds of crashing glass. It seemed to go on forever, but only lasted a minute. When the discordant noise had finally dissipated she lay frozen on the floor. She didn’t want to get up. She wanted to curl up in a ball and wish the world out of existence.

Abruptly, the stairway balustrade groaned, broke free of its wooden base and some of its balusters, and sprung straight up to smash into the ceiling. The rail broke in half upon impact and instantly lost its power. Both halves dropped. One half crashed into the stairs, and the other half hit the first floor. The remaining balusters shot off into the air. Two went straight up to wedge into the ceiling. The others flew around awhile like misguided wooden missiles.

After the last baluster had spent its energy and dropped back down Trina reluctantly lifted her head. The more rational part of her took over and convinced her that she couldn’t just hide her head and hope that it would all go away. If she were to make it she needed to take action.

She looked to the first floor to see what destruction lay before her, to get an idea of what she would be facing. Her eyes paused at Troy first. He was still twitching near the bottom of the steps as though he were still amid a convulsive fit. And, she thought, that might not be far from the truth. It could be that he was indeed convulsing, unconsciously spewing out psychic manifestations in all directions. Perhaps he was even in the throes of death and all that supernatural energy of his had to be spent before his body would give up.

Right now she couldn’t spend the time guessing what was going on. She needed to get down the stairs and the hell out of the house. She could ponder these things later.

The steps appeared fairly stable but were littered with large and small debris from the broken railing and the shattered light fixture. Add to that the trembling house and she wondered if she would be able to make it down the stairs without seriously hurting herself.

As if the house had read her mind it rumbled once more, then groaned and creaked, and with a soft sigh that seemed to drift about the house, it slowly settled into a deep stillness.

She got to her feet as quickly as her body would allow. She had to take advantage of this calm. She couldn't assume that it was permanent, though inside her she hoped, prayed, that it was indeed permanent, that there would be no more destruction.

She gazed down the length of steps thinking that Troy had finally passed on and that his body lay still. She was wrong. His eyes had closed, but his head was still twitching, and saliva still leaked out freely from a corner of his mouth. Now she felt even more of a reason to hurry up and get out of the house.

She had taken only one wary step, testing the structure beneath her feet, afraid that it might give way and swallow her up when a jagged crack began to crawl up the center of the stairs from where Troy lay. It moved inexorably upward splitting, and splintering the wood and carpet in its path, driving the steps apart into two sections. When the break finally stopped it was just a little over a foot shy of ripping the floor out from underneath where she stood.

Trina took a large, quick step backward. "No," she moaned. "No." She wasn't sure what to do. Should she still try what was left of the stairs? Or, should she try an upstairs window as a means of escape?

The quake returned in a violent wave that nearly knocked her back off her feet. Above her jagged lines began to eat across the ceiling. Pieces of wallboard began to fall like swollen snowflakes. Before she had time to think about the implications, a sudden force slammed into her and hurled her backward. She smashed into the back wall. For a few moments, she remained pressed to the wall like a bug on a windshield, struggling to breathe, before the pressure let up and she dropped to the floor.

For a few minutes afterward, she fought for consciousness and against a part of her that was beaten and tired and just wanted to give up. But her survival instinct was still holding on.

She had landed close to the shotgun. Eyeing it she instantly knew what she had to do. She reached out and pulled it to her.

In the attic, directly above her head, a two-by-eight wooden beam suddenly snapped in two. Both ends of the broken beam swung down and jutted through the ceiling knocking out chunks of wallboard. One husky piece of the board hit beside her, startling her. Another large piece of board swung out like a pendulum but didn't fall. It clung tenaciously to the ceiling by the thick paper backing.

She quickly took the two shotgun shells from her pocket and slid them into the chamber of the shotgun, then began to crawl back across the floor. Once again she seemed to be faced with but a single choice if she wanted to continue to live. Troy had to be stopped the only way she knew how.

She came as close to the stairway as she dared. Looking down the stairs she cried softly at what she felt she had to do. She felt as though a knot the size of a fist had settled in the pit of her stomach.

She noted that the gap in the steps was widening. Though the split didn't begin until past the head of Troy, it seemed evident to her that before long it would extend beneath him. Eventually, it might open up wide enough to swallow him. If that were to happen the mere trauma of his body falling into the gap might bring an end to his life and the end of this destruction. But by then it might not matter. The house may already be on top of her.

She pointed the gun at Troy and aimed. Her hands shook. She closed her eyes, gripped the gun tightly, and fired. Pieces of step and floor to the side of Troy shattered flying into the air like a mini dust storm.

She had missed him completely. Troy's head still twitched convulsively.

The floor beneath her groaned and dipped a couple of inches. She aimed again. This time she kept her eyes open. She steadied her hand, took a breath, and fired again.

CHAPTER 34

It had ended. Most of it. The groans and creaks that remained were the results of the already damaged house settling even more.

Troy was dead for sure. There was no doubt. Half his head was gone.

Trina cried. She cried long and hard until there seemed to be no tears left. It was nearly an hour later before she could gain some semblance of control.

She lay on the floor for another half hour trying to decide what to do. A part of her didn't want to decide. She wanted to lie there and drift off to sleep, and hopefully wake up later and find out that it had all been some kind of horrible nightmare.

Unfortunately, she knew in her heart that as bad as this was this was reality.

She had concluded that the way things stood right now she had a very good chance of being prosecuted for the murder of Troy. For what kind of defense did she have? She didn't think that anyone would buy the story that Troy, a paraplegic, had been endowed with such incredible psychic powers. Or, that he had used this power to kill Tommy, and that he had attempted to kill her also.

No. It might get her out of the death penalty by way of a mental plea, but it would also, more than likely, assure her a spot in a mental institution for the rest of her life.

No. She would have to bury the truth. It was the only solution.

She had a rudimentary plan. Part of it would depend on her pleading ignorance. Another part would depend on the investigators' inability to piece together logical explanations.

First, she would take Tommy's pistol. She had seen it lying halfway up the steps where Troy had dropped it. She would wipe Troy's prints from it, and if her stomach held up, would place Tommy's hand on it and slide the gun back into his ankle holster. Though Tommy's gun had not been fired the investigators might wonder why Tommy's gun was not on his person, and why Troy's prints were on the handle.

Second, she would wipe the shotgun free of her fingerprints and place Troy's hands on it. Then she would throw the shotgun into the fissure at the center of the stairway, only a few feet from where the body of Troy lays.

She would call 911. With her most hysterical voice (which shouldn't be hard to manufacture, under the circumstance) she would state that her house had been struck by an earthquake, that the house was destroyed and that her husband and friend were dead.

The story would be that Troy was in the process of showing Tommy his shotgun when the earthquake hit. She wouldn't know why. Since she was upstairs when the quake hit (as her story would go) she could only speculate that Troy had dropped the shotgun and that it had discharged, killing him instantly.

Tommy's death could be attributed to the quake, though his extensive injuries might raise questions. She doubted, however, that anyone could come up with an alternate explanation.

In all her story would have a few holes in it. The thing she had going for her was that the authorities would have a hell of a time explaining what, other than this earthquake anomaly, could have caused so much damage. She figured that it would be written off as a freak quake with a lot of question marks after it.

No, it wasn't a great story, but it was a whole lot more believable than the truth.

THE END.

Though this story has ended check out the continuing story of Trina Dance as she is thrown once more into a supernatural situation. **THE DARK STRAIN.** [Amazon.com:](#)
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