

**THE DEATH OF DARKNESS**  
A NOVEL

Draft 1a

Bruce McClelland  
Gordonsville, VA 22942

## CHAPTER ONE

“It is the day of my wedding, except it is a long time ago, somewhere in medieval Russia I think. I'm not sure how I know this—I don't know anything about Russian history, but somehow I just know that this was a Slavic town.

“I am a princess, and it seems I am about to marry my father's brother, whose name is Tervel. He is a warlord, and is handsome and rugged, like out of one of those movies. He is wearing a sword, which seems too big even for him, and he is very intense and powerful.

“I keep looking at him and wondering what he thinks of me. I am dressed in some sort of long white linen gown, and on my head is a garland of colorful flowers, which I keep thinking of as my ‘beauty’. I am anxious because I know

that at some point I am supposed to take it off and throw it, but I don't know when or to whom. I don't want to do it wrong...it is important that everything be done right.

“Besides it being my wedding day, some other kind of ritual is happening at the same time. A strange little man, who tells me his name is Cosmas or Cosmos, says it is also the day to honor the dead. This reminds me that I have never visited the grave of my mother, even though she has been dead for several years.

“Everyone is preparing for a feast, but it is also a sacrifice. There are lots of big round wooden tables, and on each one a lamb is being slaughtered by having its throat cut. The lambs are then skewered with a roasting spit. Of course, there is blood and fat everywhere, and I am stupidly worried some is going to get on my dress.

“I am confused with nausea, because of all the killing and squealing and blood, and with lust, because I am so attracted to Tervel, who keeps leering at me with impatience. I know that as soon as all the ceremonies are over, we are going to go off and rut like horses.

“In the middle of the sacrifices and the revelry (there are drunken peasants everywhere), a man no one has seen before appears at the gates of the city. He is wearing ragged garments stained with gold and dark blue paint, and a cloth sack is slung over his left shoulder. I think he must be an icon painter, because I can see brushes and boards sticking out of his sack.

“He starts walking toward me, right in front of Tervel and my father, the prince. I can see his face beneath a curious cap, the sort worn by Perseus or is it Hermes? He has fiery eyebrows, but his features seem unformed: his nose is nothing more than a lump of flesh, his mouth is a mere slit in the bottom third of his face, and his eyes are solid grey, with no pupils, like a bust of Homer. There is something scary about him, but I am also extremely attracted to him. So much so, that I now wish I wasn't getting married to Tervel.

“As he approaches me, everyone in the courtyard becomes still, as if they are under some kind of spell. I can still move, but I can see Tervel, his expression frozen in jealous rage, unable to move an inch.

“The closer this man got, the more repulsive I could see he was, yet the stronger was my desire for him. There were sores on his skin, and he smelled like decay. He walked with a large hawthorn stick, which he held in a hand that resembled a leper's maw.

“He came right up to me, and picked me up like I weighed nothing. (Don't I wish!) He sat me down on top of one of the tables, right in the middle of a pool of lamb fat and blood. For a second I was worried about soiling my dress, then I felt the warm blood soaking through the material onto the backs of my thighs. It felt very pleasant, and when this mysterious man began to push my hem up past my knees toward my waist, my thighs began to slide around in the slippery juices.

“He dropped his hawthorn walking stick, and carefully removed the bag from his shoulder and laid it on the ground. Then he unfastened the sash around his waist and opened his robe, exposing himself. His genitals were also covered in sores, and I wanted to throw up, yet I also wanted him inside me like I have never wanted anyone else.

“My wish came true: he slathered himself with a handful of drippings he had scooped from my thighs, and rubbed it on himself. Then he penetrated me without any warning, much less foreplay. The sensation was so intense it was like I was being branded while I was coming at the same time. When it was over, he very politely withdrew, tucked himself in, picked up his stick and his bag.

“My wedding dress, needless to say, was ruined. During this time, I had given no thought to all the people around, but now I realized that what had just happened had been a public exhibition. I pulled my bloody gown back down below my knees. I saw Tervel, still motionless, still staring at me in rage.

“Then this man, whose sores and deformities were now completely gone, by the way, reached into his sack and pulled out a decorated lacquered box, which he handed me. I dared not open it while he was still there before me, but he soon walked out the gates, and disappeared.

“With some trepidation, I opened the box. Inside it was a small painting, like an icon, except instead of a religious scene, it was a picture of me. I was

naked, and I was lying in a grave in a graveyard somewhere. There was a sort of stylized full moon in one corner, and there were faceless people standing around the pit. Sitting at the edge of the grave, like a loyal dog, was a wolf. I woke up and sat straight up.”

Anna Comnena shut the cover of the clothbound book, which she herself had labeled “Dreams & Visions,” with extreme care, as if any imprecision on her part might disturb the contents of her most recently recollected dream. She had begun keeping this journal about a year, since the time when, browsing in the New Age bookstore across the river in Woodstock, she had come across a book describing how it was possible for a person to control the events and outcomes of his or her dreams. Her entries over the year had become more and more detailed, more vivid. She could remember names and numbers particularly well, and sometimes she could even describe the feelings and thoughts of all the actors in her dreams. But, though her dreams were gradually leading her into more and more exotic places and periods, she felt she was still not *controlling* them. In this last dream, for example, she thought that if she were in control, her mesmeric artist-rapist would not have possessed such repulsive features.

After all, why should he? Considering the depth of her orgasm (and spontaneous orgasms and ecstatic experiences during her dreams were now commonplace for Anna), should not her dream lover have been dreamier?

She was about to tuck the journal back in its drawer in the nightstand next to her bed when she hesitated. She housed the nocturnal diary there in case she was awakened in the middle of the night with a dream or especially a nightmare whose details it was imperative to jot down immediately. Before putting it away for the day, it was necessary to make one slight annotation.

Nervously, she opened the journal once again, and read what she had just written. Quickly satisfied that her narrative was true to her remembrance of the dream, she added in a small hand at the bottom of the page the following words:

*Father's name was Boril. Painter was Vaghan or Ban. Cap like Mithra. Bulgaria not Russia? Multiple orgasm! What about Tervel?*

After penning these vaguely cryptic reminders, which she was confident she would know the meaning of if she ever consulted this entry in the future, she closed the writing book again and put it away.

Though the record of her dream was safely locked away, its unclear meaning, as well as the aftereffects of its powerful erotic sensations, continued to disturb her. She looked at the wind-up alarm clock on the rickety nightstand. In an hour, at 10:30, she would be beginning the third session of her workshop on Channeling Sexual Energy for a group of naive and soulless men and women who had paid a hefty premium out of their much heftier New York salaries for the privilege of ministering to their sundry spiritual malaises, away from the demands of cellular phones,

impatient clients and bosses, and tight traveling schedules. She wasn't sure she could clear from her mind the nagging questions raised by the dream in time for her workshop (which demanded, she felt, absolute clarity) unless she could maybe find Chuck and ask him what he thought about the dream. But Chuck wasn't always easy to find, and when he could be found, he wasn't always easy to understand.

Charles, or Chuck, Berg was a local poet who had taught on occasion at the nearby small private liberal arts college, but generally went unemployed, supported by his aging parents or an NEA grant, unless asked to give a reading or teach a class here or there. His reputation, both within the community in the central Hudson Valley of upstate New York and at the generally more liberal and tolerant Alpha Institute, was that of a brilliant but wacked-out intellectual whose arcane conversational style was so lofty and abstruse that virtually no one not in the same league or at least on the same plane of consciousness could hope to engage him in prolonged rational discourse. Nevertheless, despite this exaggerated reputation, the Alpha Institute had invited him back for the second summer in a row, to teach a course in Poetry and Zen Buddhism.

Chuck wasn't particularly liked by most of the staff at Alpha, mostly because compared with their own, his ideas were far superior and his credentials much less dubious. Anna, however, wasn't threatened by his weird erudition, and in fact was flattered by his obvious crush on her, though

she never found him attractive “in that way.” This lack of reciprocal attraction, she rationalized, had less to do with his mental characteristics than his poor bodily hygiene.

Though Chuck's class wasn't until the afternoon, he liked to come out to the grounds of the Institute from the town whenever he could, so he could frequently be found in the canteen with a cup of coffee and a book, or talking to one of the “campers,” as they jokingly referred to themselves.

It was in just such a situation that Anna found him. “Hi, Chuck. Or do you really prefer Charles? Do you have a minute?” she asked without giving him much room to say no.

“Greetings, Princess Anna. What can I do for you today—a little haiku, perhaps? A koan? Maybe a tarot reading...I am at your dispose-all.”

“Wait a minute. Did you just call me ‘Princess Anna’? Why did you call me that?”

“Oh, I don't know. I suppose because there's something regal, something princessy about you today. You look as if you would like to divorce Prince Charles, perhaps. The *other* Charles. Did I offend you?”

Anna pulled out one of the rough-hewn chairs from the rustic table, and sat down. Chuck pointed at his coffee mug as if to suggest he would get her a cup if she wished, but she shook her head.

“No, of course not. It's just that...well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. You know a lot about dreams, don't you?”

“That depends,” the bearded poet replied. “I’ve read a lot about what they are, what they mean, where they come from, if that’s what you mean. But no one I’ve read, from Anaxagoras to Freud to Tedlock or the sleep researchers seems to know very much. Consequently, neither do I.”

Anna wondered how she was going to cut through Chuck’s notorious penchant for giving long answers to simple questions. She had less than an hour to “clear her head,” and she didn’t want to spend it philosophizing about whether one could or could

not, ultimately, “know a lot” about dreams.

“Well that’s a lot more than anyone else around here doesn’t know, so you’re the guy I’m looking for. If I tell you a dream I just had, will you at least tell me what you think?”

“But dream symbolism is very personal. It’s a private language, where *You* talks to you. Or at least *you* talks to the *You* that’s really talking to someone else, so it’s you talking to someone else through you. And I’m afraid I don’t know you very—”

She cut him short. “Just assume this is Me talking to You through me. The me is the message, after all,” she quipped. “Just tell me what you think of it. You don’t have to tell me what it ‘means’.”

She told him the entire dream, in almost the same words as she had written it down. She realized her recollection of the dream was already contaminated by having re-read her own account. As she was telling the poet

her dream, he folded his hands on the table and rolled back his eyeballs in an eery way, so that only their whites were showing. Like he was blind, Anna thought—a blind poet. This self-induced blindness was his way of meditating, or at least feigning a meditative state.

When she got to the part about the wolf and the moon, she stopped, without mentioning the questions she had inserted after writing down her dream, except for the possibility that the backdrop was Bulgaria rather than Russia. “Well,” she asked matter-of-factly, “what do you think?”

Despite the believability of Chuck's intense focus, he could not hide his embarrassment concerning what he took to be the personal, self-revealing details of her dream. He decided to hold his tongue about the obvious phallic-vulvic aspects of the sword and the garland, and to not bring up the issue of not-so-latent displaced incestuous wishes. She would either reject these propositions in defense, he calculated, or else she already had considered such solutions.

“I'm not sure. I guess for me, the important thing hinges on where, exactly, the dream took place, and when. Something, I cannot remember exactly what, is ringing a little bell in me about a certain Vaghan in Armenian cosmology, and I think there was both a Boril and a Cosmas in Bulgarian history, but it's been a long time. I'd have to check. But surely that must be up your alley. After all, it's *your* dream.”

Anna's eyebrows rose, her fingers clenched the table. “That's just it. I

don't know a damn thing about any of those people. I've never studied Russian—or Bulgarian, for that matter—history or even mythology. Yet the dream was so *real*.”

Like a psychiatrist who has just noticed that the five-sixths of an hour is up, Chuck blocked Anna from going further with the discussion of her dream. “I guess we'll just have to see what happens. Maybe you'll remember something, or maybe your next dream will be more revealing. There's not much here for me to go on, except for the obvious superficial symbolism,” he lied.

Anna got the feeling that Chuck had more to say than he actually said, but she let it go. Her main task, telling the dream to someone else, a third party, had been accomplished. Showing her middle-aged class how to Channel their Sexual Energy was going to be easy enough now.

When she got to the classroom, which on fair days amounted to little more than a small wooden platform in the middle of a clearing surrounded by enormous locust and pine trees, most of the students were already in place, sitting in the modified lotus position and chatting about technique. Men and women were dressed uniformly alike, that is, in tank tops and light cotton shorts or cutoff jeans. Their Birkenstocks and brand-name running shoes were arranged fairly neatly in rows on either side of the sitting area. Each student had been supplied with a plastic covered foam rubber mat, which tended to stick to sweaty thighs and made funny noises when they moved.

As the last few students straggled in, Anna observed the expectant faces of her charges and wondered how many of them, if any, would ever be able to do much more than fake an intuitive sexual response that was not brought on by an external stimulus.

She began the session with a few simple meditating and chanting techniques. Then she proceeded to give them her personalized version of the organization of the chakras and the nature of kundalini. It really didn't matter what she told them, she had recently come to realize, so long as some Indian-sounding words were used and there appeared to be some mystico-religious reason for what they were being asked to do. Better to use words like "chakra" and "kundalini" than to talk about voluntary arterial dilation and serotonin levels. If they'd wanted to hear that kind of talk, they would have paid their money to a different sort of institute.

After her discussion, she instructed them in posture and breathing. This being their third session, they were ready to attempt an out-of-body exercise. For this, she would have to abandon control of the group, and enter a mildly ecstatic state herself.

Soon, the entire group was moving, swaying to and fro in accord with its collective rhythm. Anna sat facing them, her eyes open but staring blankly. She could feel herself leaving her body.

The point of the exercise was to prepare them for a psychically induced sexual response, but she had to be careful. Improper control of posture and

respiration could be dangerous. Once she was out of her body, anyone in the group who was not practicing correctly was more or less on his own, at least until she could come back to normal consciousness.

Anna relaxed as her spirit moved upward away from her body, now about twenty feet below her, down on the ground. The calm joy that usually accompanied this sort of journey seemed momentarily not to be there, but Anna gave it no thought. *Probably dream residue interfering with my...with my what?*

Something was wrong. The experience of bright light which usually accompanied this state had been replaced, not gradually, but violently, forcefully, with an overwhelming darkness. It was darker even than those nights in the country when the moon is new and the sky is covered with dense clouds, so that not even a star is visible.

Not only was her mind dark. Her orientation with respect to her body, which she could sense but no longer visualize, was becoming rapidly destabilized. Anna no longer had any idea where her body was, much less how to return to it. She had a feeling she wasn't the only one in trouble: she could hear the students, it sounded like all of them, moaning in a way that had nothing to do with meditative chanting. The sound seemed to her to involve cries of pain and cries of grief, and it was getting louder. Anna knew she should try to intervene, to bring them back or stop whatever was causing them to make such sounds, but she was powerless until she could find some

sort of link to her body. She tried to locate herself by establishing her physical position with respect to the group, but she could not tell which way the group was facing, or even how far below her they now were. She remained in this disoriented state for a long time, though she couldn't tell how long. At last, her suspended state of consciousness began to give way, and she thought she could regain her bearings.

Either the group was rising toward her, or she was falling toward it, or both, because the collection of moans was getting louder. At the same time, she thought that the darkness which had overcome her was starting to abate, like a storm passing away. As it became lighter she could see her body again, but although she could sense the general location of the students, she still could not see them.

She gathered up all her willpower in an attempt to quit her ecstasy and return to her body, still seated on the platform, still staring blankly ahead. She had never had to do this before, but the act of coming back to her senses she imagined was a little like skydiving, except once she started her rapid descent, it was as though her consciousness was being drawn by a magnet.

She did not remember the actual point of re-entering her body, but she was grateful when she was able to see with her own eyes the familiar sight of her students, now directly in front of her, still sitting cross-legged on their foam mats. A cursory inspection revealed everyone in the group was still in a deep state of meditation. They were silent and motionless as they had been

when she last remembered seeing them, before she left her body. It was as though, for the students at least, nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Satisfied that everything was alright, she began to talk to them, in order to bring them gradually back into normal consciousness. She looked at her watch: it was 1:30 in the afternoon! Her session had lasted two hours longer than scheduled. She would have a lot of explaining to do to the Institute's director.

“It is now time to re-enter normal consciousness. Let go of your attachment to the light. Let yourself begin to feel your body,” Anna told her group in a soft but serious voice.

Even though this was their third session, and they were, in her opinion, ready to experience the separation of mind and body on a limited basis, they were certainly not prepared for a three-hour trance. Anna expected to hear some strong complaints, not only from the administration, which went out of its way to ensure that the Institute's clients had nothing but the highest

recommendations for their friends and co-workers when they returned to civilian life, but from the apprentices themselves, many of whom may have missed other classes, or else would complain on principle, because that was how they usually behaved.

Anna waited for the students to return to their anxious, nervous, pressured senses—exactly what they had enrolled in Alpha to learn how to escape, without the use of drugs or alcohol. It usually took a couple of

minutes from the time she told them to “let go of the light” before she would notice one or two students beginning to fidget or sigh heavily. Then in the next couple of moments, the rest of the pack would clearly be back in a waking state, although occasionally she encountered “stragglers”—those who either refused to relinquish the calm induced by their deep meditation, or else who for whatever reason decided to pretend they were still meditating. Anna never had any difficulty separating the former from the latter, but she allowed the peer pressure of group participation to bring these stragglers back, rather than exerting any pressure herself.

Presently all the students were awake, and talking about their own experiences. They began stretching or moving or even standing up. Anna was relieved to see everyone “back,” and to hear no complaints—yet.

Then she noticed to her chagrin that, as usual, she had one straggler, a man in his late fifties who she had noticed at their first session was extremely tense and angry. He seemed so angry, in fact, that she wondered if he would be able to relax long enough to benefit from her course. Seeing him now in such a motionless state was reassuring, because it told her that her techniques could benefit even those who put impossible demands upon themselves.

Anna dismissed the rest of the class quickly, urging them to go back to the main building immediately, and hoping no one would stop to scold her for not releasing them sooner. On the contrary: many of the students thanked her as

they passed by, saying it was one of the most profound experiences they had ever had or, more glibly, the best sleep they had had in years.

She had assumed that the loud talking and the rustling of most of the class would be enough to draw her straggler out of his trance. She hated to interfere with his practice, primarily because she didn't know where he was, consciousness-wise, but after several minutes, she felt it was her obligation to bring him back into the real world.

The man, whose name she could not remember, had not been able to get into the full lotus position because of a hip injury, and so had been allowed to sit with his legs crossed. He was still sitting with his eyes closed, and his bald head and shoulders were getting badly sunburned. Anna approached him slowly so as not to bring him back to his waking consciousness too abruptly.

“Hello,” she addressed him. “It's time to let go of the light. Just let it go. You will be able to get it back. Return to your body. It will be alright.”

Her encouragement produced no result. She had never had to deal with such a recalcitrant pupil before. She touched him gently on his back, being careful not to touch any sunburned skin.

Though she touched him as gently as she could, the force of the contact was enough to cause the man to slump forward.

*He must have fallen asleep*, Anna thought, and started to tap him on the shoulder to wake him up. An enormous wave of anxiety washed over her: something about the way his skin responded to her touch—something so

subtle, she didn't know exactly what it was—told her that this man was not alright.

She pulled him back up from his slumped position and looked into his face. His eyes were still closed. She looked at his nostrils and cheeks. There were no signs of breathing. Anna could feel her stomach clench with nausea when she realized this poor man, whose name she so rudely forgot, was dead.

As much as she really didn't want to make sure, she decided she had to do what everyone in the movies and on television always does in such cases. She tried to find his pulse, first at the wrist, then on the side of the neck, at the carotid. Failing to find one, which could be the result of lack of training in such matters, she knew that she could tell for sure by looking into his eyes. She carefully pulled back both eyelids. There, staring back at her, were the clouded green eyes of a dead man.

Aside from the most crucial question of what to do next, a million other questions raced through her head. What happened? How did he die? Was it somehow her fault? Was he murdered? Did his death have anything to do with the blackness that had come over her? When did he die? From the filminess over his eyes, she knew he had been dead for awhile.

## CHAPTER TWO

Rafael Goldman was a tall, silver-haired man in his late forties. While not nearly as good-looking as, say, Paul Newman ("Paul Newman you're not," he had been assured on more than one occasion by his first wife), he exuded a charisma that was disarming.

Once a practicing lawyer in the area of arts administration, he one day said good-bye to city life and headed for the green acres of upstate New York. Most of the people he came in contact with on a regular basis, whether administrators, artists, or gallery owners, frequently complained of their need to somehow find a space where they could retreat from the demands of their professional lives. Long harboring such feelings himself, he decided to found an institute whose stated purpose would be to allow people like his clients a place in which to explore their "inner selves." Hence the origin of the Alpha Institute, which in the ten years since its inception had grown to encompass two hundred acres and its own profitable bookstore, and was capable of attracting a great number of celebrities from the great metropolis a hundred miles to the south.

Anna really liked Rafael, despite his occasional off-color innuendoes with regard to the name of the course that she taught at the Institute. She couldn't understand how he could be so sexist and dismissive, on the one hand, and so seriously committed to the New Age movement on the other. It didn't really matter. She was able to parry his thrusts fairly easily, and she could not forget that he had given her work, not only at his "summer camp," but in the city during the off-season as well. Anna was nevertheless hesitant to acknowledge her attraction to someone who was so clearly charming and sexy, as if to do so would be to admit that she was like the other women who swooned over him or found his personal power compelling. And she was loath to have anything to do with the person who employed her, regardless of his personal characteristics.

Considering the circumstances, she was expecting Rafael's support, and was therefore chilled by the coldness in his voice when he invited her into his office from the main hallway of the administration building. Before crossing the threshold, she peered inside at the incongruously sumptuous office, with its artificially neat book cases, black Italian leather couches and glass-topped table and desk. Incongruous, because the rest of

the administration building offices were musty, starkly barren rooms in the old colonial farmhouse that had been the original building of the Institute. Sitting next to each other in armchairs across from Rafael's desk were two men in almost matching cheap brown suits. They stood up when she came into the room.

"Anna...Ms. Comnena...please come in and take a seat. This is Detective Henderson of the New York State Police, and this is Deputy Sheriff Consigliare, from the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office. They'd like to ask you a couple of questions.."

The two men extended their hands politely as greetings were exchanged.

"Why are there two of you?" Anna asked boldly, trying to cover her nervousness. She sat down in the folding chair opposite the two policemen. "Don't we just have a 'death by natural causes'?"

"Well, ma'am," said Henderson, asserting with his deep voice his higher rank, "we're not sure yet. Chances are, it's something that can be handled by the local sheriff--" He nodded to the bored deputy. "But since the Institute has its headquarters in New York City, the State Police may have jurisdiction...depending on what we find."

"Oh," Anna replied, not really aware that the Alpha Institute's headquarters were in New York. She looked at Rafael, as if to say, *Do I have to talk to these guys?*, but he shot back a glance that said, emphatically, *Yes, you do*. He clearly was intending to stay through their questioning of Anna, but the trooper told him to leave. He was not entirely successful at covering the umbrage he took at their order, since he didn't want to be out of the loop, but he left nevertheless.

"Now, then, Mrs. Co-- Comena," said Henderson after the door had closed behind the director.

"Comnena," she corrected. "M-N." She didn't bother to correct the 'Mrs.'.

"Mrs. Comnena. What kind of name is that?"

"Good question. I think it's Greek, but I'm not sure. My parents didn't know, and I've never met anyone else with that name."

"Oh." Having broken the ice, according to the manual, with a seemingly casual and friendly but personal question, the detective got down to business.

"Did you know the decedent?"

"Who?"

"Leo Ouspensky."

"Oh, right! That's *it!* Yes, I'd forgotten his name.

Ouspensky. That's what he told me when he signed up for my class, but I forgot it."

"So you knew him?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, miss, you either knew him or you didn't know him. Did you know him?"

"He was in my class. But I only spoke to him once, just to tell him about the class, what it would entail. He seemed excited, even though I told him I didn't think it was going to work for him. So I let him in anyway. Why not?"

Both Henderson and Consigliare were a little befuddled by Anna's answers. "*What* wasn't going to work for him? Maybe we'd better back up a little so you can tell us about the class."

"Alright. I teach people how to harness their sexual energy."

The deputy, already embarrassed, snickered at the possibility of making a joke about 'harness', but thought better of it when he saw Anna's expression forbidding him to even think about it. "You wanna tell us what that means?" he asked instead.

"Well, you know what sex is, right?"

The two cops looked at each other, and nodded.

"And you know what energy is, right?"

Now they realized they were being toyed with.

"Well, for most people, that energy just gets pissed away." The scowls on their faces told Anna they were both disturbed by her use of the vernacular. She smiled. "It doesn't go anywhere, doesn't produce anything."

"Yeah, sure, we get it. But do you think you can tell us exactly what you teach in your class?"

"I'm trying to tell you, but I don't think it's going to make any sense to you unless you know what I'm talking about. The point is, we are all driven by sexual impulses all the time, whether we admit it or not. I'd say that at least half our decisions have something to do with sexuality. The other half are about survival. We make a lot of decisions and moves that aren't in our own best interests."

The two looked around the room as if they might find some help understanding what Anna was saying, then realized they were on their own. "Okay. So?"

She had given the pitch a thousand times before.

"Well, what if you could use that energy to get what you really wanted? I mean wanting things that are good for everyone, for the whole world. If we could all want that, the world would be better off, am I right?"

"Yeah but then we'd be out of a job, right, Clark?"

Consigliare nudged Det. Henderson.

"Alright. So much for theory. I'll come right to the point. I guess the easiest way of explaining it is that I teach people how to have a 'spiritual orgasm,' so they don't stay so hung-up on the physical kind. But first I have to teach them techniques for attaining bodily orgasm by means of mental control alone."

"Look, ma! No hands!" The deputy sheriff couldn't resist. Henderson himself scowled, trying to suppress a chuckle.

Anna gave them each a look that made them feel like schoolboys. Detective Henderson got serious. "Do any of these...techniques...put any of your people in danger?"

"Well, it's a little like a tennis class, I suppose. There's always the chance of pulling a muscle or worse, maybe a heart attack. Everyone who takes my classes is informed about the risks, of course, and has to sign a release. You can check with Raf-- with Mr. Goldman.

'Danger' is a pretty strong word. I'd say the risk is no greater than f--...than having sex."

Consigliare blushed. "What's that? The risk, I mean."

"I'm sure you gentlemen are aware that the human sexual response involves a lot of changes to the cardiovascular system. Erections, for example, are nothing more than the consequence of arterial dilatation and engorgement of the corpus cavernosum."

As she had intended, she'd lost them, but from the looks on their faces, they seemed willing to believe her.

"Anyway, my techniques first suspend orgasm and then deliver it at maximum peak. That means a lot of blood starts pumping into the brain, because the arteries are wide-open. That's where the pleasure comes from, really. It's in the brain, not in the sex organs. Which is the whole point. But that's also where the risk is: stress to the blood vessels. Understand?"

Anna was mildly annoyed at herself for taking such an unnecessarily impatient tone with the two policemen, who were, after all, just doing their jobs. But she was often amazed that she had to explain this stuff to people who ought to know better. After all, didn't a former governor of New York, the ultimate boss of the State Police, "die in the saddle," from the very condition she had just described?

As she was telling the policemen about the inherent risks in her techniques, she began to wonder whether

perhaps poor Ouspensky had had just such a stroke. But then, he hardly would have died so peacefully. At least, she thought he'd died peacefully. Since she and presumably the others had been deep in meditation, it wasn't totally out of the question that Ouspensky had undergone, unnoticed, a tremendous series of violent cerebrovascular spasms. In any case, the policemen would have been told by Rafael about the release forms, and there certainly wouldn't be a need for more than one policeman. No, something else must have happened to provoke such an investigation. Poisoning? Bee sting?

Det. Henderson, who of the pair of law enforcement officials had the better grasp of what Anna was trying to make them understand, asked a few more perfunctory questions, mostly about time of death, whether she'd noticed anything unusual, and so forth. She didn't mention the blackness that had come over her, nor the fact that her class had lasted three hours as a consequence. She was certain they knew about that, but for some reason weren't asking her.

When they clearly were about to excuse her and call Goldman back in, she decided to ask *them* a question.

"This Mr. Ouspensky...the decedent...what exactly was he? I mean, what did he do?"

Consigliare walked around to the other side of Goldman's desk, and began absentmindedly looking down at the clutter of various memos and notes. For some reason, he had been selected to answer Anna's question, though she felt she had addressed it more to Henderson. "He claims to be an art importer--from Russia. Sells--*sold*--a lot of religious art to bigwig clients down in the City. I don't think we're divulging anything that isn't common knowledge if we tell you that there are some questions about the ways he got these paintings--they're called 'ikons'--out of Russia. We hear there's some people over there who aren't too happy that their national treasures are making some guy rich while their whole country's broke."

Anna smiled to herself at Consigliare's simple-minded understanding of the economics of the art business.

"Oh. So you think he was murdered?" she asked naively.

"There's no evidence to support that," Henderson answered. "We don't have the coroner's report yet, but we're pretty sure he didn't have a stroke or a heart-attack. So we got to run this down, to see if there's any foul play."

"Oh, I can't imagine *that*," Anna said with conviction. "Everyone around here is pretty friendly, and these aren't the sort of people who believe in violence, believe me."

"Probably not," said Henderson, "Probably not. About the only murders we ever see involve knives or guns, and you're right, they don't involve people like the kind I've seen around here. But people from New York--now that's another matter. There are all kinds of them, and who knows *what* they're capable of. Anyway, we'd appreciate it if you'd not mention anything you told us to anyone else for the time being. And here's my card. Please call if you hear anything pertinent, or something comes to mind."

"Will do. Nice meeting you gentlemen," Anna said on her way out. "You might think about taking my course sometime." She was going to add, "Couldn't hurt," but thought better of it.

Anna found Rafael in the hallway, sitting on a shabby frayed leatherette armchair and pretending to be reading the old copy of *Parabola* that weighted down the year-old color brochures describing the Institute and its mission. He glanced up at her with a half-hearted smile as he put the tired magazine down, but said nothing to

her. His silence was unusual, and Anna knew he wanted to say something to her, something perhaps inappropriate, something personal, and for his own reasons had decided not to. Anna wanted urgently to respond, to anticipate his intention, but instead politely smiled back in silent acknowledgment of her promise to say nothing to no one, and walked out of the administration building. As she left him there, she thought maybe she had noticed in his smile the beginning of a request for something more, something having less to do with Ouspensky and more to do with Anna herself. But she let it pass, since she was more intent on evaluating her performance during the brief interrogation.

The interview with the two policemen was good, she thought, if only because it gave her some place to hang the strange fact of Leo Ouspensky's unexpected death. She didn't appear to be under suspicion--after all, why should she be?--but it was always possible that the detective was being cagey.

Though she knew she wasn't guilty of any intentional crime, the mere fact that Ouspensky had died, of whatever causes, during her class was enough to bother her, to make her feel like it was somehow her fault. Since her

classes for the rest of the day had been canceled, Anna decided to hide out in her room and read until dinner.

She walked slowly across the yard in front of the administration building, toward her room. She passed by the weedy tennis courts, where two masculine-looking women were pretending to play tennis, without racquets and balls. A strange mixture of noises surrounded her as she walked. When she broke it down into its components, it was nothing more than the coincidence of splashing and laughter from the swimming pool, wafts of quiet conversations, the drone of classroom lectures and various modes of chanting, a slight rustling of leaves, and an assortment of busy summer birds. All together, however, the harmony became a type of music--not gay, but not melancholy, either. Rather, she imagined the continuum of sound that shifted its pitch as she walked through it was some kind of modern music composed on the spot in honor of Mr. Ouspensky by a local universe that didn't know him very well.

She was fortunate to reach her room without encountering anyone else she knew well enough that she would have to stop and talk to them. She thought for a moment about taking a nap, but she wasn't really tired and knew that she would just be avoiding herself if she

did. She went over to the bookshelf, a single painted board supported at an angle on the wood wall, and began to weigh the benefits of starting E.M. Butler's *The Myth of the Magus*, which she had bought on impulse and didn't know anything about, versus trying once again to get past the first third of *Interview with the Vampire*, which she thought she ought to read so she could better understand the disjointed movie.

She opted for the latter, having considered that she was too distracted for any kind of academic prose, and if she failed once again with the Anne Rice book, it was only to be expected, given her history with it. She took the paperback over to her bed, and plopped herself down on the saggy mattress.

She found herself finally enjoying the verbose self-explanations of the ancient Lestat. In fact, within an hour she was almost twice as far as she'd ever gotten in the book before. This time, she had willingly abandoned herself to the cozy mixture of erotica and not-quite-horror, though it was hard for her to read it without imagining Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. So that when there was a knock on her door, she wasn't entirely sure it wasn't Lestat himself. She roused herself from the accidental dream and went to the door.

Rafael was standing outside her door. "May I come in? I'd like to talk to you about something," he asked politely.

"About what? Ouspensky? I guess so, sure. Welcome to my humble abode. I should tell you, though, that those policemen asked me not to say anything to anyone, and I guess that includes you."

"I'll try not to compromise you."

There wasn't much room for the Institute's director in a staffer's room. The beams in the ceiling were low, and the rooms themselves didn't permit much more than a bed, a table, a bureau, and a chair. Anna felt a little strange sitting on her unmade bed while her boss took the uncomfortable chair, but it was better than having it the other way around.

"I won't ask you what you told the detective. I assume you told him some version of the truth," Goldman began without any chit-chat. "What I want to know is what you *didn't* tell them."

"I don't know what you mean by that," replied Anna sharply.

"I mean, Anna, that you and I are both of the opinion that Leo Ouspensky didn't just die, or else there wouldn't be policemen poking about. And we both know that

the Institute depends heavily on its reputation to facilitate relations with local politicians, and for a good deal of its funding, since we're non-profit."

*Non-profit indeed!* thought Anna, *That is, after you subtract the Range Rover, the brownstone in the city, and the business trips to Aspen.* "I'm not so sure, Rafael. A man dies in deep meditation. It's happened before...though not around me, thank God. No one saw anything, no wounds, no sign of anything that isn't kosher."

"Oh come on, Anna. I happen to know something happened. Your entire class was missing for three hours. I also know--though I can't tell you how--that you took the class to a state of expansion for which they were unprepared. Can you honestly tell me I'm wrong?"

She could have, but she didn't. She said nothing.

"So?" he demanded, crossing his legs in a manner that suggested he was prepared to wait all day for some kind of an answer. "Just tell me what happened. I'll make sure the police don't hear about it. I just want to know, in case I have to make any...adjustments."

Anna didn't quite catch his drift, but she was nevertheless a little shocked to see this unethical side of him. It was her own naivete that had prevented her

from admitting the probability that a New York lawyer would not on occasion be above bending the law. Should she tell him about the dream? About the darkness? She didn't think it was worth the risk.

"I don't know what to tell you, really," Anna confessed, standing up from the bed nervously. "Everyone seemed to be doing so well. I've taken groups like this out-of-body before, hundreds of times--they were ready, I'm positive. I don't know what happened. Everything started off alright, but then--"

"Yes? Then *what?*"

Anna sat back down right across from Rafael and stared into his intense blue eyes. They were so deep, she felt she could drown in them. There was something dreadful about their depth, perhaps even dangerous, that Rafael himself was unaware of. The limitlessness she imagined in his eyes was not totally different from the expansive darkness she was trying to tell him about.

"Then this strange blackness came over me. It wasn't like sleep, I just couldn't see my body. I could hear things, but I couldn't act.

"I can't explain it, Raf. It was different from ecstasy, different from deep relaxation. It was black, totally black--not at all like the black of sleep,

though. I have never been so completely dependent on some other will--there was literally nothing I could do, because I could not act. Anyway, when I finally got back, I think three hours had passed. I didn't say anything to my students, I just pretended it was normal. No one complained--at least not to me. I didn't even notice Mr. Ouspensky until everyone else had gone."

Goldman saw that Anna wasn't going to tell him much more than this, though he thought he ought to ask her if she felt at all drugged or sick or even poisoned. He wasn't surprised when she said no, but he was a little curious to learn that she had been talking to Chuck Berg immediately before her class.

As he got up to go, having found out what he needed to, even if it wasn't very much, Anna rose from the edge of the crumpled bed. "I feel terrible about the situation, Raf, seriously. But I didn't have anything to do with Mr. Ouspensky's death. I didn't even remember his name, much less did I have any reason to harm him.

"I know how you feel about the Institute's reputation. I'll do what I can to make sure no one gets the wrong idea. But you know about small towns."

"Thanks, Anna. And, yes, I *do* know about small towns, unfortunately," said Rafael, opening the door.

"Let's try to put this thing behind us."

"Good idea," Anna agreed. "Oh, Raf. Back in your office, before--you looked as if you wanted to say something to me. Anything you wanted to talk about--besides all this, I mean?"

Rafael stared back at her, trying unsuccessfully to utter a response. He gave up and shook his head. Anna shut the door.

## CHAPTER THREE

"The same man visited me again. He looked different--this time much taller, bulkier, but otherwise the same, and I had no doubt that he was the icon painter. I remember those watercolors that were done by the woman in Jung's *Vision Seminars*--that association alone suggests I should interpret this recurrent figure as my *animus*, though perhaps in his shadow aspect.

"Certainly dark--nighttime, underworld. We are together, and I have incredible lust for him, but it does not appear to be reciprocated. He seems to harbor paternal feelings for me. He also functions--like a true animus figure might--as something of a guide.

"He shows me around a graveyard, it is not modern, very ancient, and instead of gravestones like we have, the markers are narrower and not clearly shaped. On each one there is a carving of a deformed little man with an enormous palm being held up, as though he were greeting me or telling me to stop. (*Must think about what symbol unites 'greeting' with 'stopping'.*)

"The graves themselves are very shallow and they have all been dug up. Mounds of dark, moist earth are piled up around them. There do not appear to be any dead

bodies in the graves. I turn to my "guide," the icon painter, to ask him why they are empty. At first he says nothing, just points to the ground around the graves. I notice that there are carved pieces of wood (stakes?), and tattered icons (I can't see what's on them), and sprinkled around is some kind of grain, which I tell myself is millet, though actually I don't know what millet looks like.

"Then he says to me, with an incredibly deep and sexy voice, as if he were trying to seduce me, 'Nothing will stop it.' He is very serious, and I become extremely frightened, and don't dare ask him what he is talking about. Then he turns to me and looks deeply into my eyes, and says, 'The death of darkness is just beginning.' After that he just disappeared somehow."

Anna noticed that her hand trembled slightly as she put down the last few words of her second dream about the man she now called "the icon painter." The vivid imagery of the dream might give Chuck a bit more information, but Anna wanted to keep this particular dream to herself. Considering that a student in her class had died while she was under the influence of some unexpected darkness, followed by her dream about the "death of darkness," she

thought it wiser not to mention this coincidental sequence of experiences to anyone, not even Chuck.

To give herself a break from the tension that she felt was beginning to grow at the Institute, she decided to go into town, where she knew no one.

Though it was warm out, she put on a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt, thinking she would fit in more with the locals. It didn't occur to her that not wearing a bra and not pulling back or at least combing out her hair might give her away, but it didn't matter: the town of New Brooklyn, made up mostly of small merchants, had ceased caring long ago about the silly (to its mind) attempts by Alpha people and "weekenders" to look like its more permanent residents.

Not having her own car, Anna had to ask the driver of the Institute's van, who happened to be standing near it smoking a cigarette, to give her a lift into town. The next regular trip wasn't going to be until 12:15, when the van was scheduled to go to the Amtrak station to drop off and pick up passengers.

The driver, a good-looking muscular townie named Jim who was out of community college for the summer, was willing enough to drive Anna into town alone, because he could show off for her by driving fast, and he could use

the excuse to escape from the boredom of his minimal duties at Alpha.

Jim opened the front right-hand door for Anna, even though passengers were supposed to sit in the back. He made sure he got very close to her as he opened it, and unnecessarily helped her into the front seat, touching her right thigh just before she sat down. Then, out of the utmost concern for his passenger's safety, he reached across her torso to retrieve the seatbelt, making sure to brush against her chest with the back of his hand as he drew the nylon belt across her to buckle it up. Anna was going to warn him to keep his hands to himself, but decided it wasn't worth the confrontation, since he would be able to deny any accusation anyway. And, much as she hated to admit it, the instantaneous erotic contact with this coarse but handsome youth was unexpectedly thrilling. For all of her elaborate techniques for inducing the human sexual response in the absence of a partner or even self-touching, the fact of the matter was that Anna had gone without real sex for longer than she cared to remember. She contemplated, for a second, trying to seduce the young driver, conjuring a lurid fantasy of his sweaty muscular body pressing down on her uncomfortably and aggressively in the back of the van,

but then she rejected the whole idea as beneath her. How could she, after all, reconcile such animality with her belief in the transcendent and liberating aspects of orgasm induced by mental concentration alone? Now she was embarrassed by her fantasy, and could no longer even face the driver.

At the end of a wordless five-minute joyride, Anna was dropped off at the only intersection in town where there was a stoplight. Two stores away from the corner was the Alpha Bookshop, a bright new store which was hardly comprehensive, but carried a selection of titles that would never be found at the other local bookstore, which tended to specialize in greeting cards and pulp fiction. She thought she might kill some time by browsing, maybe buying a new book or two, then having a late breakfast across the street.

Anna entered the bookstore and unconsciously headed straight for the newly expanded section labeled "Psychic/Dreams." A new paperback, face out on the top shelf, had no trouble catching her eye: *Death, Dreams & the Soul*, by Samay Dhanandra, Ph.D. Since this was the apparent sequel to his previous book, *Controlling Your Dream Experiences*, which Anna had read with a mixture of interest and amusement, she had no choice but to buy it.

She took the book up to the cashier immediately, having lost all interest in browsing further. She paid for it in cash, declined a plastic bag, and crossed the street to the restaurant where she thought she would have breakfast.

A quick look around once she was inside the screen door of Van Schooick's convinced her there was no one there from the Institute, no one she would have to talk to. In fact, the converted apothecary at that moment could claim only a handful of clients, it being a weekday and too late for breakfast and too early for lunch.

Anna sat down in a booth not far from another one where an off-duty nurse and a pair of friends were talking over coffee. Anna did not want to sit too close to these women, considering the availability of seating, yet she wanted to be within earshot because it was a habit of hers to listen to local gossip. She usually didn't know any of the people whose names and reputations were dragged through the mud, but she found these conversations reassuring, because they reminded her how unspecial the in-joking and reputation-bashing at Alpha were.

She ordered coffee and toast from a pleasant young woman dressed in a tight black uniform, then opened her

new book. She quickly reread the nonsensical blurb on the flap, and the even more ridiculous enumeration of Dr. Dhanandra's spurious credentials: Director, Teheran Academy of Dream Research; Author of Over One Hundred Books and Articles on Dreams, including the widely reprinted and translated *Love Your Dreams*; President and Founder, Dhanandra Thaumalogical Institute. As she imagined the reality behind the résumé, Anna chuckled out loud. She turned to the table of contents to see if there was anything there that would relate directly to the notion of dreams and death.

One chapter, "The Dream of Death," sounded promising, but a little further down the page, she found a chapter that seemed to have been titled just for her: "The Dream of Darkness and Bodily Death." She was almost afraid to turn to it.

She was interrupted, briefly, by the return of the waitress with a cup of coffee and a plate of foil-wrapped butter squares and jam packets. The distraction lasted just long enough for Anna to tune into the conversation a couple of booths away.

"A Russian name," the nurse was telling her friends in a very loud whisper. "Ostrovsky. Orlovsky. Something like that. Jewish, I'll bet."

Anna quietly stuck the flap in her book at the table of contents page, and closed it. *Ouspensky!* she thought, *They've got to be talking about Ouspensky.* What she had told

Goldman about the impossibility of keeping anything secret in a small town had just been confirmed. She gloated a little, then tried to figure out how she could keep listening in without appearing to be eavesdropping. She opened her book again, and pretended to read.

"Anyway," the nurse continued, "I was on ER duty when they brought him in--of course, he was already dead." She whispered the last few words a little more softly, assuming that Anna was probably one of *them*, but not so softly that Anna couldn't hear her. She figured she was meant to.

"I heard the detective from Poughkeepsie telling some other guy it might have been murder, because this man had a lot of enemies in the City, but they were going to have to wait for the autopsy. He even said it might be the Russian police--the KBG or whatever. They're still waiting over there. But just before I got off duty, a friend of mine who sometimes helps the pathologist told me that *he* thought that the signs looked like stroke. Only thing is, a stroke usually causes the body to go

into convulsions. This guy, I hear, just died." The nurse turned her head and looked directly at Anna. "If you ask me, the guy probably croaked because he couldn't do some of those perverted exercises those people do."

"Like what?" Anna heard one of the nurse's eager listeners ask.

Anna could only infer the answer, because the nurse, now thoroughly convinced that Anna belonged to the Institute despite her attempt at the local costume, brought her whisper down to such a hush that Anna could only hear the *m* of 'meditate'.

*Oh, great!* Anna thought, *either everyone is soon going to think there was international intrigue at Alpha, in which case we're all out of jobs, or else I'm out of a job because my channeling technique causes strokes.*

Her only hope was that the nurse's friends would keep their mouths shut about the already exaggerated rumor, but that wasn't likely. Still, Anna decided it was premature to tell Rafael any of this, although he probably knew a lot more than she did anyway.

Realizing it would make matters worse if she attempted in any way to correct the "facts" as they were understood and transmitted by the curious nurse, Anna tried to ignore the natural gossip and went back to

skimming through her book. Presently the women at the other booth got up and left, full of coffee and probably fantasies about men with foreign accents and poison-tipped canes.

Leafing through her book in an absent-minded search for something that would justify her having bought it, Anna began contemplating the KGB hypothesis suggested by the imaginative nurse. Though the days of an all-powerful Russian state security agency were supposedly over, the mystery surrounding Leo Ouspensky's death certainly fed the kind of paranoid reasoning that would perk up any state police detective's life.

A conspiracy theory seemed more or less plausible for a shady New York 'art importer'--which could mean anything from cocaine trafficker to gun runner to thief-slash-smuggler to just plain (though unlikely) art importer--but such a theory could not anticipate the coincidence of Ouspensky's death with her own loss of control over her meditative state. Unless she'd been drugged or something. But there was no need to point that out to anyone, at least until someone asked her for an explanation.

When the check was finally brought, Anna guiltily overtipped her waitress, who otherwise did not stand to

make much off the \$1.75 total for coffee and a side order of toast. She checked to see that the flap was still keeping her place in her book, and got up and went outside.

It was a bright summer morning. Anna had not expected to encounter such bustling. She noticed how people were tending to congregate around just a handful of stores: the independent, old-fashioned supermarket, of course, and also the hardware store. Whereas the parking lot in front of the former was filled mostly by women, either getting out of or putting groceries into their station wagons and minivans, the lot in front of the hardware store, which was directly across from Val's Market, seemed crowded with men in overalls or jeans loading lumber, paint or fixtures into the backs of their pickup trucks.

She admired the uncomplicated and complacent division of sex roles among the townsfolk. These were people, Anna told herself, who would probably never be interested in a course on Gender & Economics (which was currently being taught by a friend of hers at the Institute), or, for that matter, would never want to know how to channel their sexual energy. Driving fast cars or arranging the house and garden was as close as

they would get to that. Thus, Anna thought, these were also people who would be thrilled to know for certain of some true evil lurking at the Alpha Institute, but it would have to be of the sort that could be attached to a conspiracy of some sort--this would validate their collective belief that the Institute was in all likelihood a front for some kind of terrorist organization or weirdo cult.

Anna had experienced firsthand and on more than one occasion the truly inexplicable attitude of the permanent residents of New Brooklyn toward people affiliated with Alpha. For while she had never been refused service--indeed, since Alpha people were known to have real money, they were generally coddled by certain merchants--she knew from the looks she received from salesgirls and waitresses (there seemed to be no men occupying the more visible positions in the retail and service businesses) that Alpha people were considered more than simple outsiders. They were akin to invaders.

Anna liked to go into stores just to see how she would be treated, and she loved to observe the storekeepers' vacillation between greed and xenophobia. But today, such games were not on her agenda. Realizing that there really wasn't much for her to do in town, and

that she might be able to hide out just as easily back at the Institute if she tried, she decided to go back. She walked over to the converted service station which served as the base for the town's two taxis, and hired one to drive her back to the Institute.

"Hear you people got some explaining to do to the troopers," the smug, fat, middle-aged driver said as soon as the old Ford sedan was headed in the right direction. The fact that her only possible responses to the driver's blunt statement were to confirm or deny it, or else ask for clarification, did not sit well with Anna. She said nothing, hoping he would take the hint that she didn't want to talk about it.

"Think it was murder, or what? I mean, were you there? D'you see it? The guy just croak or what?" The driver's rude questioning was clearly not going to stop.

"Actually," Anna decided to take the offensive, "I *was* there and I *did* see it. The man just died, if that's what you're talking about. No mystery, no foul play. He just died. Plain and simple. I don't know, maybe he had a heart condition. It happens. He wasn't all that young, you know, and he *was* overweight--" She stopped short, realizing that the driver's obesity made Ouspensky seem underfed.

"Yeah, but," the driver insisted, "I listen in on the police band. I heard them call it a 'possible 914'. That's murder, you know. Homicide."

Anna was shocked by this revelation, but tried not to show her surprise to the driver. The wild speculations of a nurse were one thing, but now independent confirmation that the police, without any evidence whatsoever, had already decided to attach the possibility of homicide to the Institute was truly disturbing. Certainly Goldman's overweening concern for the Institute's reputation was about to become even more excessive, but the problem of more immediate relevance to Anna was that the aura of suspicion that would soon descend on the Institute would be very bad for the students' mindsets. And she was already anxious she was losing touch with her ability to guide them.

"That doesn't surprise me," Anna said to the driver coolly. "Anytime they don't know how someone died, I'm sure they've got to consider murder. It's just part of their job," she added, as if she knew.

"Oh, well. Too bad. We could use a murder around here. They happen down in Poughkeepsie all the time, but I don't think I've heard of any murders in town here since that high school kid blew away his parents and then

himself with a shotgun. That was quite awhile ago, four or five years, maybe longer."

Anna said nothing in reply, just told the driver where to go once he was inside the gates of the Institute. She had him drop her off as close to her room as cars were allowed so she might avoid having to see or talk to anybody.

When she got to the door of her room, she noticed a piece of lined notebook paper folded in half and affixed to the peeling off-yellow paint of the door with a piece of old masking tape. Scribbled on the paper was her abbreviated name: *Anna C.*

She pulled the note off the door and went into her room to read it. It was, just as she had thought, a note from Chuck:

Synchronicity, dear Watson? Eli Popova, the \*ahem\* *Bulgarian* folklorist & storyteller, in the assembly hall at 8 tonite. Assume I'll see you there?

--Chas

Anna had heard of Popova only once, from Chuck, in fact, who had said she was at one point a neo-Jungian who'd hung around with Robert Bly and even Joseph

Campbell. She knew nothing else about her other than that she later rejected that psychological view of folklore as naive and this had apparently caused serious damage to her reputation in the States.

The fact that a Bulgarian would arrive at the Institute so soon after Anna's dream about Tervel and the icon painter struck her as more than a "synchronicity," yet she would have given anything to be able to deny to herself the link between the dream and the subsequent manifestation. Still, she would have to go to the performance, not only because there was usually so little to do in the evenings that any kind of event seemed worth attending, but also because she had to see for herself whether this "Bulgarian Connection" would possess an even greater meaning for her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"To dream of death, of course, is rarely to foretell actual, physical, that is, bodily death. Rather, with such dreams we are obliged to seek their true meaning in those areas of our lives where there is the imminent possibility of personal transformation.

"For example, one person of my acquaintance who had consulted me about the meaning of a sequence of dreams, in each of which she tearfully had to experience the death of her father, with very little prompting on my part came to realize that the dreams signalled her separation from her own false beliefs about her relationship to her father. The dreams, in other words, were telling her to let go of her illusions about her father, whom she had pedestalyzed as a defense against accepting his limitations. In this case, the dreams of death were very positive, for they were harbingers of a more honest view of the subject's relationship to another human being.

"To dream of darkness, on the other hand--"

Anna momentarily closed the book, using her index finger as a bookmark, and laid her head back against the

pillow that was propped against the bedstead. She knew she would have to go on, to read the next sentence, but before doing so she would need to pause for a minute or two, to accumulate strength. She closed her eyes.

Immediately an unwanted image of her own father came into her mind. Dr. Alexander Commena, Professor of Medicine at Columbia University. A god, she thought, albeit an otiose one, considering how little of him she actually saw while she was growing up. Then the sordid discovery, of years of furtive romances with his students, of either sex, and the messy divorce and then her subsequent complete inability to forgive her father-- "to let go of her illusions" about him, either as a god or a devil. Then his tidy but nevertheless shocking suicide by self-administered lethal injection, for which Anna tried her hardest not to feel responsible. But she knew she was: she knew how much her father's life depended upon his ability to maintain illusions, to cover for his failure to meet his own grandiose expectations of himself. And Anna, because she had merely substituted one set of illusions for another when his myriad betrayals were at last revealed, felt she had denied him a space to acknowledge his limitations. She never had dreams about her father's death.

"To dream of darkness, on the other hand, does not generally portend the same positive outcome as to dream of death. For although darkness *per se* is not evil, in my experience to dream of it--which is not by any means the same as not having or not remembering a dream, or as having a cloudy memory of a dream--is a sure sign of impending death. Absolute darkness occurring in dreams, I would contend, is

the result of the soul's travel into the land of the dead. When the travelling soul is one belonging to a living being, then darkness is a sign of the soul's confusion in the new land--its *inability to speak the language.*"

Anna wasn't exactly sure she agreed with Dr. Dhanandra's hypothesis, because she wasn't quite sure she knew what he meant. She glanced at the clock: it was 5:30. Her stomach had told her it was later because she had had so little to eat and she'd been reading a long time. Dinner would be available in the cafeteria in half an hour. She slipped a paper bookmark into the book and put it on her nightstand, thinking she would resume the

chapter on "The Dream of Darkness" after the performance by Popova.

Anna stood up from the bed and picked up the jeans and plaid shirt from the floor next to the bed where she had dropped them after she got back from town. She folded them and took them over to her dresser, where she exchanged them for a long cotton print skirt and a tank top. She was very thirsty, and decided to go to the cafeteria for something to drink. She knew she would probably run into Chuck, and she did.

She bought a can of Diet Coke from the machine, and sat down at the table, where Chuck was in the process of revising some recent poems.

"You got my message, of course," Chuck smiled at her as she sat down. Chuck always smiled when Anna came near him, and Anna always smiled back, but never in the sort of generous way that Chuck would have preferred. She was acutely aware of how much he wanted her, and attracted though she was to his brilliance and creativity, she could not find in herself even a spark that would ignite the conflagration of romantic passion that Chuck hoped for anew with their every encounter. Now, she condemned herself for her narcissistic attraction to the silly young driver and her concomitant total inability to generate

any erotic feelings toward Chuck. It was an inability that bordered on revulsion, and on the few occasions on which she had, out of kindness or guilt or simply curiosity, tried to imagine getting naked with him, the mere thought of his hairy fat belly, hanging over his probably tiny penis, and his overwhelming body odor forced her to exit her fantasy as if from a bad movie. So she had learned to keep her distance, to Chuck's eternal chagrin.

"Yes, I did. Thanks. So tell me again about this Popova: what is she going to do tonight?"

"I'm not sure, except I know she's going to tell some traditional and maybe not-so-traditional tales. She's a folklorist at the Institute for Folklore in Sofia, Bulgaria, but she's here in the States thanks to a Fulbright, I think at Berkeley. She's traveling around the country for the summer."

"What kind of stories are these? I mean, are they going to be in Bulgarian?" Anna asked.

"I seriously doubt that," Chuck replied with a laugh. "She speaks English perfectly, and I doubt her stories would go over well if she told them in Bulgarian. Anyway, I thought it was quite a coincidence that you had that dream--especially when you told me you didn't really

know anything about Slavic history--and then Eli Popova swings by, without any advance warning. To answer your question about what kinds of stories she's going to tell, last time I heard her, in New York a few years ago, she was getting into the dark side of Bulgarian folklore. Tales about characters like *samodivas* and *rusalkas*, as well as the usual werewolf and vampire tales. She says that those kinds of stories may come from the time before the Christianization of that part of the world. They're about pagan apirits and deities that I think Christianity turned into demons...*maybe*."

"Where does she get the stories? From old books and things?"

"It was my impression that she actually talks to people out in the countryside, who apparently still tell these tales. But some of them are probably just updated versions of stories collected in the last century...before TV."

Anna took a big swig of her soda. "Personally, I'm looking forward to it, just for the distraction from all this other stuff, but you can imagine how nervous I am about hearing a Bulgarian tell stories about demons, especially after--" She paused, remembering that she did not want to tell Chuck about her second dream or about

what had happened to her right before Leo Ouspensky had passed away. "--my dream."

Graciously, Chuck let that topic drift away without remark, and he was also sensitive enough not to bring up anything about Ouspensky or the investigation.

Changing the topic, Anna asked Chuck about the binder in front of him, leading him into a discourse on the process of editing poetry. Anna didn't know very much about poetry, but Chuck made her feel comfortable even in her ignorance, such that she thought she almost understood what he was talking about.

She listened intently as Chuck breezed between such diverse topics as Iranian gnosticism, mimetic magic and colonialism, the development of the Indo-European vocalic system, even virtual reality and his own idea about virtual poetry. For Chuck, it was clear, poetry was a means of learning, of perceiving relationships, by turning ordinary words and syntax upside down or inside out. As she listened to his free associations, there was so much she wanted to tell him about how, somehow, she understood him, because her own work with dreams had opened her up to a series of connections that seemed to contradict or expand reality. Yet she knew--for she had learned it well from her relationship to her father--that

for her to put her feelings and thoughts into words would be merely to reveal her own ignorance, her own inarticulateness. So she merely listened.

After awhile, when Chuck seemed to be running out of steam, Anna persuaded her companion that they had better eat if they wanted to get good seats for the storytelling. "Carnegie Hall," as the diminutive performance center was called, tended to fill to overflowing fairly easily, especially when something interesting was happening.

Despite the fact that Popova's appearance was more or less impromptu, word had traveled fast. Because of its proximity to New York, the Alpha Institute tended to attract a number of people in the arts, and a good number of students who were not themselves artists or performers had friends in the City who were. As a consequence, unscheduled dances, readings, recitals and other performances were not uncommon, and a word-of-mouth network announcing these events seemed to operate efficiently, although on occasion one or two people might not learn of an event in time to be able to attend.

"I saw Bobby McFerrin here a couple of years ago--he actually taught a course at the Institute," Chuck told Anna as they walked over to the cafeteria. "And John Cage

gave a performance here in the early days. He was doing a book with St. Lazarus Press, a local publisher, and just happened to be in the neighborhood. Then, I heard that a long time ago, when Rafael had just opened the Institute, Madonna did some kind modern dance thing, which apparently was embarrassingly bad. This was before she was real big, of course. Billy Steinberg, who wrote some of her earlier songs, went to school around here, and supposedly was one of the first people at the Institute."

Anna got the picture. She'd had enough soon-to-be-famous types in her own classes in the two years at Alpha to know that Rafael Goldman liked trendy people. She also knew that was why the Institute's reputation was so important to him: most of its tuition came from upmarket people who wanted to rub elbows with successful artsy types, and anything scandalous was likely to scare away those in the public eye, which in turn would disappoint those who came to rub elbows with them. Even rumors of a murder--or a mysterious death--could potentially undermine the entire foundation on which the success of Alpha was built.

"Actually," Anna said, "this storyteller tonight sounds more interesting than Madonna ever thought of

being. I love fairy tales...it's such a pity no one really tells them anymore."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Chuck replied with some doubt, "though I tend to think folklore takes whatever shape it needs to to express the culture. You've got to remember, folktales are just one form of folklore, and those narratives in our society have been more or less replaced by movies, novels, cartoon...even sports and video games. The Internet, perhaps. Mass and pop culture have supplanted a good deal of folk culture. So to hear a Bulgarian storyteller is probably quaint or even interesting, but it has nothing to do with today's world."

Anna had not thought about it that way, and she understood what Chuck was saying, but she didn't agree with him. She could still point to the coincidence between her dream and the fact of a Bulgarian storyteller making an appearance. Rather than get into an argument, the two of them tacitly dropped the matter while they hurriedly ate the bland cafeteria food. Anna and Chuck each got a cup of coffee to go, which they took over to Carnegie Hall.

The performance center was already starting to fill up. The first rows were totally occupied, and there were

even a few people sitting on the window sills, which tended to be more comfortable than the warped and worn benches. In less than fifteen minutes, the place had no room even for standees. From the expectant conversations around her, Anna learned that several people had already seen Popova perform, and they seemed to hold great admiration for her ability to keep a jaded American audience spellbound.

At last the hall lights dimmed while the scant stage lights were brought up. Rafael, dressed in neatly pressed designer jeans and a denim shirt, came out to center stage. After yelling a few good-natured catcalls, the audience finally responded to his gestures to settle down. He began to speak, loudly and confidently enough that he needed no microphone.

"I would like to thank everyone for coming to our performance tonight, which unfortunately was arranged only at the last moment. I am glad to see that our lack of advertising was more than offset by your enthusiasm, which I am confident will be repaid.

"I should like to mention that our guest this evening was a personal acquaintance of Leo Ouspensky. Because of that, and because of our sadness at his unexpected passing, Ms. Popova has decided to dedicate

tonight's performance to Mr. Ouspensky." Anna found herself admiring the apparent complete lack of nervousness in Rafael's presentation. Rafael pulled from his shirt pocket a folded piece of lined yellow paper. He unfolded it gingerly and began to read from it.

"For those of you who are unfamiliar with Ms. Popova, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce her now. She currently lives in Sofia, Bulgaria, where she is a folklore researcher at--I'm going to try it in Bulgarian, bear with me--the *Institut na Folklor* at the *Bulgarskata Akademiya na Naukite*--the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She has taught Bulgarian and South Slavic folklore at the University of London and Oxford. She has traveled extensively throughout the Balkans, collecting folktales and songs from villages in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Macedonia. Ten years ago, thanks to her exposure over the years to thousands of native stories and legends, Ms. Popova began to retell these stories herself, and has roamed around Russia and Europe, giving performances to enchanted listeners of all ages.

"For the past year, Eli Popova has been living and working in the U.S. A recipient of a Fulbright exchange fellowship, she has recently been traveling throughout the

country, combining her research interests with her penchant for telling tales about the goblins and demons of the Balkan peninsula. We are fortunate to have her here at the

Institute. She is up from the City, where she has just finished a five-day workshop on Slavic folklore and storytelling. Let's all give it up for Eli Popova."

An enormous round of applause resounded from the rafters. Presently a petite woman in her late thirties walked onto the stage from the wing. She was wearing a colorful and authentically embroidered skirt and blouse from the Rhodope mountain range of southwestern Bulgaria. Her black hair was held back by a braided garland headband. Her deep blue eyes flashed brilliantly and her broad smile seemed almost too large for her face. Anna stared at her. Something seemed familiar about her, but Popova's costume was so striking and, in fact, so out of place even at the Alpha Institute, that Anna was having a hard time pinpointing what it was about her that seemed so familiar.

Perhaps Anna was caught staring at the folklorist, or perhaps it was something else that caused Popova to stare right back at her. Anna flushed with inescapable embarrassment when she realized that her own gaze had

been met head-on by that of Popova, whose intensity caused her to squirm. The folklorist, even as she began to give some background to the stories she was going to tell, kept her eyes firmly fixed on Anna, who was sitting in the center, five rows from the stage. Anna leaned over and whispered to Chuck that she was being stared at by the performer, but no sooner did he turn to verify her complaint than Popova began to move her gaze naturally around the audience.

The Bulgarian woman was talking about vampires. The original Slavic vampire, she claimed, was still very much alive in the mountain villages of Bulgaria, as well as parts of Serbia and especially Bosnia, where vampire lore was on the increase as a result of all the recent bloodshed. She went on to say that this folkloric vampire had very little in common with its more familiar European (and romantic) counterpart: the Slavic vampire was more likely to be a peasant than a count; bats and fangs and crosses were not at all part of the lore, though icons and garlic were considered useful against them; folkloric vampires came into existence through a number of causes, but being bitten by another was not one of them. Finally, Popova told the audience before reciting some tales, vampires were frequently invoked as the causes of

unexplained phenomena, such as the pregnancy of a recent widow whose husband had died unnaturally, or a series of deaths due to uncontrollable epidemic. Thus, unlike the Gothic vampire, the function of the Slavic variant was less to induce horror than to function act as scapegoat. And, Popova stated without further explanation, to express ambivalence concerning the nature of death.

The entire Alpha Institute audience was already captivated by the diminutive folklorist before she had even begun her first story. The silence that had come over the crowd was so absolute that not even the usual coughing and shuffling could be heard.

"Tonight I would like to dedicate my first story to someone in the audience who does not know me, but who I know very well," Eli Popova declared, staring once again at Anna. "I won't mention her name, but I believe she will be knowing who she is," she continued enigmatically. Anna had no doubt that Popova was referring to her, but she had no idea how the Bulgarian woman might know her, or even yet why she still seemed so familiar.

"This is a story I was told in a small village just south of the ancient Thracian city of Plovdiv. There is a very old church there, though it was not originally Orthodox. It was originally founded by the Bogomils,

members of a heretical sect in the tenth or eleventh century. What is curious about the church is that its interior is covered with frescoes painted in the Byzantine-Bulgarian style, but depicting apocryphal scenes--stories that are not in the New Testament. Anyway, a number of stories are still told about this church, including a number of vampire tales. The one I want to tell you tonight I like to call 'The Vampire and the Icon Painter.'

Anna tensed noticeably as Popova began to tell her story about a revenant corpse that once used to wreak havoc around the church outside of Plovdiv. "People who went to this church to pray would frequently come home afterwards to find their crops inexplicably wilted, or worse, they themselves would become sick, and either die, or continue to get sick every time they intended to go to church.

"The people in the village had their suspicions about who this vampire was; they thought it was a particular hermit who lived in a hut outside the village, the only son of a man who had been labeled a heretic because he was thought to have believed in the dualistic tenets of Bogomilism. But when the townsfolk went to dig up his grave, confident they would find signs of life in

the corpse that had been buried almost a year, all they found was a decomposed skeleton...hardly the sign of the undead.

"One day an itinerant icon painter came into town--a man no one had seen before, but this was not unusual, because such painters frequently came to the village to see the frescoes and icons of the old church. On his way into town, he had seen the open grave of the old hermit, which had not been filled back in under orders from the town judge, who wanted to make sure the old man's corpse was not responsible for the disease that was plaguing the churchgoers.

"The icon painter, upon asking why an old grave had been dug up, was told that a vampire was about, and that no one knew who or where it was. Hearing this, the icon painter said he could find out who the vampire was, but he would exact a fee for his services. In exchange for uncovering the vampire, he said, he would have to be allowed to replace the holiest, most revered icon on the iconostasis with a painting of his own creation..."

At this point in Popova's story, Anna began to feel very uncomfortable. Ever since she first realized that the folklorist somehow seemed to know--had Chuck mentioned it to her?--that she had had a dream about an

icon painter, Anna had not been able to concentrate on the tale being told on the stage. The image from her dream of the icon painter in his paint-stained robes would not leave her, and she had no doubt--though she also had no solid evidence--that the character in her dream and the one in Popova's tale were, if not identical, at least somehow related.

He puts his bag of boards and paints on the ground. Tervel stares at me, at him, with hatred. Only the icon painter and I can move. His eyes--they are blue, with white catchlights, as if they had been painted on his face. He himself, with the gold and blue on his robes, is like an icon...

Something in Popova's story--perhaps just the coincidence of the icon painter--had jogged Anna's dim memory enough to dislodge one more fragment from her original dream. There was more to it, she knew, and she was afraid that whatever it was, it either wasn't at all pleasant, or perhaps on the contrary, was so pleasurable it would destroy her. She prayed to herself that Popova's story would not open her recollection of that dream any further--at least not now, in front of all these people.

When the vampire tale went on to describe an icon painter in the vicinity of a grave, Anna lost her last chance to believe that perhaps the performer had found out about her dreams from Chuck. There was in her opinion no other explanation for the coincidence between her dreams and the Slavic tale than that Popova could read her mind, or at least her dreams. So strong was the growing feeling of recognition, that she was entirely unwilling to entertain any sort of "rational explanation," even the obvious and trivial one that somehow, Popova had gotten hold of her dream journal, and for the sake of showmanship, had selected from her repertoire a story that would seem to Anna coincidentally similar.

Whether the legend being told was indeed a good deal like her dream, Anna was not about to find out. For at the very moment the storyteller paused in her narration, there was, as if on cue, a ferocious growling that seemed to come from not more than twenty yards behind Carnegie Hall.

A nervous twitter passed through the audience, unsure whether this canine noise was not some kind of sound effect, intended to lend a spooky East European atmosphere to Popova's vampire tale. Any such notions

were quickly dispelled, however, when the growling and snarling was soon accompanied by a man's voice, screaming something unintelligible. Popova herself looked frightened and confused as she turned to listen. The horrifying sounds coming from behind the theater were clearly not part of her performance.

The members of the audience to their credit did not panic as soon as they realized what was going on, but neither did anyone immediately venture forth to try to stop what sounded like a violent animal attack upon a fellow human being. Within seconds after it had begun, the screaming ceased, though the snarling continued for at least another minute, until it, too, seemed to stop as abruptly as it had begun.

Rafael at last hurried out of the performance center by the side door and headed off behind the building. He was followed by Popova, as well as a number of the more intrepid staffers and campers, who had become bolder in the absence of any further feral sounds. Among these were Anna and Chuck, who were no longer hemmed in their seats.

With her private knowledge that the sounds coming from the woods were neither artificial nor caused by anything that would ordinarily be considered real, Anna

for the first time since her childhood was unable to repress her fear. At an early age, around seven or eight if she remembered correctly, she had once--and only once, she hoped but wasn't sure--come across her father hitting her mother in jealous rage, and had clumsily made a muffled cry that revealed to her father that his abusive action had been witnessed. Her father, seemingly drunk and out of control and for some reason wearing only boxer shorts, had turned and headed towards her. Betrayed on that occasion by her own expression of fear, Anna had from that day forward vowed never to exhibit fright again.

But now, the certainty of death in this otherwise insulated and elite community, and the growing feeling that it was not going to end here, caused Anna to begin crying. Chuck, not knowing exactly why she was crying, but confident that the response was not irrational or even exaggerated, put his arm around her shoulders and held her, as they inexorably headed off to witness the terror.

As the clumsy, uncertain crowd made its way through the wooded darkness behind the performance center, they were eventually halted by the large, dim figure of Rafael, who was holding up his hands and shouting "Get

back! Get back!" as loudly as he could at the advancing spectators.

The crowd continued to push forward until it reached some invisible line, beyond which no one dared pass. Anna found herself jostled right up behind Popova, who was standing in the very front and straining to see what Rafael had stumbled across that was so terrible or dangerous he would not permit anyone to advance further.

There was not much light where Rafael was standing. The half moon was still low in the sky, and the ambient light from the stage was just bright enough to reveal the outline of what appeared to be a human shape lying prone on the ground.

"Can someone give me a flashlight?" Rafael asked the group that had followed him into the woods. Immediately several of the flashlights that had been brought by those with the experience or foresight to bring them to the performance were passed up front. Rafael selected one that was as bright as a spotlight and took it back to the location of the horizontal form on the ground.

A collective gasp of fear mixed with revulsion issued from those who were able to view the object of the flashlight's intense beam. There, in a glistening pool of blood mixed with clumps of mud, was indeed the general

outline of a man. But except for its general size and shape, and the presence of a collection of objects resembling arms and legs, a head and a trunk, there was very little else to confirm that this bloody mass had ever been human.

Rafael shined his borrowed light on this destroyed human only long enough to determine what it was, or more precisely, what it might have been, but this was unfortunately long enough that it was also clearly seen by most of those who had come to help.

He turned the beam back on the crowd, with the intention not only of restoring the image of the dead person back to its proper darkness, but also of blinding those with the clearest vantage.

"We've got a very serious situation here," he shouted with no small degree of understatement. "I'll need a couple of strong volunteers to help me--no one who's squeamish--the rest of you don't want to see this, believe me! Go on back to the hall, or better yet, to your rooms and lock your doors until we're sure everything is under control. Tell everyone in the theater the show is over for tonight." He saw Popova in the first row, and gave her a quizzical and apologetic smile. He did not see Anna behind her.

Gradually, the crowd began to recede. A couple of people had fainted, and a few others were devoted to reviving them. Others did as Rafael had asked and went back inside the performance center to tell those who were still there that there was a "serious situation" and they should all return to their rooms. Still others, those with the greatest instinct for self-preservation, fled straight back to their rooms without bothering to offer help or information to anyone. Within twenty minutes of the discovery of the freshly gnawed corpse, everyone affiliated with the Institute was behind a locked door. Everyone, except Rafael, Popova, and two staffers who worked on the Buildings & Grounds crew.

CHAPTER FIVE

The clock said 4:15 when Anna heard Eli Popova's voice from a dark corner of the room.

"It was Mr. Consigliare," Popova said quietly and nonchalantly. "The detective."

"Yes, I know who he is...was," Anna spoke into the darkness, as though this were a perfectly normal circumstance for such a conversation. Anna was trying to wake up, to be coherent, but was having a hard time. She reached for the light next to her bed.

"Don't turn on the light," Popova said. "We have enough."

"Alright," Anna agreed, seeing that she could now detect Popova's outline in the corner. The moon had risen in the clear summer sky, and was casting a mild silvery tinge over everything in the room. The soft highlights in Popova's hair, now let down and falling over her breasts, and the catchlights of her eyes were visible in the pale moonglow coming in through the window. Anna had the strange feeling that Popova was naked, and she strained to see if that were really true, but she could not see well enough to really tell.

"I need to tell you something. Only you," Popova said with grave seriousness.

"Alright," Anna repeated. "I won't tell anyone."

"Mr. Consigliare. Mr. Ouspensky. Their deaths were related," the folklorist told Anna with conviction.

"I know," Anna lied, having suspected as much.

"Both have fallen off the Wheel of Life. They are falling into Darkness."

"What?" Anna asked, bewildered by Popova's shift from the rational to the irrational. "What do you mean? What 'Wheel of Life'?"

"This one," replied Popova, all of a sudden an impresario.

Immediately before Anna there emerged from the darkness a large, room-sized painting, on what sort of surface Anna could not tell. The painting, which seemed to glow primarily with gold and bright blue tempera, was indeed of a large set of concentric circles, which could be taken for some sort of representation of the cosmos or of the cycles and vicissitudes of life. Inside the layers of circles were symbolic or iconographic depictions of earthly and sidereal cycles: astrological symbols and zodiacal constellations, paintings of scenes of agrarian life in the four seasons, the ages of man, and so on. The

upper two quadrants of the painting held a marvelous brightness, as if the painting itself were illuminated from within. Similarly, the bottom half seemed to exude a darkness that was virtually absolute, even though within that feeling of darkness could still be discerned the faint contours of demons with bat wings, as well as open-jawed dragons and ferocious wolves. Among the myriad faces that seemed to be falling off the wheel into this realm of dark demons, Anna thought she could make out the faces of Ouspensky and Consigliare, both attached to scrawny, Boschian bodies plummeting towards hell.

As she inspected it more closely, it seemed to Anna as if the light that composed the upper part of the painting were in fact made up of small portions or drops of light, which seemed to be traveling--floating--upwards from the bodies of the doomed that occupied the lower region.

"Watch the light," said Popova, who was standing in the darkness. So Anna did. She watched as the crowds of light, like tiny flames, kept ascending toward the top of the painting, which was getting brighter and brighter. Yet as bright as it got she was still able to see, through the illumination, the painted figures of men in

robes, men on horses with spears, and at the very top, a woman's figure, seated, surrounded by animals.

Below this intense scene, the bottom portion of this curious painting continued to darken, as if the last remnants of light were finally escaping from the darkness. Anna could somehow sense, in this changing `painting', that the souls falling off the wheel of life were still falling, even though they could no longer be seen in the absolute gloom of that portion of the picture.

Anna knew this was a dream. She'd done enough dreamwork to be able to see her own dreams as dreams while she was dreaming them. But she hadn't yet learned how to make choices--to control her "inner eye" or whatever it was that seemed to be looking around while she was inside the dreamscape. She also knew that this dream was about some kind choice--not the obvious one suggested by the dualism of the painting, but another kind of choice, about her life. She couldn't tell exactly what that choice might be-- Popova was guiding her in this dream, and Anna therefore suspected it was perhaps Eli's figure that was seated in the midst of the radiance at the top of the painting. What did Eli want her to do?

She looked over at the figure of Popova, who had walked out of the corner and now stood by the painting. Anna saw that her psychopomp was indeed naked, at least from the waist up, because her chest and head were completely illuminated by the glow from the upper part of the painting. Below her waistline it was as dark as it was in the bottom of the painting.

"Watch the wheel," Eli whispered almost angelically. Anna obediently began to focus upon the spinning Wheel of Life with its strange and incongruous vignettes. As she watched, the images inside the wheel began to change, even as the wheel itself began spinning more rapidly.

*I am being taken deeper,* Anna told her dream-self, knowing this and nothing more about what was happening to her. It was like getting hypnotized from inside a dream. *This is what I get for trying to mess around with my dreams,* she told herself. As the wheel spun faster and faster Anna began to lose control of her dream-self, who was falling into a deeper and deeper state. Anna tried to follow, but  
was not allowed.

"You have not been cleansed," said Popova's voice somewhere in this very unpredictable dream space. Anna wanted to cry, but she had no eyes. She had no body. She thought she was just a mind, and had just seen her dream-self be taken away.

Anna also wanted to ask Eli where that self was going, being taken, but she knew Eli couldn't--or wouldn't--tell her. Impulsively, she imagined that if she somehow grabbed the wheel, she could follow her dream-self, so she lunged--still bodiless--toward the surface of the painting. She wanted to reach out, hold onto the wheel like the brass ring on an old-fashioned merry-go-round, but she had no arms, at least that she was in control of. She fell into the middle of the Wheel, she

began to feel everything spinning. She was losing consciousness.

*'How can I lose consciousness in the middle of my unconscious?'* was the last thing she remembered before she woke up.

She found herself on the throw rug in front of her bed. It was still dark, the moon had set, and there now wasn't a speck of light anywhere in the room. She was lying on her back, and she felt chilly--somehow, probably while she was asleep, she'd thrown off her T-shirt. Maybe, she thought, she'd gotten warm while she was having that complicated dream.

She was about to get up to turn on a light so she could write down her dream, which was still quite vivid, when she sensed someone very near. In fact, right above her. She could feel--though she couldn't hear--breathing directly over her. The breath was soft and sweet and warm--a woman's, Anna thought.

She wanted to be terrified at the idea there was someone in the room with her, uninvited, but something about the breath wafting over her face calmed her, reassured her. Anna could also sense some movement of the follicles of the hair on her thighs, as if something were very near them. She now knew for certain there was someone kneeling over her in the pitch black cabin.

"Eli?" Anna asked aloud, shocked a little by her own voice in the darkness.

"You must be cleansed," she heard the Bulgarian voice reply.

Anna was transfixed. Was this still a dream, another layer of some terribly fouled-up dream, or was it really happening?

She felt the breath come closer, closer to her face. It became even sweeter and warmer, so that the chill from her nakedness just disappeared. The breath began to move around, at first around her face--in her eyes, her ears, her nostrils, even her mouth. Anna wanted either to resist or to succumb, to become passionate with this unseen Cupid, yet she could do neither.

The autonomous breath eventually began to move away from her face, down her neck, soon all over her body. She felt the warm breath between her legs, and her whole body shuddered, yet she otherwise couldn't move. The intensity of this intimate yet sexless breath was almost more than she could bear, and she felt herself fainting, falling once again into darkness. She knew she had been cleansed.

It was nine-thirty when Anna finally awoke from her multilayered sleep. The images of Popova and the painting of the Wheel of Life she knew were part of an elaborate dream, but the memory of Popova's breath moving around her body had seemed too real, though that, too, must have been a dream. Anna quickly got out her dream notebook, and wrote down all the details she could remember. She annotated her entry with a question about whether Popova was some sort of dream-guide, and another about how she ought to interpret the residual sexual feelings from the dark intimacy.

Consigliare and Ouspensky. She'd been advised their deaths were related, and this hadn't surprised her. But thinking about it now, fully awake, she had no idea what the connection might be. She resolved to think about it. She was sure everyone else was thinking about it, too.

Anna got her things together for a shower. It was going to be a strange day: cops would probably be everywhere, she would be questioned again, and this time they probably wouldn't be so polite, since one of their own had been killed. Rafael would be frenetic trying to cover everything up and dealing with the local media, and would also be in a foul mood. All the campers would be

frightened and anxious. And Eli--well, actually meeting Eli would have to be strange.

She put on her short terrycloth robe and took a towel, shampoo and soap outside, down to the communal shower building. There were two other stragglers there, one a silver-haired woman in her sixties who was just drying herself off, the other an attractive young woman in her mid-twenties, a Broadway actress whom Anna had spoken to once or twice, but whose name she didn't know. Ellen something. The younger woman smiled at Anna as she came in and took off her robe. Anna blushed, reminded by the young woman's nakedness of her recent erotic dream. Anna smiled back, but said nothing, and tried not to look at the other woman's body.

She showered more quickly than usual, not taking any time to just luxuriate in the water as she usually did. She dried off quickly as well, and put on her robe as soon as she was no longer dripping. She smiled at the actress, still posing under the water, as she left and returned to her cabin.

It was going to be a hot day, Anna knew, because it was already quite warm and it was only ten o'clock. She decided to dress minimally, in cutoffs and t-shirt and sandals. It was time to go see what was happening.

As she made her way toward the cafeteria to get her mandatory morning coffee, she heard the bustle of a lot of cars and voices. A few minutes later she was close enough to see several county, town and state police cars parked haphazardly on the lawn in front of the administration building. Men in blue or brown uniforms stood around talking idly, a couple holding leashes attached at the other end to excited German shepherds. No one appeared to be in charge. Standing near the front door to the administration building was Rafael, who was talking and gesturing wildly to Detective Henderson, who for his part seemed quite calm. Anna hoped they wouldn't see her, and she turned her face slightly away, so she wouldn't be recognized. Many of the other staff and campers were also milling about in various groups. Evidently the day's activities had been suspended, for the majority of the Institute's weekday population was out on the main lawn.

Anna reached the cafeteria, which was almost empty, except for a few groups of campers who were sitting at their tables talking about the most recent internal headlines. She dispensed herself a large coffee from the stainless steel coffee maker, and looked around trying to decide whether to sit down by herself or take her coffee

outside. She wondered why Chuck wasn't there--she couldn't imagine that he would be anywhere else, certainly not outside with the rabble. It was possible he hadn't shown up, but it wasn't likely--as aloof as he was, during the summer the Institute was his life, his only social existence.

Then she saw him. Chuck had been sitting at a table in a dark corner of the cafeteria, hidden behind the cashier. He was grinning at her in a way that told her he'd been watching her since she'd come in.

She warmly recalled his protective arm around her from the previous night, but the recollection was quickly pushed aside by a complex of embarrassment, memory of her father, her usual revulsion, and, curiously, a quick flash of the heroic Rafael confronting the horrifying fact of the mutilation with scarcely a flinch. Still, relieved that she now had another option, she headed over to Chuck's table. As usual, it was stacked with books. The book he had just put on top of the pile when she reached the table was entitled *Gnosis on the Silk Road*. Anna sat down and put her coffee on the table. "Thanks for last night," she said, before she realized how it sounded.

"For what?"

"You know."

"Not really," Chuck replied. "What?"

"Don't make me say it. OK. For putting your arm around me. I was acting like a baby," Anna confessed.

Chuck sensed that whatever openness she'd shown him in a moment of panic, he was not going to see it again for quite some while, so he decided to let her off the

hook. "Don't mention it," he reassured her, giving her room to change the subject.

"What's this?" Anna asked, picking up the dense hardback, grateful she could avoid the more pressing topic.

"Manichaeian texts. History of how Iranian dualism spread from Central Asia in the first centuries after Christ."

"Oh," Anna replied, "Catching up on a little light reading?"

Chuck was used to her facetious awe, and let her remark pass. "Have you heard?" he asked, knowing immediately from her look she hadn't.

"Heard what?" Anna was fairly sure he was going to tell her that the mangled body was that of Detective Consigliare.

"That guy last night. The one that got chewed up. They know who it was."

"Well? Go on. Who was it?"

"One of the cops who had been here after that guy in your class died."

Anna felt a twinge of accusation in Chuck's phrasing, but realized maybe it was her own guilt

emerging. "Which one? Consigliare?" Anna asked, knowing full well which one it was.

"Yeah, that's the guy. Consigliare." Chuck hesitated. "Wait a minute. You know, don't you? Who told you?"  
"Just a lucky guess. Actually, I saw the other one, Henderson, talking to Raf, so I figured it probably wasn't him."

"Oh," Chuck replied, mildly disappointed that he hadn't caught her in a conspiratorial cover-up. "What you probably don't know is that a lot of people are really shaken up by all this. You know: they come up here to get away from violence and anxiety, and now two people are dead, and there are cops everywhere. Rafael's trying to keep everybody happy, including the cops, I think. But he's got his work cut out for him. I think a lot of people are going to bail--especially if they can't come up with a good explanation for these two deaths."

"What are they saying, the police, about Mr. Consigliare? What do they think it was, a bear or something?" Anna asked.

"Not a bear, that's for sure. There are bears over in Woodstock, but there aren't any on this side of the river. Can't afford the toll, I assume. If you ask me, it was probably a rabid dog, maybe a coyote. Lots of raccoons around here are loaded with rabies--you see them

wandering around in the middle of the day, even though they're nocturnal. One could easily have bitten a dog, or a coyote. There's been a rash of these `coydogs' in the last few years--they seem to have migrated down from the Adirondacks. Anyway, they're wild, and probably strong enough to overcome a man, especially if they're mad, or if there's more than one."

Chuck's reasoning sounded very plausible to Anna, and she hoped it was the same reasoning that would be used by the police. While a lot of people still might leave the Institute, a lot might decide to stay if they could be convinced somehow that the mystery had been solved. The major obstacle to Anna's own acceptance of this version was the overwhelming coincidence of the two deaths in a few days in a place where formerly there had been none. Anna was also acutely aware of what Popova, acting as her hypnogogue, had said about the two deaths: *They are related*. When she had been told that, she had known immediately that it was true, and now it was going to be very difficult for her to believe otherwise, no matter how clever an explanation was cooked up between Rafael and Henderson.

"So you think it was an animal, Chuck?"

The poet hesitated, pulled at his beard. "That's most likely, at least around here. It's just odd that that Ouspensky guy died, and now one of the cops investigating his death-- It's just too much of a synchronicity, is all."

"I kind of hope you're right. I mean, I guess I'd rather have a wild animal on the loose than some sort of maniac. But to tell the truth, the idea that there's a rabid dog or something even worse out there isn't all that appealing, either."

Chuck and Anna fell silent. They both knew, as did everyone else, that there was some as yet undiscovered link between the deaths of Ouspensky and Consigliare, but they also knew that everything possible would be done to protect the already tarnished reputation of Rafael Goldman and his Alpha Institute. In their mutual recognition of this, they became reluctant to talk about it further, yet neither could find anything else to speak about for the moment.

Their silent conversation was interrupted by a loud voice approaching the door of the cafeteria. It was Frieda Cohn, a short, frizzy-haired astrologer who liked to assume the role of spokesperson for Rafael Goldman, whom she had tried for several years to seduce but without much success, except for a one-night stand after a New Year's Eve party at her Manhattan apartment.

In her high, North Shore Long Island accent, she yelled, without much regard for anyone's privacy or proximity, "Everybody! Outside! Mr. Goldman is going to

make an announcement! They've found something! Everything is going to be OK!"

The excitement of her announcement was undercut by a detectable tension, a tone of anxiety, perhaps disbelief, which itself might have been based on contradictions to her very words that she had seen in the astrological tables, which she tended to check about every six to twelve hours.

"Well. That was quick. They certainly didn't waste much imagination making up *this* story," Chuck said cynically. Anna nodded. Those were her sentiments, exactly.

## CHAPTER SIX

Standing nervously before the impromptu assemblage of Alphans, Rafael appeared to be chatting with Henderson and another person, a tall man with close-cropped black hair and dark whiskers, and wearing a white lab coat and a tie. Anna had never seen him before, but Chuck was pretty sure it was the town veterinarian, who'd been practicing for years and was well known even to those who didn't keep pets, like Chuck. Rafael waited a few minutes while the rest of the crowd gathered in front of the administration building. When he was confident that almost everyone was there, having done a rough head count, he began to speak loudly enough to compensate for lack of a PA system.

"Everyone! Please settle down. We have a very important announcement to make. I would like to introduce Detective Clark Henderson of the New York State Police. To his right, some of you who've been here in past years may recognize Dr. Lou Arnolfini, who is a doctor of veterinary medicine in town. Detective Henderson and Dr. Arnolfini have some news concerning recent events, some of which I'm sure will put all your minds at ease. Detective Henderson?"

A round of ambivalent applause arose from the crowd, which was clearly expecting to hear something about the recent tragedy. Anna nudged Chuck with her elbow and whispered, "Here we go!"

Henderson stepped forward as if up to an invisible podium, cutting off Goldman in the process. He spoke in an official tone of voice that he had developed from watching a lot of police shows on television.

"Thank you, Dr. Goldman. Now, as you are probably all apprised, I was recently involved in the routine investigation of the recent death of one of your associates, a certain Leo Ouspensky, who we have recently determined died of unexpected but natural causes. Working with me at the time was Deputy Sheriff Consigliare of the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office. Now, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you...to inform you that Deputy Consigliare was the identity of the person who was recently deceased on these premises while performing investigative duties."

A murmur passed among those in the crowd who had not known that the victim of the recent unseen attack was a policeman.

"Now, this tragic accident," Henderson continued without much emotion, "should be no cause for alarm for

the citizens of...for the inhabitants of the Institute here. While I've got to admit we suspected foul play, considering the extreme coincidental nature of the deaths of Ouspensky and the deputy, we are now--and by `we' I refer to Mr. Goldberg and myself and Dr. Arnolfini here-- we are convinced that the Deputy Sheriff was not the victim of a homicide perpetrated by person or persons unknown."

Something akin to a collective sigh of relief issued from the crowd, once they had deciphered Henderson's officialese. Henderson let his news sink in a few seconds before continuing.

"At 8:03 this A.M., one of my men, Officer Perkowski--" Henderson pointed to the ambitious Perkowski, who took a slight step forward and nodded-- "while patrolling the grounds for evidence that would assist us in solving the mystery of the deputy's unfortunate accident, came across a canine subject that appeared to be rabid. Drawing his service revolver, the officer laid low the dog or whatever with one shot, between the eyes."

Henderson's explicit reference to the gruesome details of murdering an animal did not sit well with his audience, who by and large would have been more inclined

to rehabilitation than execution, especially without a fair trial. Henderson couldn't have cared less.

"Once Officer Perkowski ascertained that the canine individual was no longer among the living, so to speak, the remains were put in a patrol car and delivered to the animal hospital in town, at which point it was thoroughly checked out for signs indicating whether it might have committed the attack on Detective Consigliare. Dr. Arnolfini has something to report in this regard, so I now turn you over to the good doctor."

The rigmarole with which this entire presentation was being managed struck Anna and Chuck as a little too much of a show to not be a whitewash, but they continued to listen, as Lou Arnolfini began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen. What Detective Henderson has just told you is true. The body of a large, beige coyote was brought into my office this morning, and I am now of the opinion that this animal was infected with rabies. While the bloodwork is not back from the lab, the physical signs of the body were all indicative of a rabid state. Most notable, and most familiar to you all, I am sure, was the classic 'foaming at the mouth.' In addition to signs of rabidity, this canine specimen also showed signs of what appeared to be possibly human blood on its

snout and forepaws. Thus it appears that Mr. Consigliare's killer has been destroyed."

Another sigh of qualified relief went up over the suppressed grumbling of those who still believed the dog got a raw deal, guilty or not.

"However, the fact that we have eliminated this threat does not mean that rabies is no longer a significant risk."

"Uh-oh," Chuck whispered to Anna, "We're going to get a lecture on how to avoid rabies or something."

Chuck turned out to be right: Dr. Arnolfini went on for another twenty minutes discussing statistics, warning signs, symptoms, treatments and outcomes associated with the rabies virus. He discussed the current epidemic among raccoons and the infiltration of coyotes. It was informative, but for most of the group, it was beside the point. Eventually Rafael let it be known that he wanted the floor.

"Thank you, Dr. Arnolfini, for that very useful information. And thank you, Detective Henderson. I think I speak for all of us when I say how grateful we are that we are `out of the woods'--no pun intended--about this rabies thing, so long as we keep our eyes peeled for animals that aren't behaving quite right. The efforts of

the State Police and the veterinary hospital in solving this case quickly are very much appreciated. Now I want you all to go and relax and enjoy this beautiful day!"

Several members of the audience who had held their hands up in hopes of being able to ask questions were disappointed by Rafael's abrupt *nunc dimittis*. Even Anna, who didn't buy it for a second, was annoyed. She turned to Chuck.

"Even if they're telling the truth about that poor dog, how do we know there was only one of them? Don't those things travel in packs?"

Chuck replied, "Good question. And did you notice how the vet couldn't confirm either that it was definitely rabies or that it was human blood? I mean, we can't convict without DNA evidence anymore, can we? But still, if they are telling the truth, then it explains a lot."

"Maybe," said Anna, walking with Chuck away from the dispersing crowd. "By the way, did you see Eli Popova there?"

"No, actually, I didn't. But then, I wasn't particularly looking, and there were a lot of people. Why?"

"No reason. It's just that--well, the attack on Consigliare came during her performance. I would have thought she'd have stayed close to Rafael. I don't know why. It doesn't matter."

Chuck had nothing to say one way or another about Popova's possible absence. He shrugged. "You think Goldman and his cronies were able to calm everyone down? I guess you saw the TV news guys--it's not like he's going to be able to keep it bottled up."

"I don't know," replied Anna absently, still thinking about the folklorist. "Why? You think everyone is going to try to leave?"

"Take a look over there." Chuck pointed over to the parking lot. Two yellow minibuses, borrowed, according to the signs painted on their sides, from a local drug rehab center, were crammed full of people, as was the Institute's own van. Even more people stood in a ragtag line, carrying or standing by their suitcases and duffel bags.

"What time is it?" Chuck asked Anna, even though she wasn't wearing a watch.

"I'd say about a quarter to eleven. Why?"

"Well, the 11:18 from Chicago, the Century Limited, is the train they're all trying to make, then. I guess

it's begun. The exodus. I wonder how many people will go."

From the looks of things, the forty people who probably weren't going to make that train unless the buses and van literally flew back from the Amtrak station, represented the advance guard of a much larger movement. Anna calculated that maybe half the Institute's clientele would try to leave that day, assuming that some were less worried about getting out immediately--so long as they got out soon. Anna thought

Rafael was very clever to provide the buses so quickly for those who wanted to go. That way, he would avoid a stampede, and possibly be able to convince those who were undecided about going that they could always get out if they wanted to, but that there really wasn't any need--Goldman was telling the truth about everyone being out of danger.

"I don't know," Anna replied. "It depends on how much they trust Raf. He's pretty good at putting out fires, he'll probably handle this one, too. I just wish everything would return to normal."

"Funny to hear you saying something like that," Chuck said with a touch of irony in his voice.

"How so?"

"Well, aren't you the person who tries to enter altered states with your dreams? Don't you try to teach people how to get away from normal?"

"Yes, sure. But that's different."

"How?"

"I try to stay in control, so I can come back when I want to. Right now, everything is just weird. Doesn't it feel that way to you? Like it's not going to end?"

"What's not going to end?"

"All of it. This strangeness. Screwed-up schedules. Lack of structure."

"You mean the dying, don't you?"

Chuck's words seemed to penetrate Anna's heart like a stake. She turned pale with the realization that Chuck was absolutely right: deep down, starting even before Ouspensky's still unexplained death, maybe going back to her dream of the ancient princess and the icon painter, she'd had the feeling that things were going to start to fall apart, and there wouldn't be anything she could do to stop it, because she was going to be right at the center, if not actually causing it. The widening gyre...

"How did you--why do you say that?" she cried, flustered by Chuck's unnecessary accuracy. "It doesn't have to be. I mean, it can just be strange for awhile,

can't it? It's upsetting, that's all, two people dying. I just hope it stops."

Anna tried to shut herself up, since the more she tried to avoid the implications of what Chuck had just said, the more she inadvertently revealed how she really felt.

"Don't worry," Chuck tried to console her, "I'm sure it already has. Raf and the policeman and the pet doctor all say divine justice has been meted out. Ding dong the witch is dead. They shot the literal rabid son of a bitch."

Chuck's facetiousness didn't help, but Anna had regained her composure. "You're right. Just 'synchronicity', as you always call it. But I think I'd feel a little less nervous if Ouspensky hadn't died--" She paused.

"Under your spell?"

"I wouldn't put it quite like that, but, yes, I guess so."

"Look, Anna: I know you teach ecstasy and everything, but I doubt you're so powerful you can cause someone's death with touching them and without even trying. Of course in John Donne's time, death was a metaphor for orgasm: 'We can die by it/If not live by

love.' But that was then, and this is now. Anyway, you're not the type. So if you're feeling guilty..."

"It's not that, Chuck. There's something I never told you. I'm not going to go into it, but it's not that I feel like I killed Ouspensky. Of course I didn't. It's more like I allowed him to be killed--to die. I lost control. Something took over. I was out of touch with my group. And that's my responsibility, if not my fault, exactly. I really don't want to talk about it right now. I think I'm going to go back and see Raf to find out what he thinks is going to happen, when we'll get on schedule."

Chuck saw that he had pushed the wrong button and decided to let her back off without objecting. "OK. Let me know if he tells you anything I ought to know. Listen, Anna...try to take some of your own advice, and relax."

"I will. I promise. See you later."

Anna turned and headed back toward the administration building, while Chuck kept heading toward the cafeteria to take up his table, where his books were still piled.

Anna was expecting a crowd around Rafael's office, but to her surprise, there was no one around. There were some people down the hall, a couple of uniformed

policemen talking to staff, but they didn't seem interested in Anna's entrance. The door to Rafael's office was open, and he was sitting at his large, cluttered desk, lost in thought. The phone was ringing, but for some reason he didn't intend to answer it. It didn't stop.

"Anna!" he exclaimed when he saw her outside his door. "Just the person I want to see. Come in. And close the door."

Goldman's blue eyes looked much more worried than Anna had ever seen them, and there was a slight tremor in his voice. He seemed to know he was being tested.

Anna entered the large office slowly, not quite sure that she wanted to obey Rafael, but not having much choice. She shut the door very softly, as if afraid to wake or scare someone, and sat down in a large arm chair opposite Rafael.

As she looked at the handsome here, in many ways so much like her father during his better years, she tried to monitor her feelings for him. He seemed to her overwhelmingly confident, just the sort of man that used to turn her on, the kind of man whose very touch she could not resist, and in fact she could feel the slight rustlings of sexual attraction whenever she saw him in

certain roles--such as the one he was assuming at the moment. Perhaps what attracted her most strongly was his ability to appear completely disinterested in her. At the same time, she was afraid of him, of his ability to manipulate without conscience, despite his apparent reasonable motivations. And lately, there seemed to be something frighteningly absent about him, as if his identity had been swallowed up by the very depth of his eyes. She didn't want to get too close.

"Hello, Raf. That was some show you put on this morning. I hope it works, for your sake, and, I guess, for mine."

"Why shouldn't it?" Goldman snapped brusquely, then realized what he'd said. "It wasn't a 'show', as you call it--I just felt that the best way to allay people's fears was for the proper authorities to present whatever information they had."

"So you mean it's true?"

"What's true?"

"About the coyote and the bullet between the eyes and the rabies."

"Look, Anna--I don't know what you've been imagining. Of course it's true. I'm hardly in a position to arrange for a police detective and a vet to stand up

in front of all those people and attest to something that couldn't be verified."

"OK, it's true. So what did you want to see me for?"

"Well, actually, if was you who came to see me, so perhaps I should ask you first: what can I do for you?"

"I was just stopping by to see what you thought was going to happen with all this. Don't worry about it. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"It's kind of delicate, to be honest. Consigliare's death has been taken care of, I mean that officer really did shoot a rabid coyote near here. But the question no one is asking--yet--and in a way, I'm kind of hoping the Consigliare thing will make everyone forget--is, what really happened to Ouspensky? Tell me the truth, since we never really discussed it: do you know something you're not telling me about that?"

"Of course not." Anna hoped Goldman was so preoccupied he didn't notice the catch in her throat when she answered.

"Let me level with you, then. This is between us, OK?"

Anna nodded.

"Ouspensky, apparently, was up to something. The police think--thought--he was involved in an operation to

get ancient and valuable icons out of Russia. He was an art dealer, you know, and had contacts in Russia. He's of Russian ancestry and spoke the language. Some uncle of his is a big-shot scholar in Moscow. In the Sixties, he'd met a guy named Norton Dodge, a wealthy guy who was roaming around the Soviet Union collecting 'unofficial art'--the stuff that was being painted by people who weren't in some artists' union.

"This Dodge had channels for getting art out of the country, but the KGB looked the other way because, as far as they were concerned, the stuff didn't exist, and they knew Dodge wasn't going to exhibit the stuff anywhere. But Ouspensky then tried to use Dodge's network of contacts for getting icons out. He didn't succeed, the KGB was much too cautious, and knew the value of the icons--they weren't worthless like the unofficial art was.

"Anyway, after the Soviet regime disintegrated, the KGB became disorganized, and Ouspensky went back and started moving his stash of icons out of the country without much trouble. There wasn't anyone to stop him, and hard currency was so tight it was easy enough to bribe anyone who objected with a few bucks.

"The problem now, it seems, is the Russian mafia. They want a piece of everything, including all the businesses down in Brighton Beach, where Ouspensky had his 'import-export' office. His gallery was on Madison Ave., but the real business and warehouse was in Brooklyn. Before Consigliare got killed, the cops were looking into a possible Russian-mafia hit, but they weren't getting very far--I suspect because they're both idiots, but it could also be because they're barking up the wrong tree. Besides, the way he died was a little too subtle for those Russians, who like to be messy--just to make a point.

"Henderson seems, for the moment, satisfied that Ouspensky's death was, if not exactly natural, at least from natural causes. He's willing to leave it at that, I think, so long as he doesn't have to explain anything to the contrary.

"Obviously, it would look very bad for the Institute if it someday appeared that we were covering something up or worse, were somehow involved in something illegal. So I want to make damn sure there's not some piece of potentially damaging information out there that could fuck us up."

"So why are you telling me all this, Raf? Wouldn't it be better if I didn't know any of this?"

"If I didn't trust you, yes. I suppose it might be in my best interest to say nothing to anyone. That's what the police advised me to do, after all. But I'm concerned that the media may get a hold of this and really turn it into something. And since you're the only one who witnessed Ouspensky's death--"

"Now wait just a minute, Rafael. What are you getting at? You want me to lie? I really didn't see anything, and I didn't know Leo very well, so there isn't really very much for me to lie about."

"I'm not asking you to lie," Rafael responded, "Just trying to make sure we're on the same page, that's all. Who knows? It may never come up again, and that will be that. But of course, if you were ever to be questioned closely, it would be in the best interests of the Institute--and I hardly need remind you that it would therefore benefit you, as well--if you phrased your answers so as to minimize the appearance that there was anything unusual."

Anna could tell from the way Rafael had begun to look away from her, out the window, that he didn't feel good about what he was asking her to do. "What you mean

is, I'm supposed to make it sound like he had some kind of stroke or heart attack or something, and I saw it, and--correct me if I'm wrong--there wasn't anything strange about what happened?"

"That's more or less it."

"And if I can read between the lines just a little bit more, you also want me to go easy on explaining what I do in my courses, right?"

"Yes."

Anna thought for a minute about whether she could accommodate Rafael. "I'll tell you what. I can't--I won't--lie for you, if it comes down to that. I mean, I can't say I saw something I didn't see, but I also understand that the reason I didn't see anything might raise some eyebrows, so I can definitely avoid going into that. How's that sound?"

"Fine, just fine. That's all I'm asking. Thanks, Anna."

"You're welcome," Anna replied, trying to hide her disappointment as she left his office.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Walking away from the administration building, Anna felt vaguely compromised, but she was also aware that she herself had not been completely forthcoming. She had told no one about her dreams, except for Chuck, and she really hadn't told him very much. She didn't know how much her dreams counted, but unlike most people she knew, she didn't believe they were irrelevant or at best codes for repressed desires. They were much too vivid to be just that, and beside that, she was to some extent in control--if not of her dreams, at least of her responses within them.

Her brief discussion with Rafael still disturbed her. There was something so unlike him in the way he had asked her to be less than honest. She understood how valuable his reputation was, but in the years she'd known him, he'd always struck her as being more or less honorable. If she was attracted to him for any reason other than his charisma and his unusual handsomeness, it was his seeming ability to do the right thing, to go out on a limb, if need be, to protect something he believed in. Well, he believed in the Institute, and certainly was trying to protect it, but there was something already a

little too desperate in his method, as though deep down he knew things were worse than they appeared.

Anna's concern over the possible reasons behind his inexplicable suggestions turned into confusion over what to do next. Her routine, like everyone else's at the Institute, had been totally disrupted. There wasn't much to do at the Institute apart from the workshops and performances, and it didn't look like going into town was an option: the minibuses and van were still gone, and even when they came back, there were still enough people waiting that two more round trips to the train station would be necessary before there would even be a space.

The day was turning out to be hotter even than Anna had thought it would be. The sun was now directly overhead and seemed to be evaporating the moisture out of everything, even the tall pines that surrounded the grounds, so that the still air was dense and hard to breathe. Going for a swim was the only sane thing to do.

She could go to the little waterfall, where there would be fewer people and she wouldn't have to wear anything, or she could go back to her room and change into a bathing suit and then head over to the large man-made pond with its clean pebble beach and wooden dock.

She opted for the anonymity of the latter: it was bound to be crowded with others who also couldn't deal with the heat, and she could just take a book and read, and jump in the water when she got too sweaty. She didn't like the oozy bottom of the pond, and she was unnecessarily worried about snakes and snapping turtles and leeches, but she convinced herself that all the people being around would drive away these undesirable creatures.

Strangely, she wasn't worried about wolves or coyotes. She could almost literally read that fear in the faces she had already seen today, yet she couldn't sympathize with it: it just didn't seem real, it didn't seem like something to be afraid of at the moment.

Anna reached her room and began to undress almost before she was inside. She dropped her shorts and top on the floor, and rummaged in the top drawer of her dresser for a bathing suit. She found the bottom, but couldn't find the top. She had just opened the second drawer, and was pulling things out trying to find the top to her bikini, when there was a knock at the door.

"Just a minute!" she yelled, quickly taking off her underwear and struggling into her rather tight bikini

bottoms. As she was trying to figure out what to put on her top to answer the door in, she heard Popova's voice.

"It is me--Eli Popova! I wanted to come by and introduce myself. Chuck was telling me about you," Popova said, opening the door herself.

"Oh, hi," Anna replied, scrambling for something to put on. "Come in. Actually, it seems so strange that we haven't officially met. I mean, you seemed so familiar when I saw you on stage, and then--Well, wait just a minute for me to get dressed." Eli's brusque intrusion while she was half-naked prompted Anna to realize why she had decided not to go to the waterfall: she was still trying to suppress the mild erotic urges left over from her dream encounter with Eli, and she was vaguely worried she would see Eli there. Now here was Eli anyway, in Anna's room in broad daylight, while Anna stood there, awkward and topless.

"You don't have to get dressed for me," Eli said casually, as if they were sisters or old friends. Eli was looking squarely at Anna's small breasts, which made her even more self-conscious. "You have nice breasts, and besides, this is nothing I have not seen before."

Anna blushed and gave a nervous smile. She didn't want to seem old-fashioned, but she was going to have a

hard time talking to Eli with her breasts exposed. Anyone else, even someone she didn't know, and she probably wouldn't have cared very much, but Eli was somehow different.

All of a sudden, Anna glimpsed a strap of the green nylon top to her bikini peeking out from under a T-shirt in the corner of the open dresser drawer. She snatched it quickly and started to put it on. "Come in," Anna repeated nervously, choosing to ignore Eli's suggestion. "I was just getting ready to go for a swim."

Anna could barely look at Eli, who was watching her get dressed like a floorwalker at a department store. "You Americans are so bashful, so ashamed. In Bulgaria, on the Black Sea, you can go completely naked if you wish on the beach. And in the countryside, in the mountains, the farming women often do not cover their breasts when they are out in the field. It is too hot--like today."

Having adjusted both her top and her bottom, neither of which fit as comfortably as they had when she'd bought the suit two years earlier, Anna could relax a little.

"Yes, I know. We're still a puritanical nation, even though we use sex to sell everything from tires to corn flakes. We can use words like 'asshole' on prime-time television, but we bleep out 'god'. Pornography is

available at every video store, even on the Internet, but we elect people who spout off about 'family values' and we're offended by the sight of a mother nursing in public." Anna caught herself going into a minor tirade, and stopped. "Sorry. I'm sure you know all that. I don't know why I--"

"Perhaps it is because you are nervous."

"Yes, I guess I am, a little. Though I don't know why I should be," Anna lied.

"Perhaps because you are uncertain about whether you know me," Eli offered matter-of-factly. Then, without any sort of invitation, the petite folklorist began to unbutton her white short-sleeved blouse, as though she fully intended to exhibit herself according to some curious custom of exchange.

Anna had no idea what to do about such inexplicable behavior, even for a foreigner, but knew she'd better stop her. "No, no," Anna said quickly, "I really don't think that's it, and you really can leave your shirt on."

"Then perhaps," Eli said, rebuttoning her shirt, "it is simply because I make you nervous."

Anna was taken aback, not so much by the boldness of Eli's statement, as by its correctness. Anna's mind was immediately thrown back to the dreamy experience of

having the mysterious shadow of Eli in her room. As if it were happening all over, she could feel again the warm breath moving over her body, and she even repeated her shudder as the moist exhalation roamed around her inner thighs. She saw Eli, naked from the waist up, standing in the glow of the mystical painting. She was staring at Popova's fleshy breasts, and could not seem to take her eyes off them. The dark nipples were like eyes, staring back at Anna, mesmerizing her. She wanted to look away, but she was in their power, these otherwise ordinary breasts that swayed softly before her in her own memory.

With all her will, Anna tried to force her eyes away. At first to the side--she tried to reach the darkness behind Eli with her gaze, but it was too difficult. The only direction her eyes could move freely in was down, toward Eli's navel and waist, but she struggled to look up, up into the gorgon's face, even though she knew that by doing so, she was violating some powerful taboo.

She struggled with her whole being to defeat the strange erotic spell cast by Eli's breasts. She was winning, she could feel her gaze at last overcoming the force that was trying to lock it in place, until at last, as if she had broken through some incredibly strong

membrane, she was able to look up, directly into Eli's face.

The relief Anna felt at breaking this strange hold upon her consciousness was enormous--so enormous that for a second or two, Anna still felt relieved, even though the face she had so stubbornly struggled to see turned out to be nothing but a mass of torn flesh. The entire structure had been destroyed, and except for its anatomical context, Anna would not have been sure this mass was a face at all. She knew this was Consigliare's face, transplanted on Eli's seductive body. She tried to scream. She tried to wake up. But this wasn't a nightmare--at least not her own.

Anna trembled, less out of visceral horror than out of fear that she could not find reality. She could hear screaming going on around her, it was her own voice. She checked the muscles of her jaws: her mouth was shut. Now, she would have given anything to be merely hypnotized by those silly 'breastes'--she had traded, she realized, the vision of sex for that of death, and now regretted that trade.

Her shock and revulsion became mixed with deep sorrow, as she was almost able to understand how Consigliare had felt as he was being attacked by the

coyote. Her empathy, it seemed to her, was rewarded: as she took on the dead man's utter pain, the features of his gnawed face grew less and less distinct, so that gradually it took on a more or less human look, and the bloody red that covered it began to fade into a lighter and lighter pink.

Anna was almost amused by the transformation, because she understood very quickly what was going on, well before it was visibly obvious. She knew that this illusion of destroyed flesh would now metamorphose into Eli's smiling face, and they would be back in Anna's room and everything would be normal--or almost.

And so it happened. Anna had had experiences with a hypnogogue before, but always as she was about to go to sleep, and never with someone real, an actual person in her very presence. As she felt herself drifting upwards, she wondered how she had entered that ambiguous state so quickly--there didn't seem to be anything that Eli had done that could have led her so swiftly into that other world.

The dream: it must have been her dream from the night before. Somehow, Anna considered, the residual erotic feelings left by the dream were being used as a trigger by Popova to guide Anna into the dreamworld as

quickly and easily as walking across the street. Anna knew she would remember only the strangeness of this induced daydream, she could feel the actual images slipping away as she continued her ascent. A woman's breasts...blood...darkness...light...

"I don't mean to make you nervous," Eli was saying when Anna came to from her momentary reverie.

"What? Oh, yes--nervous. No, I'm not nervous at all," Anna said. Curiously, where just a moment ago, Anna had felt very uncomfortable around Eli, she now was completely relaxed. "I'm going swimming. Want to come?" Anna grabbed a towel that happened to be draped over the back of a chair, put her arm around Eli, and led her outside. "If you don't have a suit, we can walk over to the waterfall," she added.

The pair walked in silence. Anna realized that, contrary to her original intention, she was taking Eli-- if it wasn't actually the other way around--to the waterfall rather than the pond. Oh, well, Anna thought, it's nicer there anyway. She knew Eli had something to tell her, something, in fact, she really wanted to know, but she hoped Eli wouldn't say anything until they reached the waterfall.

Along the way, Anna saw a few casual friends, to whom she waved or said 'hi' in a manner that would not risk conversation. There seemed to be a lot fewer people around than usual, and Anna wondered whether the exodus wasn't greater than she and Chuck had calculated.

The sound of the waterfall, which really wasn't much of a waterfall at all but rather just a rapidly moving stream rushing down some rocks into a pool below, could usually be heard from a hundred yards away, as could the giggles and shouts of people frolicking in the water like Swedish naturists. But today, as they approached the edge of the clearing around the stream, Anna heard neither rapids nor voices. The lack of voices she could understand, but the missing sound of rushing water was difficult to interpret.

Presently they reached the stream. Their entire journey on foot had been accomplished in silence, a pact neither of them had been willing to break, but Anna felt a need to comment. "There's no one here. How odd!"

"They are all afraid. Perhaps as they should be," Eli commented enigmatically. "But you are not, and I am not, and we are here. I think it is best that we are alone, anyway."

"Why?"

"I will tell you. But not until after I go into the water. I must cleanse myself," Eli said, and began to disrobe without the least sign of modesty.

To Anna's surprise, now that they were actually in sight of the rapids, the water seemed to be rushing no less swiftly than usual, nor was it making any less noise. Eli ran into the water, traversing the rocks at the bottom as deftly as a mountain goat, and plunged into the deep pool at the base of the spill.

"Come on in! Take off that silly suit!" Eli yelled to Anna.

Ordinarily, Anna would have declined. She wasn't generally embarrassed to be naked around other women, but she never felt particularly comfortable, either. Yet there was something about Eli's tone of voice that assuaged any shyness or reluctance on her part. "What the hell," she said out of earshot, stripped off her bathing suit, and hobbled much less gracefully than her predecessor into the water.

She met Eli in the middle of the pool. They were standing on rocks which were uneven and sharp. The water came up to Eli's shoulders, but it was only chest-high on Anna, who was somewhat taller. Anna subtly bent her knees a little so she would be even with Popova. The noise of

the water pouring off the rocks and into this pool was loud enough that if they wanted to say anything, they would have to shout. This didn't stop Eli.

"We are safe here," she yelled, unconcerned that anyone nearby might hear her. "In Bulgaria, we believe that vampires and other demons cannot enter water. And you must be naked to be purified."

Anna said nothing, since it would take a lot of effort even to utter some trivial response.

"I visited you in your dream," Popova told Anna at last, above the noise of the water.

"Yes, I know," Anna replied in a shout. She realized she didn't have to shout; for although the water was still rushing over the rocks, it no longer seemed to make any noise. In fact, the entire woods had become as quiet as a library. "Why?" Anna asked, now using her normal voice.

"You had a dream about a holy painter, did you not?"

"You know I did," Anna replied, not at all surprised that her dream life was so well known to the Bulgarian woman standing in the water with her.

"May I tell you who he is?"

"Be my guest."

"OK. Try to believe me. This will sound perhaps crazy to you, but it is true. At least, it is true in a way that I think you, as an American, are not used to things being true. When Americans use the word 'myth', they mean a lie. When we say 'myth', we mean what is true beyond ordinary truth." Popova spoke sincerely, and in her normal tone of voice.

"Go on. I have no reason to doubt you," Anna told Popova honestly.

"The icon painter in your dreams has a name. It was--is--Bån. You are not the only one he has visited in dreams, only the latest. He comes to those who do not have ordinary dreams, but who have expanded their dream world to include other times, other histories."

Anna sort of understood Eli, because she remembered she'd dreamed about a place and time that seemed real enough, but about which she actually knew next to nothing. What she didn't understand was how Eli could know so much about her dreams. "Before you go any further in telling me about my dreams, I've got to ask you a stupid question. Are you psychic?"

"No," came the unexpected reply. "I cannot 'read your mind,' if that's what you mean."

"Then how--"

"How do I know about your dreams? Isn't that a strange question, coming from you?"

Anna nodded, and stared into the water between them.

"Let us just say it is a 'technique'. I learned it many years ago, from an old woman who used to tell me stories. In fact, she was the person who told me the story I was telling the other night, about the vampire and the icon painter. She told me people used to call her a witch, a sorceress, because she moved around a lot, she was a wanderer. The words are related in Bulgarian.

"Perhaps some day I will teach you this technique, but I suspect you will learn how to visit dreams on your own. You have read Castaneda?"

Anna shook her head, mildly embarrassed to admit it.

"Well, you will. And when you read his book on dreaming, you will understand that dreaming takes place in a different part of the cosmos. Different physics, different metaphysics."

For all the books and articles Anna had read on the subject of dreaming, she had no idea what the Bulgarian woman was talking about. Popova noticed Anna's befuddlement.

"Once upon a time, what I am able to do with my dreams would have been called 'magic'. Now, such things

are considered 'techniques', and can be taught, the same way you teach people how to channel their energy. That, too, might have been called 'sorcery', at least in the ancient Balkans." Eli paused for a moment, but seeing no response in Anna's face, continued. "What I can do is control my own dreams in such a way that they intersect with other people's dreams. I 'meet' other dreamers while I am asleep. But I cannot do this during the day--I cannot read your mind."

Despite her blank look, Anna had a million questions, but decided it was best to let Eli say what she had led Anna to the waterfall to say. "So perhaps you should tell me about this Ban."

"It is pronounced more like 'ben', but not quite the same. I have seen it spelled in the Latin alphabet with a funny circle over an a. It is an old Iranian word, I think."

"Ben. Whatever."

"Well I must tell you, and you must believe me, that on the plane where dreams are experienced, time does not work the same way. In my dreams, I can intersect the dreams of ancient and future dreamers, although I should say that I have never been in the dreams of anyone from the distant future, though I have often been in those of

people in the past. And it is just this that worries me. It is this blankness, this darkness, that causes me to enter your dreams."

All this was getting terribly absurd for Anna, who usually tended to give a certain amount of credence to such abstruse and illogical metaphysical concepts. But there was something, perhaps in the way Eli described it all, that sounded too much like science fiction. But she did not protest. "OK, so who's Bân?"

"When you met him in your dreams a few days ago, he had assumed the role of an artist. But he is also known as a builder--the Great Builder. I have encountered him as both the builder and the painter--separated by many centuries, but without doubt the same person. Actually, he is not a person, at least in the ordinary sense. He is a god. Or, if you are a Christian, a demon, perhaps a devil. But not like the Christian Devil--much different.

"There are legends still about Bân, though he is called by different names, in certain parts of the world. He has a task on earth, and this task originally, when he was the Great Builder, was to carve the tombstone at the death of Darkness. The dark forces. You see, the ancients believed that light and dark were created by different gods, and that these forces are continually struggling

against each other. According to the old religion, the forces of Light were eventually supposed to win, and Bân would then carve the tombstone, or some say prepare the grave, after the victory.

"The legend changed during the period when the Slavs were being converted to Christianity--which they never totally did--and Bân became an icon painter. His name changed to Van in some regions, like Bosnia. According to the tales, he was working on a great painting. This painting was supposed to depict the end of the world. And when he was finished with it--"

A chill came over Anna when she realized what Eli was getting at. As crazy as it all was, she herself had experienced a glimpse of the true darkness, and two people were already dead because of it. She wanted to leave, to get out of this stupid, cold water, get some clothes on, get away from this foreigner with the strange ideas, and get back into something normal.

But she knew she couldn't. Not only did she feel she would probably not be able to leave, since there was a fairytale quality about being in the middle of a stream that sometimes made no noise, but she also understood that she would have to hear the rest of the story about Bân.

"When he finished the painting, that would be like finishing carving the tombstone: it would mean the end of the Darkness."

"This was a religious belief? What sort of religion believes in a god that's out to destroy the believers?"

"That we are not sure of. There was a group of these dualistic believers known as the Bogomils, whose religion also saw mankind as impure. In fact, they believed that procreation was itself evil, because it further mixed the light with the dark. But it is not certain whether Bân or Van was a Bogomil god."

Anna laughed. "Well, if they thought procreation was evil, there can't be too many of them around anymore, can there?"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Eli corrected her. "The religion spread north, into France and Italy. Have you ever heard of the Albigensian or Cathar sects?"

"Well, sure..."

"They were Bogomils. Obviously they found ways to procreate, but they still believed that the material world was evil. They even believed that the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah, was evil. You can imagine how the priests felt about that idea."

"Wow! I guess their jobs would be on the line, if they were pushing His word!"

"Exactly. So now you have a little bit of the background. Not much, but enough so you can understand about Bân. Who has visited you.

"The legend I was first told--and which was confirmed for me in a dream--was that Bân's painting was being completed in a church--perhaps a Bogomil church, definitely not an Orthodox one. Someone, an Old Believer perhaps, a Byzantine spy, perhaps, stole the painting. Don't ask me how you can steal from a god. Trust me--you can. You must remember that many people in those days felt that icons or holy paintings of any sort were sacrilegious, because they attempted to portray that which could not be depicted."

"Yes, but what about these...Bogomils? Why would they allow an icon?"

"As I understand it, they believed that the whole Christian mystery was an illusion, since Christ couldn't have had a physical body, or else he would have been contaminated, too. So I guess the painting, since it wasn't Christian anyway, would have to have been considered symbolic.

"The painting disappeared, says the legend, and it is being kept away from Bån by evil forces who do not want to release the Light. Different stories blame the theft of the painting on different people, but they are always--always--considered to be working for the forces of Darkness.

"Anyway, the tales always say that Bån has been looking for the painting over the centuries, because he must finish it." Popova scooped some water with her hands and splashed it on her shoulders and face. Apparently this was all she was going to say about the legendary icon painter, at least for now. Anna saw the connection between Bån and Ouspensky, but she wasn't quite sure how she herself was involved, except on account of her dream work. "OK, what you're saying is, Ouspensky had something to do with this painting, right? But what does this have to do with me? I barely knew the guy. And do we have to be standing here? I'm turning into a prune."

"No, we no longer need to be in the water."

"Why did we have to be here in the first place, might I ask?"

"So he can't hear us."

Right, thought Anna, She's worried some folklore character out of a dream is going to hear us talking about him. "Oh. So why me?"

"You don't know? About your name?"

"No, I don't." Eli's cryptic remarks were beginning to get on Anna's nerves. Anna was starting to feel very uncomfortable. She started walking back over the rocks to her bikini. She was able to hear the rushing of water again. She was secretly thrilled by the natural sound, it seemed so real.

Eli followed a couple of steps behind her, yelling above the noise. "The name 'Anna Comnena' means nothing to you? No one ever said anything to you?"

Without turning around, Anna shouted back, "No. Just tell me, for Chrissake." The mysteriousness of everything was getting on her nerves.

"Anna Comnena was the daughter of a Byzantine emperor, Alexius Comnenius, in the twelfth century. Her father was involved in the persecution of the Bogomils, and she wrote down an eyewitness account of a trial and burning at the stake of a certain Bogomil leader, Basil. I forgot that you are American, and have no knowledge of history...even of your own ancestors.

"I just assumed you knew that, who she was. Who you are. There must be some sort of link, don't you think so?"

The two wet naked women reached their clothes. Anna offered the sole towel to Eli first, who declined it, so Anna patted herself dry with it, then got back into her bikini. Eli put on her clothes without drying off. Anna imagined that would be terribly uncomfortable, but kept her opinion to herself.

"Like what?" Anna asked peevishly. "Reincarnation?" She knew her impatience was due to the fact that what Eli had told her was scaring her, but she couldn't control her tendency to be curt in the face of fear.

"Perhaps. I know very little about such things. They are religious beliefs. All I know is that I have followed Bân to you, and there is definitely a connection between him and Ouspensky. And there once was a woman in the days of the Bogomils who had your name. That's all I can say. I thought perhaps you could tell me something."

If any of this were true, and Anna didn't believe it was, then who was Eli Popova? What was her interest in Bân or Ouspensky? Was she one of the forces of Light, or on the contrary, of Darkness? Anna was afraid to ask.

"No, I don't think I can really tell you anything you don't already know. Let's go back," Anna said. The pair headed back to the main grounds.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Anna and the folklorist split up when they reached the main lawn. Anna was going back to her room to change and then return to the cafeteria to get something to eat. Eli didn't say where she was going, she just went in another direction, toward the performance center. As she crossed the lawn, Anna noticed that there were still people milling about in the parking lot. Neither the buses nor the van were in sight.

*That's odd,* thought Anna, *at least the van should have come back a long time ago.* She looked at the sun and figured it must be at least two o'clock. Enough time had elapsed since the first trip that several more could have been made either into town or all the way to the train station, and therefore all these people--who appeared to be waiting for something--should have been long gone.

She wasn't going to get involved, but her curiosity was mounting as she headed back to her room. When she got back, she took off her bathing suit and hung it up on the back of the bathroom door. She felt like rinsing off, although she'd just been standing in the middle of the cleanest water around. She wondered about the idea of being "cleansed" or "purified," and what it meant.

She dried off and got back into her shorts and T-shirt--it was still hot, and the only other clean clothes she had would be too warm.

The sun had tired her out. She felt her face. Despite the fact that she already had a base tan, standing in the water with Eli, she had gotten sunburned. She went back into the bathroom, got a gob of aloe lotion, and rubbed it into her face, and then on her shoulders and upper chest, so she wouldn't peel.

Anna changed her mind about the cafeteria. It wouldn't be that long before dinner, and she could get more than just a mediocre sandwich or yogurt if she waited a little. Instead, she decided to lie down and read her book on dreams, to see if Dhanandra had anything to say that would support Eli's claims about intercepting other people's dreams.

A small voice in the back of her mind tempted her to go back outside and find out what was going on with the buses, but a slightly louder voice was persuading her that, considering what Eli had told her, she might not really want to know. She would learn soon enough, if there was anything to learn.

She flopped herself down on the bed with her book and began thumbing through it. She found a heading on

"The Dream: Space & Time," but it turned out to be very speculative, and in fact seemed wrong. She tried to keep reading anyhow, but the sun and heat had exhausted her, and she couldn't keep her eyes open for more than a few pages.

When she awoke, it was almost dark. Anna was surprised not only by how long she'd slept, but by the utter absence of recollection of any kind of dream. In a way, it was a relief, to not remember her dreams for once. Yet because of her work on trying to control her dreams, it had been a long

time since she'd woken up without remembering *something*, if only the tiniest fragment. So as nice as it was to not see Bân, or Eli, or Consigliare or anyone else during her sleep, Anna was mildly troubled by the possible meaning that *not* remembering her dreams might have.

As the sun had gone down behind the Catskills, the temperature outside had dropped dramatically, so that Anna was very chilly, to the point of goose bumps. She was also starving, having not eaten the entire day. She changed into jeans and a cotton sweater and headed to the cafeteria. She walked quickly, fearing that it might close soon.

When she got near enough, she saw through the window that, far from being closed, a large number of people were still inside, and several were standing in groups outside the door. It seemed as though the crowd was actually some sort of impromptu assembly: people were sitting around in a circle and appeared to be discussing an important issue. Chuck would certainly be there. She could find out from him what was going on, if she couldn't discern it from the proceedings.

She felt mildly guilty about always relying on Chuck's devoted constancy without every offering him anything but her mere presence in return. She wondered for a second whether she wasn't being something of a tease, but then rejected the possibility as something she had given up in high school.

She walked past the small groups standing outside. As she passed, their voices became hushed. Anna nervously entered the cafeteria like she was going into hostile territory, though no one in the group actually paid much attention to her.

It didn't look like she was going to get much to eat: though the cafeteria was open, the kitchen and the cafeteria line were closed. There were vending machines from which one could get a soda and a snack, but even

that wasn't going to be easy. Some of the latecomers attending this "town meeting" were leaning up against the machines, and Anna got the feeling very quickly that if she went and put money in the machines, she would be perceived as both disruptive and unconcerned. She decided to starve.

She looked around the room. Sure enough, Chuck was there, as were many of the same people she'd thought were waiting for the van earlier in the day. It didn't take her very long to come to the conclusion that this meeting had something to do with the reasons those people were still at the Institute.

"Well, when the buses didn't return, did anyone think to call a taxi?" a woman was asking the group at large, somewhat impatiently. Anna recognized her as Naomi Bernstein, a well-known fabric artist from New York.

The question, which didn't need to be asked, caused a round of low grumbling. A short, stocky man in his mid-thirties whom Anna didn't know, stood up. "I don't want to be rude, but one of the first things stated when we called this meeting to order was that all local sources of

transportation had been tried.

"Sam here called the taxis in at least three towns, and I called a couple of taxi companies across the river. They all had pretty much the same story: all their cabs were out, nothing was available, but they promised to send someone right away, as soon as the cabs got back."

"Slike Harlem," someone in the back of the room shouted.

"What?" the stocky man said. "What do you mean?"

A slender, slightly effeminate black man stood up. "I say it's like Harlem. You ever try to get a cab north of 125th St.?"

There was a ruffle of embarrassed laughter, since none of them had.

"You just can't do it, at least not some times. Drivers think it's dangerous. So they don't come."

Another person, a frail woman with prematurely grey hair and a very worried look on her face, asked, "Do you think then that no one's coming because they're scared?"

"Could be," the man answered. "Wouldn't you be?"

This was the wrong thing to say. Before he asked that question, everyone in the room--except for Anna--had been complicit in the denial that there was anything really to be afraid of--in spite of the fact that the whole purpose of this gathering was to address the

problem of getting people out who definitely were afraid to stay. Now, with the analogy to Harlem out on the table, it was no longer possible to pretend there was nothing to fear.

"I hardly think that's a pertinent analogy," protested a squeamish, balding little man in glasses. "This is upstate New York."

"Let me ask you," chimed in someone else, "do you think most of those people in town aren't afraid of us on some level? I mean, I'm sure they don't understand what it is we're all doing here, and I've talked to people from as far away as Albany who think the Institute is some kind of cult. So maybe this man--I'm sorry, I don't know your name--is right: maybe the taxi drivers have heard the news and are just plain scared to drive out here."

"I really don't see how that's relevant," the bald man replied.

The debate, such as it was, was becoming heated. The mere suggestion that people on the outside might be afraid of something at the Institute--where all these people, otherwise already terribly frightened by the pace of their own rapid and unexamined lives, had come for refuge, to get away from the threatening noises and

gestures of urban life--was enough to generate even more fear among the inmates.

Anna listened to the various explanations and suggestions as she made her way over to Chuck, who was sitting at his usual table, but hardly alone. He waved her over when he noticed her approaching. When she got to the crowded table, she came around behind him and whispered.

"Hi, Chuck. Pretty crazy, huh? How long's this been going on?"

"A couple of hours," he whispered back loudly. "Ever since the van didn't return to pick up the rest of the people."

"Yeah, well," Anna whispered again, "that's the thing: I can understand maybe the taxis not wanting to come out here, but that doesn't explain the van. I know that driver. He's just a kid, not the type to get afraid because someone gets bitten by a couple of rabid dogs. Why wouldn't *he* come back?"

That hadn't occurred to Chuck, who'd bought into the Harlem analogy. "I see your point. I don't know. Maybe he ran into some taxi drivers or someone at the train station who talked him into not returning."

"Maybe," Anna said, "but I kind of doubt it." Anna turned her attention back to the proceedings.

"...if we can't get someone out here, hell, it's not that far. We can walk into town."

"At night? Are you crazy?"

"Why not? It's almost a full moon and clear as a bell out there. I can see my own shadow, it's so bright. Five minutes through the woods here, and you're on the main road to town. What's the big deal?" The speaker was a very large, heavysset man with the fearless demeanor and look of a football player. There was something about his size and style that suggested he didn't belong with the rest of the people at the Institute.

Another man, less intrepid, disagreed. "Well for one thing, it was night when that policeman got...got it. And he had a gun, didn't he? You'd have to be nuts to go out at night. Secondly, you've missed the last train, unless you go down to Poughkeepsie or catch a bus over in Kingston. Even if you are thinking about walking--which I think is crazy--there's no reason not to wait until morning. Maybe a lot of us would go, then."

A murmur of assent passed through the room.

The fearless man didn't want to wait. "Well, I'm up for proving there's nothing to be afraid of. It's not

that late, it's a nice night. I'll be in town in a half hour. I'll talk to those taxi people and find out why the hell they never came out here. Does anyone want to go with me?"

This challenge initially met with dead silence as everyone weighed the implications and consequences. Then, like a plant in an audience-participation television program, the frail woman stood up. "I'll go with you!" she exclaimed boldly, and looked around the room to see how many others would sign on.

Unfortunately her bravado had only managed to earn her a position as the sole companion of the man who claimed he was going to walk into town. No one else volunteered.

"Alright," said the man to his obviously terrified fellow traveler, "let's go, and show all these scaredy-cats they're just being wimps."

Anna was not alone in thinking the pair were being ridiculous, but she made no attempt to stop them. "I hope they'll be alright," she said to Chuck.

"Me, too," Chuck replied sincerely, a worried look on his face.

As the odd couple--the burly football player and the spinsterish woman--reached the door, they both turned

around, as if to see whether there were any last minute converts. There weren't. "So long," the man said loudly to an audience filled with trepidation, "We'll call you from town." The two of them went out the door.

This unnecessary heroism left everyone in the cafeteria with nothing to say, so an eerie silence fell over the entire assembled group.

"Adam and Eve," Chuck said loudly enough that everyone could hear, forcefully enough that it would be dramatic.

He stood up. Anna had never seen Chuck be so bold. Usually, he was content to teach his workshop and sit in the cafeteria drinking coffee and reading obscure books. Now, for once, he seemed to be playing a different role, as if the exit of the brave or foolish couple was for him a potent symbol of something new.

All of a sudden, Anna could see Chuck in an entirely new light. It was as if somehow, all the nobility of spirit that she had tried to ascribe to Rafael, and which he now no longer could reflect, she was now going to project onto the scruffy, dumpy poet with the scraggly beard and the general aroma of overripe Camembert. Still, noble and heroic or not, Chuck would have to do a lot more than make an apt remark and an astute political

gesture to cause Anna to feel the sorts of stirrings in her loins that she imagined he'd always wanted her to feel.

For the moment, however, Chuck was at the helm of this frightened group, and Anna stood up with him. She understood, as did everyone else, why he'd said what he said, but she couldn't really see the Alpha Institute as a metaphor or even a second-rate substitute for the Garden of Eden.

The poet now made his way among the crowd in their haphazardly arranged chairs. Anna was right behind him. As he walked, even those who'd always written him off as strange or simply out of it seemed to show some admiration on their faces. Anna hated to admit that for the few seconds she was behind him, she enjoyed basking in his temporary and limited glory.

The silence held as Berg made it to the door of the cafeteria. There had been, throughout the entire meeting or at least from the time Anna had come into it, a strange and pervasive smell of institutional food and LP gas from the range in the kitchen. Anna noticed that it got much heavier as they approached the door. Not exactly rotten or dangerous--instead, the odor was nauseous because it was redolent of all institutional meals

everywhere--it seemed to embody for example the worst lunchroom experiences of Anna's adolescence, and it became so overpowering as she neared the door that she thought she might throw up. Chuck seemed to

her to be walking too slowly, she couldn't wait for him to open the door, so much did she feel the need for fresh air.

She looked around. She wasn't the only one: the faces of just about everyone in the room were contorted with incipient nausea. Looking at all these faces a little longer, Anna realized that everyone's movements, like Chuck's, were in slow motion. She turned back to Chuck. He was walking even more slowly. *Aren't we ever going to get to the door?* she asked, not sure whether she actually said the words aloud.

At last the door opened. A warm breeze floated across her face and into her nostrils. She took a deep breath, and the noxious odor of the food and gas seemed to disappear. Anna followed Chuck outside. Without turning around, she was aware that others in the cafeteria had gotten up and were following them out. She wondered if they all had the same purpose, to get out from under the oppressive odor and the concomitant

symptom, the apparent dilation of time. Or maybe the meeting had just been adjourned.

Once outside in the sultry night air, Anna took another deep breath. She looked up at the sky. There were no clouds to speak of, but there also weren't as many stars as usual, because the bright light of the half moon, which had just passed over the tops of the tall pines, obscured all but the brightest stars.

In the few seconds she was looking upward, two shooting stars sped across the sky, both in the same quadrant and almost on parallel courses. She made two quick, perfunctory wishes, then told herself she should ask Eli what Slavic people thought about shooting stars, and whether they wished upon them or anything. Then she thought about the two intrepid sojourners, the thick football player and his mousy cohort, and how it wasn't really all that brave for anyone to walk from the Institute into town, especially on such a bright evening. After all, the town of New Brooklyn was civilized, honest, and it wasn't really very far to the main road into town.

She noticed Chuck was also looking up in the sky, and she wanted to ask him if he had wished on the twin falling stars, but she decided not to. He probably didn't

see them anyway, she thought, since he seemed to be looking right at the moon, not at the stars directly overhead.

The crowd of people that had just been inside now were outside, milling around and expressing quite vocally their various opinions on whether the two who had left should have waited till morning. It was odd these people weren't going back to their cabins, but then, neither was she. She wondered why, but she did not really want to hear her own answer: dread. Dread that the moon might illuminate some evil intention. Dread that she--and perhaps everyone else--knew that the stupid couple who'd left for town on foot would never make it.

When, above the chatter of voices surrounding her, she thought she could hear the faint yips of coydogs off in the distance, she knew her dread was justified. In a moment, she understood, she would hear the sound of fierce growling as the dogs came together and descended upon the poor, bold couple. And after that, when it was clear to everyone that it was too late and they would all have to go into the woods to where the sounds had come from, she knew she would have to go with them and stare into the mauled and lifeless faces of these newest victims of--what?

As it turned out, her momentary insight into the immediate future was wrong. The barking of the dogs did not grow stronger, there was never any growling, much less the vicious rending of flesh by rabid animals. On the contrary, as if in a choir, the faint canine sounds in the distance ceased in perfect unison, leaving an eerie, absolute silence that in some ways was more frightening than the feral sounds of the predicted attack.

A new and complex feeling washed over Anna, one that she could not understand. For she stood there, in the silence, surrounded by the dark silver pines, experiencing at the same time a deep, wrenching nausea, but in her lower gut, and a few inches lower--the most intense and localized orgasm of her life. She knew that Adam and Eve were dead.

As she recovered from this momentary shudder, she looked around to see how her peers had responded to the silence, half hoping but hardly expecting that they, too, had experienced the same unusual viscerogenital response.

The moon had reached its apex, and it was now bright outside that the expressions on everyone's faces were visible to everyone. Dread, fear, fright, or pure horror

were the only choices available. On no one's face was there a trace of bravado, or even real bravery, or even denial. There was no place to go, and for the time being, there was safety in numbers. With minimal discussion, the people assembled in front of the cafeteria began to sit or lie down right where they'd been standing . No one even considered the simple move of going inside the noxious cafeteria for safety. Perhaps, they collectively thought, when they woke up the next morning, everything would be OK.

## CHAPTER NINE

Anna awoke at the crack of dawn with the feeling that a rooster had announced the beginning of this new day. But there were no farm animals at the Institute, so she imagined it was just some sort of association with a dream.

She had dreamed that she had gotten up much earlier, around 3 a.m., and was walking around the small circle of sleeping people who, as if at some sort of party where the punch had been spiked, had all ended up just going right to sleep in front of the cafeteria. In this dream, the two who had gone off together were back with the group, alive. They were, for some reason, only pretending to be asleep, and in spite of the night's sultriness, they were under sheepskin covers, which even in the dream Anna thought was odd. She regretted that her dream journal was back in her cabin. She could always go get it, but she didn't want to leave the group of sleepers.

The moon was long absent from the sky, and the golden color over the eastern horizon told her it was going to be a clear, hot day. She wanted to wake Chuck up, to have someone to talk to, but decided against it. Rather, with nothing else to do but serve as sentry

against a threat that probably didn't even exist, she decided to walk around and look at the faces of all these people, to see if she could make up the story for each that lay underneath the desire to leave.

One face after another was contorted with stress or anxiety. The tense, mustachioed corporate architect who'd made a lot of money by cutting corners and getting kickbacks looked as though he would crack at any second, so afraid was he that he would someday be found out. The black model, who was clearly gay, would continue to seek meaningless straight relationships rather than acknowledge his own sexuality. The young actress she'd seen in the shower, now sleeping with her blonde head on the chest of a large woman with dark black hair, had such a sour look on her face that she was almost confessing her lack of talent. The Scarsdale housewife spending her husband's money on every self-improvement technique that came along, evidently without much success, was terribly afraid that dying would be the only meaningful thing she would do in her life. The freelance book designer who wanted to blame her bouts of depression upon abuse by her father, but could not manufacture any memories to confirm such a popular cause.

Anna saw the fear of death in all these people. It was on their faces every day, perhaps every minute, even without the immediate threat that now seemed to be taking on a specific shape somewhere inside the perimeter of the Alpha Institute. What of her own fear? What, if not this very same anxiety that revealed itself in the faces of her compatriots, drove her to investigate her dream life and to try to control what she conveniently labeled 'sexual energy.' What, in other words, was her need to control those unknown parts of her about, if not to escape the universal threat of oblivion?

In the grand scheme of things, of course it didn't matter. Anna's rage at her father, her resentment toward her mother's weakness, such feelings would die with her, she presumed, and that negative energy would become once again available for the growth of the planet or maybe even enlightenment. Yet for all her awareness of the enormity of space, and time (if there was such a thing), like the rest of the sleeping people about her she could not help getting caught up in the trappings and illusions of her own nervous system, no matter how hard she worked to transform those impulses.

Anna looked up at the fiery tips of the old pines and towering locusts as they took light from the new sun.

A sharply delineated horizontal band of light cut across the top third of the surrounding trees, while below that bright golden strip was smoky blue-green shade, representing, Anna thought, the level of these people's dreams. She really wanted to wake Chuck up now, so he could see this simple and exquisite early morning phenomenon, but she never liked to wake anyone up, since they might be in the middle of an important--that is, revelatory--dream.

She walked over to where he was sleeping and looked down at him, wrapped in the misty light. His face, poking through his beard, was so unlike the others in its peacefulness. He was smiling, and she could see his eyelids twitching slightly. She glanced down at his waistline, and saw his hairy, plump stomach peeking out from the bottom of his T-shirt. Her eyes drifted still lower, and she noticed that he seemed to have an erection. For a brief second, this signal of his unconscious arousal provoked in her just a hint of desire, which she was quickly able to dispel by reminding herself that his tumescence was a purely autonomic by-product of his sleep state. She wondered, however, whether he might be dreaming of her. Then she shuddered at the thought, and decided to wake him up.

She touched him softly on the shoulder, and could feel the moisture either of dew or sweat on her fingertip. He woke up quickly, but without a start, as though he had been very close to waking up anyway. He looked up at the pretty, dark-eyed brunette whom he had just been dreaming of, as though she were an angel or miraculous appearance of the Mother of God. Then, sitting up, he looked first at the gold-green tree tops and gasped in awe at how spectacularly the horizontal rays now divided the trees in half. Then, he looked around at the circle of disheveled people, strewn about as if they'd all passed out after a Bacchic orgy.

Anna put her finger to her lips and then motioned for him to follow her back inside the cafeteria. It would be at least an hour before the staff came in to make breakfast, so Chuck wordlessly started to make coffee in the Bunn-o-matic.

"Lordy, you sure do start early," Anna mock-scolded, closing the entrance door gently behind her so they could talk in their normal voices without waking anyone up.

"Yup," Chuck replied succinctly, concentrating desperately on starting the caffeine tap flowing.

Neither Chuck nor Anna was an early riser, and it struck them both as more than slightly odd that they were

behaving as though this were just any morning they both happened to get up with the dawn. But to act otherwise, to panic or rush around waking everyone up, would be to admit just a little too soon that there was probably something seriously amiss, though they couldn't be sure.

"Think those guys made it into town?" Anna asked Chuck, now that he was finished with his machinations.

"Nope," Chuck answered with dead seriousness.

"Why not?" Anna asked, hoping she would be able to argue with whatever reason he gave, but knowing from her own dream that he was right.

"*El Angel Exterminador*," came the cryptic reply.

"What? The Buñuel film?"

"Exactly."

"That's a little different, Chuck," Anna suggested. "I mean, isn't that a metaphor for the self-interested immobility of the bourgeoisie? How does that apply here?"

"Well, Anna, look around." He waved his hand toward the sleeping masses. "Though they pretend to be the proletariat, is not this whole institute dependent upon the bourgeois? But that's a political argument, and well beyond me. But remember that the Old Testament exterminating angel went around marking a certain class-- that is, a group of people at a certain, shall we say

'lower', level of spiritual awareness, for elimination. Presumably by the force of monotheism."

Anna could see the conversation already drifting away from the more immediate significance of her original question, so she put a stop to it by returning to the banal.

"Your coffee's ready," she pointed out.

"So it is," Chuck said, getting up and pouring himself a cup. "Want some?"

"Of course. Black."

"Coming right up." Chuck brought the two overfull mugs of black coffee to the table.

"Smells good," Anna said. "I hope it doesn't wake them up."

"Why?" Chuck asked, uncomprehending.

"I don't know. It's kind of nice just being able to sit here a bit before we have to deal with everything."

"So you think those people out there are just sleeping?" Chuck asked with a sadistic smile. "Did you check their vital signs?"

"Don't joke around like that!" Anna demanded, her voice tense with spontaneous anxiety. "That's not something to kid about, under the circumstances."

"Who says I'm kidding?" Chuck baited her. "And exactly what are the 'circumstances'?"

"Good morning. Any word about that couple that left last night?"

Chuck and Anna looked at each other, then turned in the direction from which the anonymous question had originated.

It was Sam Lepirat, an affable but somewhat out of place local businessman in his late forties who'd come to Alpha thinking it would make him hipper. Through the window in the door, Chuck and Anna could see other members of the motley crew had woken up, probably thanks to the aroma of coffee. "Coffee smells good," Sam added, walking over to the coffee machine to pour himself a cup.

Though the privacy of their conversation had been interrupted by Sam's intrusion, Anna sighed with relief that she no longer had to entertain Chuck's outrageous notion that perhaps everyone was dead. She hadn't considered such a possibility, since there was no reason to think anything of that magnitude had gone wrong, but when Chuck jokingly suggested it, she found she had no reasonable way of excluding it, either.

"Oh, good morning, Sam," Anna said. She knew him by name not because he'd taken her class, but because he was

the kind of person who made sure everyone knew his name. He even introduced himself to the women who worked at the cafeteria. "No, no word. But they probably made it, don't you think? Why wouldn't they?" It was like discussing whether some climbing team had reached the top of Mt. Olympus.

Sam came over and sat down with Anna and Chuck, although they hadn't encouraged him, to their knowledge. He was followed by Naomi Bernstein, the fabric artist, and the young actress Anna had noticed was sleeping with her head on Naomi's ample chest. Somehow, because Chuck and Anna had woken up before the others, they were now designated as being in charge, or at least responsible, and were therefore attracting a crowd of people who wanted to have their input into what ought to be done.

"I think something happened. I don't think they made it. I don't know why--it just doesn't feel right."

"I agree," the loud fabric artist blurted out, her latest conquest nodding sheepishly in agreement.

"Somebody ought to go see if they made it."

Since Naomi was staring straight at Chuck when she made this suggestion, Anna watched him to see if he was going to be brave enough to volunteer. Alas, he exhibited no willingness to venture forth into the woods. She

couldn't blame him, of course--no one wanted hard evidence of danger, especially danger caused by an unknown force. But, now that she was vaguely disillusioned with Rafael as her knight in shining armor, she more than half hoped Chuck would prove to be the heroic type. Where she herself would draw the line between foolhardiness and bravery, she wasn't sure, but at the moment, Chuck seemed merely selfishly concerned with his coffee and his interrupted privacy with Anna.

"Well," Anna said, trying to divert Naomi's insistent gaze away from Chuck, "it seems to me that if something terrible happened to them, then without our knowing exactly what it was, we'd be running smack dab into the same sort of danger. And if they--I feel so silly not even knowing their names--*did* get into town, then theoretically they would call Rafael or someone. In either case, it is the responsibility of the administration to deal with this."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Naomi said brashly. "Let's storm City Hall!"

Chuck, who had momentarily grown quiet, in part because of his intense and growing dislike for this woman whom he considered obnoxious and self-aggrandizing, was pushed to respond by his even greater dislike of mob

action. "I don't think there's any need for that," he asserted coolly, even though a crowd of interested observers had begun to form around this particular table, expecting some sort of political action to be taken.

"This is lunacy. Pure hysteria. Is there any real evidence that we do not have the ability to continue to live normally?"

"What about the fact that the buses never came back? What do you make of that?" a man behind Naomi yelled.

"Just because we cannot explain an event doesn't mean that it originated in a hostile--or even benevolent--will," Chuck rationalized. "I still don't see any clear evidence that any of us are in danger, at least from the outside."

Anna could not fathom the cause beneath Chuck's apparent reversal in his thinking. It was as if he had suddenly, before anyone else, come to the realization that the two deaths, Ouspensky's and Consigliare's, really were unrelated, mere coincidence, and thus did not portend any future catastrophes. Or, she calculated, perhaps he was playing a role, trying to keep people from panicking. In any event, this posture of his didn't jive with what she knew to be his real thinking--at least, as of about a half hour earlier.

Anna knew better, but said nothing. Her link to Popova, her dream-visions of the icon painter, were too vivid, too suggestive that other forces were at work, but so far, she did not know enough about them to feel she was in a position to suggest another course of action. But like Chuck, she was afraid that, without some reassurance, this group--especially those that were frustrated in their attempts to leave--might soon give up their collective intelligence, if they began to imagine they were trapped or threatened.

"I agree with Chuck," Anna lied, smiling at him fondly. "I think before we jump to any conclusions, we ought to find out from Rafael what he knows. For all we know, those two guys that left here last night are already in the City or wherever. Why don't Chuck and I go find out what we can?"

Naomi, perturbed by Anna's deft usurpation, interjected, "Why don't we *all* go? If he sees all of us, he's less likely to make up some bullshit like those two clowns did yesterday."

The others standing around grumbled in assent, leaving Anna very little room to argue. "Fine. Though to be honest, I don't think this is necessary. But let's go." Anna stood up, then Chuck did. Though clearly they

were not in charge of this group, nevertheless they'd been stuck in front, to conduct the negotiations with the administration. A big smile triumphantly crossed Naomi's face, who now began to feel she was back in her element for the first time since her SDS days at Columbia in '68.

The crowd, led by Naomi, Chuck and Anna, shuffled out of the cafeteria in a loose line, mumbling generally about the best course of action to take. The sun was now far enough above the horizon that the grounds were no longer totally in the shadow of the surrounding trees. Anna noticed how completely different everything looked in the morning light, how unmenacing were the trees. In fact, rather than possessing a foreboding, mysterious aspect, now they almost seemed to be offering protection. Yet they were the same trees, it was the same woody barrier between the Institute and the road into the usually peaceful and nondescript town of New Brooklyn. What was it about daylight, she asked herself, that could create the illusion that there were no mysteries, there was nothing that could not be seen?

As the group of around twenty-five began its disheveled march toward the Administration building, Anna looked in the direction of the road, where the bulky man and his slight companion had set out the night before on

their trek into town. Chuck was looking there, too-- perhaps not to see anything in particular, but rather to see if somehow he could feel anything strange about the area, below the threshold of perception, now that it was daytime. Anna watched his face for any signals that he knew something he wasn't telling. She now could tell, from just a slightly deeper furrow in his brow, that Chuck was worried.

Crossing over the main lawn, Anna had just thought about whether Eli was awake, when she saw in the distance, heading in the direction of the waterfall, a woman about Eli's size. Focusing her gaze, she could see the long fall of brown hair which so unmistakably belonged to the Bulgarian woman. She hesitated to call out, considering the mood of the group behind her, but decided that there was no harm. "Eli!" she yelled. "Eli Popova! Over here!"

Eli evidently did not hear Anna's shouting, though she was definitely within earshot, as she kept heading toward the stream. Then Anna realized Eli was already within range of the white noise of the rushing water, and wouldn't be able to discern much else. Gradually, Eli disappeared into the distance.

"What do you want *her* here for?" demanded Naomi.  
"She certainly doesn't seem in a rush to leave here.  
Besides, this doesn't concern her."

Whether this was a personal slur or merely a xenophobic reaction, Anna couldn't tell, but Naomi's hostile remark burned her up. "It concerns *all* of us, if we're in some kind of danger as you yourself seem to believe. Or do you think that whatever it is that you all are afraid of is something that our guest shouldn't fear as well?"

There was no answer to that, so none was offered. When they reached the steps to the porch of the Administration building, the crowd stopped abruptly. No one said anything for a few moments, as if no one knew exactly why they were there. The group had formed with some sort of purpose, but now that they were going to have to actually state that purpose to someone else, no one was quite sure how solid the political ground was beneath them.

Anna took a couple of steps in front of them, then turned around to address them. She wasn't used to this kind of role, and didn't like it at all, but she felt that Rafael, who had done no wrong, certainly deserved to be insulated from the direct shock of a small mob.

She looked out at the assemblage, trying to read their true feelings. Fear, of course, but fear of what? Was the collective sensitivity of the crowd somehow more attuned to something none of the individuals within it could actually understand? Or on the contrary, did collective action represent, as she had believed, a kind of insensitivity to the truth, a reaction based upon some lowest common denominator of attunement?

Most of those before her were, like herself, aging hippies or yuppies who'd grown discouraged by their own loss of promise or idealism, and now, in their frantic attempt to avert an imagined danger, were more probably trying to fend off the threat to their passing youth than to their actual existence. Not bad people, she told herself, and on the whole a lot more intelligent and interesting than most other people she knew. It was just that they--again like her--were having a hard time coping with their own lack of preparedness for the emotional ordinariness of middle age.

Even Rafael, now in his mid-fifties, wore his graying hair stylishly long, and tended to dress according to his misguided concept of a downtown New York artist. The Institute itself really was modeled along the lines of a summer camp, and such ancient phrases as "Do

your own thing" and "It's where I'm at" were still used from time to time.

"I'll go get Rafael, if he's in his office," Anna said to the crowd, which was now starting to attract other campers, who had no idea what was going on.

"Meanwhile, perhaps you ought to come up with what it is you want to say, or what you want Raf to do." She turned and mounted the weathered wooden steps to the porch. She went in the front door, and walked down the hall.

Goldman's office door was slightly ajar, so she knew he was around. She knocked on the door, seeing his head above the back of his leather chair. He was leaning back, his feet up on his desk. He appeared to be doing nothing more than staring idly out the window that looked out on the side of the building.

"Come in, Anna," he said, before he had even turned around.

"How'd you know it was me?" she asked.

Rafael spun around in his chair. "Who else would it be, knocking so deftly?"

"Raf, I'm afraid we have a bit of a problem," Anna stated solemnly.

"I know. It's the ones who want to leave, isn't it? I've been thinking about it all night. I've called taxis,

the sheriff's office, the *New Brooklyn Star*, the Amtrak station--you name it, I've tried to get a straight answer, but I either get the run around, or people say they'll send someone right out. But then, nobody comes. You'd think we'd been quarantined or something. I guess I'm going to have to drive those people into town myself.

"I just don't get it. The fucking town is all of seven minutes away, but getting some goddamned transportation out here seems to be impossible. I *knew* we should have done more to keep people getting a hold of the stories about those two unfortunate accidents. I can understand maybe a little reluctance, but this is *ridiculous!*"

"So you're willing to drive people into town? I think that will go a long way toward chilling everyone out. Maybe you'd better come tell them that...there's a crowd outside who want to know what's going on. Oh--by the way--do you know anything about a couple of people who tried to walk into town last night?"

"No, what people?" Rafael asked, standing up. "What now? How stupid, walking into town at night, when there still may be more of those rabid animals out there. Dumb. Very dumb." He shook his head in disbelief.

"I don't know their names. A big football player type, short blond hair--"

"That's Bill Johnson. Really was a football player."

"OK. And then, some woman. Small, mousy, so-so."

Raf shook his head.

"Anyway, we--they--all were having a meeting last night in the cafeteria, to figure out what was going on. This Bill Johnson guy says *he's* going to walk into town, there's nothing to be afraid of, and he asks for volunteers to go with him. The little woman was the only one who offered to go. They left together, I don't know, some time before midnight. I was just wondering if they called you when they got into town."

"No one's called all night, so far as I know," Rafael said. "But that doesn't mean anything. Maybe they just didn't bother to call. Where were they expecting to stay? Or do you think they were going across the river to get a bus? They'd have to take a cab all the way to New Paltz at that hour," he surmised.

"Got me. Anyway, I'm afraid you're going to have to deal with that, too. Everyone wants to know if they made it into town, and if not, where they are--or what happened." A great sense of compassion came over Anna as she finally saw how deep his predicament was. None of his

skills would serve him very well in the present circumstance, but she thought his offer to drive people into town himself would bolster his support. Everyone would just have to decide who would get to go first, just in case...in case this car, too, never returned.

"I guess I'd better go talk to them," Rafael acknowledged. "Where are they?"

"Right out front."

Rafael peered through the open connecting door between his office and the secretary's, whose window looked out onto the front of the building. "Hmm," he mumbled as he headed out to the front porch.

## CHAPTER TEN

Rafael and Anna emerged onto the porch. Since the front of the Administration building faced east, they were greeted first by the blinding morning sun, and had to shield their eyes with their hands just to be able to see the front row of the crowd. Rafael was not happy with his position, and decided to stand down from the porch, so he could get his face out of the intense light, but also so that he might feel, under these uncertain circumstances, less like a dictator. Anna decided to stay where she was, but she sat down on the edge of the porch so as to not tower above Rafael.

Rather than letting the group state its demands, Rafael pre-empted them by coming straight to the point. "Anna has told me you have some concerns about your safety, and that some of you would like to leave. Is that the basic picture?" he asked no one in particular.

A sort of murmuring could be heard, which he interpreted as assent.

"OK," he continued, "let me tell you what I know, and then I'll tell you what I can do. First of all, personally I don't believe that you, or any of us, for that matter, are in any sort of danger. While it is

probably not a good idea to go walking in the woods at night--or maybe even during the day, for now, until we're absolutely certain there are no rabid animals around, there certainly aren't any such creatures on the Institute's grounds.

"Nevertheless, I guess I can understand your apprehension. What I don't understand, to be perfectly frank, is what is going on with the townsfolk.

"Yeah!" someone in the back of the crowd demanded. "Just what *is* going on there? What happened to the buses and everything?"

"Yeah," virtually everyone else chimed in.

"I don't know, exactly. I've been on the phone with practically everyone in town, from the taxi dispatcher up to the mayor and the town judge. They all assure me that nothing is wrong, that the people aren't scared because of what happened out here--" Rafael paused for a moment to make sure he knew what he was getting into--"but if you ask me, they're all just spooked and don't want to admit it. But they apparently don't want to come out here, either. It's the strangest behavior I've ever seen."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Though she couldn't see her, Anna knew that the confrontatory voice

belonged to none other than Naomi Bernstein. Anna could see Chuck seething with annoyance at Naomi's unnecessary aggressiveness.

Rafael kept his cool. "Well, as I told Anna here, I personally will drive you into town in my car. You can't all fit at once, I'm afraid, so I'll have to make a few trips." He wondered, as he made this promise, whether he would be able to get the entire group into town before this hysteria

began to contaminate the thinking of the other, still sleeping, members of the Institute, who so far had expressed no particular desire to leave and probably would not have known what all the fuss was about.

"How're we gonna pick who gets to go first?" Naomi wondered before everyone.

Chuck at last decided to shut her up. "Don't you think you're being sort of infantile, Naomi? Rafael is right: this whole thing is completely out of proportion. He offered to make a couple of trips--so what's the big deal? Personally, I'm in no hurry to leave. It's a nice hot day, I can go to the waterfall. In fact, why don't you and I go skinny dipping, Naomi, and let these other people go into town first?"

Naomi's humiliation at the intolerable innuendo behind Chuck's suggestion was thorough enough that she backed down. In fact, Chuck's statement caused several people to reconsider whether it was absolutely essential that they get off the Institute's grounds at that very moment, and thus the problem of whom to take first resolved itself. Gradually, about half the group backed away from the core of the crowd in front of Rafael, indicating that they would be willing to go in the next trip. This provided an opportunity for Rafael.

"Why don't you people--seven, eight, maybe nine-- come with me now," he said, counting heads, "and I'll get the rest of you when I come back. Maybe when I'm in town I'll find something out that will prove to you that you don't have to go at all." He turned and started heading toward his car, a white, late model Range Rover, a marque that invariably belonged in these parts only to 'New Yorkers' aka 'weekenders'. "Follow me," he said, fishing his keys from his pocket.

"Raf!" Anna called to him.

He turned around. It was too much like out of a movie, but he played his role. "What?" he asked, almost poignantly.

"Nothing, I guess," Anna was unable to conceal the overwhelming trepidation that had just come over her, out of the blue. "Hurry back."

"You got it," he said coolly, pointing his thumbs up, like a back lot movie star.

The group of people who quickly began climbing up into Rafael's car just happened to be the older ones in the group, as if it were their time to go. The younger ones, those in their forties and younger, had somehow all tacitly understood that their elders should be permitted to go first.

As the various overweight and out of condition bodies tried to accommodate themselves to the poorly designed interior of the boxy British so-called luxury car, built, ostensibly, for driving in the African jungle or Australian outback in style if not in comfort, Anna spied Eli's slender form coming towards her from the direction of the waterfall.

When she had gotten a little closer, Anna saw she was wearing a light cotton chemise, which was clinging damply to her figure, and her long hair was wet and stringy. She had just gone for a swim. Eli then saw Anna, now standing by the steps to the Administration building, and waved. "Chuck," Anna said to the poet, who was

chatting with another bearded man, but much taller.

"Eli's coming." She pointed in Eli's direction.

Chuck looked at Anna as if to say "so what?", but it was a good excuse to move away from the tall bearded man, so he sort of motioned that he had to go attend to Anna.

It seemed to both Anna and Chuck that Eli was standing next to them much sooner than they imagined she should be, as if she'd just zoomed forward into the picture, or arrived by some sort of invisible conveyor.

"You've been swimming." Anna sometimes had a penchant for stating the obvious.

Eli, somewhat rudely in Anna's opinion, did not respond even with a smile to Anna's casual opening, but instead stared intently at the crowd that had just finished packing itself tightly into the Range Rover. Grey-haired and bald heads were pressed against the door windows, while in the rear compartment, which was not intended for passengers, were contorted elderly bodies and faces trying to stifle their understandable annoyance at being packed in like cattle on their way to the abattoir. The only mitigating factor, manifested in the slight smiles exhibited by a few of them, was that they were at last *getting out*, into the normal world--even if

that normal world was as menacing and incomprehensible as Manhattan or Brooklyn.

Anna and Chuck watched curiously as Eli continued to stare at the car. They could hear the car's engine cranking as Rafael turned the ignition key, but it didn't start.

"British cars," mused Chuck, pretending to know about such things, as he pretended to know about a great number of things. "Not made for warm, dry weather, I guess."

Eli, who knew nothing of British cars, failed to appreciate Berg's facetious witticism. Instead, she just continued to stare fixedly at the car, and then began to take a few steps toward it.

"*Krasnaya smert'*," she said, quite distinctly.

"What?" asked Chuck and Anna in unison, assuming the folklorist was speaking in her native tongue.

"*Krasnaya smert'*," she repeated, then added, changing her accent, "*Krasnaya smert'*. It's Russian. The Red Death. The Glorious Death. Don't let them go!"

Chuck and Anna looked at each other, bewildered, having absolutely no idea what the strange Bulgarian woman was saying.

Eli continued to walk slowly toward the packed wagon. The ignition was tried again, but again without success, but this time, the three heading toward the car could hear a definite crackling sound, and dark smoke began to emerge from the right side of the hood. Chuck wondered whether Rafael would be able to see it from the driver's seat,

especially with so many people in the car, but he was certain that Rafael would not be able to miss the unmistakable smell of unburned gasoline and frying electrical circuitry. Chuck had once owned an MGB, and well knew the telltale signs of British electrical system craftsmanship.

"They mustn't go," Eli said in an odd British accent, increasing her pace.

Rafael apparently did not see the smoke issuing from the front of the car, for he tried one more time. At last, the smooth British engine turned over and began to purr. Chuck and Anna stopped, realizing that everything was going to be alright, and hoping that Eli would calm down as well. But the intense woman would do no such thing.

She turned and started screaming at the two of them, at first incomprehensibly, perhaps in Bulgarian but

perhaps in English that was so loud and rushed that it simply sounded like gibberish. But then, Eli seemed to settle down a bit, realizing she wasn't getting through with her frenetic yelling.

"Don't you see? This is a sacrifice," she said enigmatically. "I am not sure you want to watch. Those people are being--how do you say?--'promoted'."

"What are you talking about?" asked Anna, sensing that Eli wasn't kidding, and probably wasn't wrong.

"I do not think we can stop it. A sacrifice means the divine has already been released. So the question is, should we watch? Do we want to participate?"

"In *what!*?" demanded Chuck, baffled.

"In the Red Death." Eli turned and pointed to the crowded car like it was the Wheel of Fortune. Or the Wheel of Life.

Black smoke was now coming from somewhere other than the hood--now it seemed to be coming from inside the car itself.

Considering the amount of smoke that was now leaking out through the seals in the doors and windows, Anna thought it was awfully odd that no one was getting out. It took the others standing around a moment or two before they realized how wrong the scene was: a crowded car,

filling with thick black smoke, with coughing and gasping becoming louder and more desperate.

Several of those outside the car, including Chuck, began running toward the car in a sort of staccato gallop, not completely confident that they should be dashing so furiously toward a car that might be on the verge of exploding. Nevertheless, several of them reached the car, and began trying to open the doors. The locking levers, which were also controlled electrically, wouldn't budge, and, because Rafael had acquired the habit of locking his car doors from driving in New York, all the doors were locked tight.

The few of the car's inhabitants lucky enough to be sitting by a window that was open a crack were able to get a few more gulps of air than the others, before they were pulled aside by the more interior passengers. In between coughing fits, Rafael was trying to yell at everyone to calm down, so they could exit through the windows if they could push them out. But their own coughing and gagging, made more severe on account of their poor physical condition, prevented them from being rational enough to hear Rafael's message, and they continued to push and pull and claw and kick each other

for the ever-diminishing drops of air, more and more displaced by the noxious smoke of melting insulation.

Anna, standing next to Popova, was frozen, like the bystanders in her first dream of the icon painter. She was simultaneously horror-struck and fascinated, and it seemed to her as if these two impulses somehow canceled out the possibility for acting. On top of that, the scene before her was so clearly a microcosm of the panic that was threatening to pervade the Institute, that she was even somewhat amused to see how clever the gods really were in providing their instructions.

She turned to look at Popova's face. It was not exactly cruelty she thought she detected in the mysterious woman's slightly upturned mouth and the powerful focus of her gaze. But it was more than philosophical detachment or transcendence. The folklorist, for whatever reason, was watching this mass suffocation as though it were indeed a ritual, a necessary sacrifice, that she in fact was anticipating and had perhaps even prepared for.

The sense of helplessness was felt not only by Anna, but shared by those who still struggled in vain to open the car doors or to break the car's resilient windows so they could pull thick and resisting bodies out through

the openings. As though it had not occurred to her before, all of a sudden Anna realized that among the crowd of dying people inside the car was one that she really cared about, and the force of her caring broke into her consciousness like the smashing of a mirror.

"Omigod!" she screamed, a little too late. "Rafael! Raf!"

She pushed past Eli and rushed to the driver's side of the car. There, his face mashed uncomfortably against the steering wheel by the bust of a large woman behind his neck who had in turn been squeezed into her contortions by the other unnaturally arranged occupants, was Rafael. His dead, smoke-burned eyes stared out blankly at Anna, a mere human spectator on the other side of the glass. In his face was neither love nor reproach, nor even was there the sort of illuminating wisdom she somehow expected someone of Rafael's charismatic nature might be able to communicate to the surviving with just one final glance.

Time stood still for Anna, giving her the space in which to determine whether she in fact might have loved Rafael, whether his loss meant more to her than just a message about her own mortality and ultimate loneliness. The aberrant cause of the smoke, which had unexpectedly

not erupted into the obligatory Hollywood orgasm of automotive conflagration, had seemingly ceased to exist, and she could see on Rafael's tender, competent face the tiny black snow of burnt plastic.

It filled his pores, slightly reducing the depth of his wrinkles while giving him an absurdly comical blackface appearance, and making the whites of his eyes seem bigger and whiter than usual.

The motionlessness not only of Rafael, but of the entire structure of limbs that had at last reached ultimate equilibrium, told her the sacrificial act was complete, the transfer of divine energy manifested, and therefore, if she--Eli, actually--were right, the door whose handle was only a few inches from her right hand, still pressed apologetically against the window, should open easily.

It did. With barely any pressure at all, the well-crafted latch opened, and the heavy door swung open silently on its hinges.

The last clumps of smoke poured out of the car like heavy water. Anna didn't know what to do. She looked sadly at her unacknowledged and now lost forever betrothed, realizing that, unlike the others in the car, Rafael had probably not suffocated, but rather had been

crushed against the steering wheel--though without, thankfully, pressing the horn ring--by the weight of bodies that had died fighting each other for air.

The others outside the car, who had valiantly tried to do *anything* to free the trapped passengers, were amazed at the ease with which Anna now opened the car door, as if she had some magical power that they themselves did not possess. She knew, in fact, that she did, but she wasn't sure whether she'd gotten it from Eli, who no longer seemed to be around, or simply from the concern that she felt for Rafael. Wherever this power came from, it was annoying. For if it had somehow been transferred by Eli, then why was it given so late? On the other hand, if this apparently supernatural--and certainly temporary--power was the result of her at last knowing how she felt about Rafael, then why was that clarity and strength granted only when the spark of life had passed from his once vivacious blue eyes?

Anna just stood there, still looking back at the absent Rafael, as those around her opened the four other doors, and began removing bodies from the car and placing them on the ground, in the hope that a couple might still be alive. Chuck, having pulled from the front passenger seat the warm, but clearly lifeless body of a man he had

just been talking to the day before about the Russian avant-garde, came over to extricate Goldman from the smoky wood and leather interior.

"Could you give me a hand?" Chuck asked Anna as he climbed up into the front seat. Anna's silent communication with Rafael's remains was broken by Chuck's request, and she abruptly came to.

"Wha--? Oh, sure." Anna held out her arms somewhat awkwardly as Chuck pushed and pulled the wedged body out from the steering wheel. Rafael's right arm almost got caught in the steering wheel as his torso began at last to spill out of the car, and it was then that the horn decided to work. The

blaring trumpet of the twin horns was so sudden and loud that everyone helping was startled, jumping out of the car as quickly as possible, bumping heads and banging limbs in the process. The slapstick aspect of the scene, with fresh corpses subsequently falling over and burping and farting and even moaning as their orifices were no longer constricted, was so completely incongruous with its utter ghastliness that the incongruity itself was funny. But no one laughed.

Rafael's head fell right into Anna's waiting hands, face down. She didn't want to touch it, as if his death

were, like the powdery soot covering his flaccid face, a substance that could easily rub off onto her. The flesh was both sweaty and tepid, and she compared it to the way it felt the few occasions she'd kissed him or touched his cheeks. The difference to the touch was nauseating, and Anna became strangely embarrassed that she might vomit all over the corpse and right in front of Chuck, who was trying to get her to be a little more active in helping him lift the dead weight.

"See if you can get his shoulders," he called from the front seat, "and I'll push him out by the legs." The care that everyone was taking with these useless masses of clothed flesh, as if they were fragile and still valuable, was just so much evidence of a human refusal to accept the speed and absoluteness with which the force of lifelessness could operate.

*The exterminating angel*, Anna thought to herself, and no sooner had the phrase flashed across her mind than she saw, in a brief but vivid moment, Bân, the icon painter, in his blue- and gold-stained robe, his bag of paints and brushes on the ground beside him. He was loosening the hemp sash from his waist.

So the dream was coming back to her slowly, in pieces, and was choosing the strangest times to do so.

She would remember enough from this instantaneous vision to be able to stitch it into the memory of her dream, but now she realized she could not be content merely to remember the flashbacks. She would also have to try to make some sense of the context in which they appeared. As she at last was able to get a hold of Rafael's limp and very heavy upper body, she resolved she would try to discern whether there was any comprehensible link between the odd task she was performing and the release of a bit of dream light from her unconscious.

Eventually, the car was completely emptied of its gruesome contents, and only then did it become absurdly obvious that no one had bothered to turn off the ignition. Chuck, now standing exhausted by the front door, climbed in and turned the switch and removed the keys. No one, least of all those who had just finished their thankless work, wanted to deal with the next phase of this operation, namely to decide what to do next.

Obviously, the authorities would have to be called, but at least Anna and Chuck were now certain that trying to get any help would be an exercise in futility. Still, going through the motions had the advantage of letting everyone pretend that they now had the luxury of just sitting around and waiting. By evening, when no one had

arrived and the poor "passengers" had been in the summer sun all day, someone would have to suggest a different course of action. But for now, doing nothing was acceptable.

Chuck and Anna, now standing arm in arm as if they had just landed on a new planet, looked around and took stock of the situation. Almost everyone from the Institute was now assembled on the main lawn. Many were sobbing, and many others were just dumbstruck. Some were explaining, in realistic or totally fabricated ways, to those who had just gotten up and come onto the scene, what had happened. There was much speculation as to *why*, with many theories being passed around about various types of electromechanical failure, and opinions offered extolling the virtues or condemning the flaws of this or that manufacturer.

Chuck saw all of this discussion as being derived from watching too many sporting events or news on TV, with its demand for the immediate gratification of so-called instant analysis. He couldn't help recalling the O.J. Simpson trial, in which every detail of evidence or testimony was analyzed ad nauseam by experts with no more expertise than those who now feigned inside knowledge of management problems at Rover Ltd.

There was some, but not much, discussion of leadership and how best to proceed, now that Rafael was gone. Chuck also thought he heard Anna's name being mentioned here and there, in the same breath as "Popova" or "Bulgarian lady," and though he couldn't get the drift of these snippets, he was worried.

"Let's get away from here," Chuck said to Anna, who had become passive and motionless after seeing, in a more or less detached way, the true extent of the destruction that had just been wrought. The ten bodies piled around the Range Rover, when added to those of Ouspensky and Consigliere, and perhaps to the missing Mr. and Mrs. Bill Johnson, composed an uncomfortably large number of deaths for such a small institute.

"There's no place to go," she said, zombie-like and fatalistically.

"Yes there is," Chuck reassured her. "Come with me." He took her hand and gently pulled her in the direction of the waterfall.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chuck and Anna said nothing to each other as they strolled toward the waterfall. Whatever there was to say could wait until they got there. There wasn't much to say, anyhow: the public suffocation of ten people for no reason at all and without possibility of explanation pretty much foreclosed on polite conversation, and more speculation was pointless. Anna knew why Chuck was leading her to the waterfall, and had let herself be led.

"Eli's here, isn't she?" Anna said, when they got to the place where the rushing of the water could usually be heard and there wasn't a sound except for the chirping of some robins in the trees and the loud cawing of crows overhead.

"What makes you say that?" Chuck asked uncomprehendingly.

"The sound of the water--where is it?" she asked, as if Chuck should know where it had been taken.

The poet, who was rarely so clueless, had no idea what Anna was talking about. He stared at her blankly.

"The water has lost its sound? Then I have found it, for I can hear it perfectly fine. Perhaps you should try

standing here." He gestured for her to occupy his position. She declined.

"You mean you can hear the waterfall?" she asked with a tone of disbelief.

"I can't hear much else, actually, and the closer we get, the less I can hear you."

"Strange..." Anna said.

"What?" Chuck asked, gesturing for her to speak up.

"Oh, nothing," she yelled back, as if she were talking to someone who was partially deaf.

The pair continued to stroll toward the waterfall, one believing in the presence of the silence, the other not. As they came around the bend in the path to the point where the water could be seen beginning its short dive over the boulders, Anna could make out the unclothed body of Eli stretched out on a large flat rock on the opposite bank of the rushing stream. Her long brown hair was fanned out above her head, as if to dry.

"I knew it!" Anna said sharply. "And you knew it all along!"

"How could I know any such thing?" Chuck defended himself, having just seen Eli himself. "Wasn't I with you and the others dealing with all that...all that..." He gave up looking for an apt word.

Anna felt mildly betrayed, still believing that Chuck had known all along that Eli would be there, but she wasn't going to fight about it--there were more troubling things at hand than his possible manipulation.

Eli couldn't hear them over the sound of the waterfall, so she didn't move as they reached the bank directly across from her. Chuck began stripping as soon as he found a convenient place to put his clothes. Anna watched him in amazement for a few seconds, then said, "What are you doing, Charles?"

"Getting undressed. What's it look like?"

"What about me?" she responded with what seemed to Chuck was uncharacteristic prudery for a woman who taught people how to have orgasms.

"You're invited, of course. Eli and I will be waiting for you." Chuck, naked as an ape, began the treacherous wade over the slippery and rocky bottom toward Eli's rock.

Anna herself wondered why she was acting so coyly. She came to the conclusion that it was a combination of her fear of admitting an attraction to Eli, her concomitant lack of attraction to Chuck, and a residual feeling of vulnerability and sexlessness that was a consequence of physically touching Rafael's face.

Touch. Anna was immediately struck with the obviousness of her own problem. How convenient it was for her to teach touchless sex under the pretext that it was a spiritually higher state, yet she had failed to really touch Rafael--or to be touched by him--until he was quite dead, and yet her visceral clenching at that single moment had seemed so much more powerful--more *real*--than all the pleasurable clenching that was induced autonomously as a result of her meditative practices.

What was she being asked to do? A number of quick fantasies raced through her head, including the obvious *menage-à-trois* that Chuck was probably organizing in his brain. As she rolled that over, she found it curious that, whereas she would have expected it to be quite the opposite, in this fantasy her libido was directed more toward the woman and away from the man. In any case, she knew that she had to participate in the meeting across the stream.

She took off her cutoffs in one move, quite self-consciously. But once she was naked from the waist down, she realized there was no point in hiding anything, so she folded them, and placed them next to Chuck's pants. Then she took off her tank top and folded it and placed it on top of her shorts.

Once naked, she felt strangely free of the contamination of touching Rafael and the other dead bodies, and she even thought about burning her clothes later as some sort of purification ritual.

She began to trace Chuck's path through the water, since he had made it across easily and without incident, and was now sitting on the rock next to Eli.

Eli waved to Anna when she was about halfway across, but when Anna tried to wave back, she lost her balance and toppled into the water. The splashing water disrupted the sunbathing of a couple of green water snakes, who quickly swam away, passing not more than a foot from Anna's terrified face. She hated snakes, even non-venomous ones, and their very proximity always provoked in her an inexplicable but palpable fear.

When the snakes had passed, Anna began her trek again. Her right nipple was on fire as it became exposed to the air. She looked down--as she had stumbled, her breast must have hit a sharp rock, though she didn't remember feeling anything, for a trickle of blood was flowing from a shallow puncture on the right of her breast.

"Shit!" she muttered loudly, as if the wound were a stain on her formal dress. She gathered the blood on her

finger, thought about tasting it but realized she was in public, and rinsed it in the water. The wound continued to bleed, but not as much.

For such a brief journey, this one seemed full of adventure, and Anna was quite happy to at last reach terra firma. "Hi," she said cheerfully, having forgotten her other concerns about joining Chuck and Eli.

"Be careful, how you cut yourself," Chuck mimicked Lugosi's Dracula, staring with just a little too much license at Anna's sore breast, so that her self-consciousness returned.

Popova, protecting Anna, gave Chuck a reprimanding look. "Welcome," she said. "Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Anna replied, her mind immediately filled with fantasies. "Ready for what?"

"To join us. I would like to finish the story I began the other night," Eli said.

"I guess so. Sure," Anna replied, relieved that it wasn't anything kinkier.

The three sat in a circle or, actually, a triangle, Chuck and Anna out of habit adopting a full lotus position, while Eli sat merely crosslegged. Anna noticed that the ever-meditative Chuck was trying his hardest to disguise his furtive glances at the exposed breasts and

pudenda of his two attractive cohorts, and she smiled to herself with the knowledge that he was totally harmless, just an adolescent voyeur.

Eli began her story, more or less at the point it had been broken off by Consigliare's untimely death.

"You will remember that the icon painter had tried to reach an agreement with the people of the town: he would identify the vampire who was causing the sickness and death, and they in turn would allow him to replace the holiest icon in the church with a painting of his own creation. Now the mayor of the village, who was a practical man, saw nothing wrong with such a deal, but the priest, that was another matter. He considered that the stranger, about whose creed he could not be certain, was perhaps a heretic, and therefore it would be heresy itself to let him put a painting--which had not even been begun--in the church. There thus came about a split between the practical and the spiritual that was to have very serious consequences..."

The storyteller paused for a moment to see what sort of reaction her story was producing in her small audience. Anna had quickly entered a state of relaxation

so that she might tune into the story on a deeper level. Chuck, too, was attempting to receive the story in a meditative state, but he was having a hard time remaining centered, and was fidgeting. Eli continued.

"Of course, the sickness and death got worse. The peasants in the village had very superstitious beliefs about who may become a vampire, yet no one they knew of could have been one. For the ancient vampire is not created by another one, but rather comes into being because of the way he dies. If he dies too young, or if he dies in a way that he cannot be properly buried, then he is likely to become a vampire. But some are born vampires, and they are marked at birth by a fleshy caul over their heads. If this mark is not destroyed properly, then the person will become a vampire after death.

"As it happened, no one in the town knew anyone who fit this description. There had been one or two suicides, but their bodies had been cremated--meaning that they could not become vampires. Aside from the stranger himself, there was only one person, a man who lived outside the village and kept to himself, who some people thought was a sorcerer--a *brodyaga* or *koldun*, because he knew a lot about folk medicines and could often heal the

illnesses that were brought to him by means of songs and prayers.

"No one had suspected him at first, because he was a healer and at any rate, wasn't dead. Such magicians are thought to be able to contact the dead, but they cannot be vampires while they are alive.

"Some people thought that perhaps this man had been in contact with the Unclean Force, as sorcerers often are, and therefore perhaps it was not a vampire but another demon that was responsible for the terror in the village."

A shudder passed through Anna as she adapted the Bulgarian story to the background of her dream, which she believed was similar in certain ways. She wanted to ask many questions about the story, but then she realized it was merely folklore, and any correspondence between her own dreams and Popova's story would be coincidental. Meanwhile, Chuck's horny restlessness had given way to engrossment, so that he was already purely inside Popova's story.

"A group of villagers finally got up the nerve to ask the icon painter whether the healer outside the

village was the one responsible for all the dying. The artist replied, impatiently, 'If it were that easy a solution, do you believe my price would be so high? But why don't you go find out yourselves, that he is not your vampire?

"So the villagers went to the hut of the healer, but no one came to the door. They were afraid to enter uninvited, for fear he would cast a spell on them, or worse, that he was a vampire and they would die just from seeing him.

"But his hut had no windows, so they had no choice but to go in. When they opened the door, they saw in the darkness the figure of the old man sitting in a chair. Flies were buzzing everywhere. On the floor around his chair was a circle made from millet seeds, and the old man, who was quite dead--and had been for several days, to judge from the smell--was

smiling. But although the smile that was on his face was in its correct place, the face itself was not, for the man's head had been severed and was being held in his lap.

"The villagers fled immediately to tell the mayor and the priest that the old magician could not be the

vampire, for someone had already performed the deeds that are necessary to prevent a vampire from roaming.

"When the two heard the story, they agreed to put aside their differences and go to the icon painter with permission to begin his painting for the church, and thus stop the dying.

"But the icon painter just laughed at them. 'Why should I bargain with you now, when the church will be all mine within a week anyway? For now that you have seen the sorcerer, you will all be quite dead soon, and the church will be empty. Then I can begin my painting--or before--it doesn't matter, you won't be able to stop me.'

"'Well, then,' asked the two authorities, 'it will do you no harm to tell us: who is the vampire?'

"'You mean you still don't know?' he replied. 'Then there's no harm in telling you.' But maybe I'll save the ending for another time..."

As Popova ended this part of her story, her listeners immediately snapped back into normal consciousness.

Chuck realized that the missing ending was just a storyteller's trick, so he had no interest in asking who the vampire turned out to be, letting Eli execute her

craft the way she wanted. But he told her he was disturbed by the loose end in the story, having to do with "seeing the sorcerer"--for if the sorcerer wasn't a vampire, how could seeing him cause all the villagers to die? If there was a cause-and-effect relationship, he posited to Eli, and since a vampire is merely a label for an effect with no observable cause, then what difference would it make if you called the sorcerer a vampire or not?

"But you assume," Eli replied to Chuck's logic, "that seeing the sorcerer was a *cause*, rather than just a marker in a sequence of events. If you had been listening closely, you would have noticed that I said, 'For *now* that you have seen the sorcerer,' not '*because*.' Do you understand?"

That was enough for Chuck, who continued to ponder not so much the story, as why Eli had told it to just the two of them in the first place. Anna had no need to ponder that at all. She now felt such a powerful connection to Eli that she could hardly stand it. As Eli had spun her story, the image of the icon painter and the dead sorcerer had become so vivid, almost so real for Anna that she knew that Eli had used the story to gain entrance to her very being.

Eli and Anna began to stare at each other, as if Chuck had ceased to exist. Without any sort of invitation, Eli moved over and kissed Anna on the lips, then put her tongue deep inside Anna's mouth. Anna became terribly confused, for now this touch was all she seemed to want or need, yet she was

also revulsed, somewhere, by the idea of becoming physically intimate with another woman, and even further in the back of her mind was a feeling of consideration for poor Chuck, who would have to watch this mystical spectacle from the outside, unable to participate.

As Eli continued to kiss her, Anna could feel herself leaving her body unintentionally and without any sort of preparation other than the intensity of Eli's touch. As she drifted up above her body, strangely so did Eli, so that Anna and Eli were still together, above their two bodies. At first it was amusing to have someone with her (which she had never accomplished before) as they watched poor horny Chuck below in a quandary over what to do, and not knowing what to make of the two naked women rolling on the flat rock before him. But then suddenly a wave of trepidation washed over Anna, as she recalled the darkness and Ouspensky's death, and she felt an urgent need to return to her body immediately.

The body that she longed to return to was now being caressed tenderly by Eli, and she watched as Eli moved her mouth down to Anna's wound and began to suck the blood from it. She wanted to tell Eli to stop, but she couldn't see her or say anything to her, she only knew she was there.

"Omigod!" she screamed in the middle of nowhere as she feared her own breast would be desiccated by Eli. She put every bit of will into pushing against the expanse of space into which she was rising. All she needed was some confusion of physical sensation, and she would no longer have the concentration necessary to maintain her separation.

Whether Chuck knew what he was doing, or was just trying to get into the act, it didn't matter. He was so aroused by the scene in front of him that he clumsily tried to insinuate himself in between the two women. His doing so caused enough disruption, that the focus of the moment was lost, and Anna found herself falling back inside her ordinary body almost immediately. She assumed Eli had returned, too. She now found herself in the middle of a very uncomfortable, unwelcome situation. Chuck was still trying to fit himself in anyplace, and

Eli's touch had become mechanical, without feeling. Anna stood up from them abruptly.

"What in hell do we think we're doing here? This is certainly a strange time to be playing sex games, don't you think? I've got to get out of here." She turned and began to walk back across the stream. The reality of the day, with its heat and soft breeze and the sound of rushing water, was reassuring to Anna. So, actually, was the painful remembrance of the deaths, if only because it was so real, so palpable.

"If it's so strange, then why did you start what you couldn't finish?" Chuck asked, flaccid with humiliation.

"Me--start? I didn't start anything!" Anna shot back impatiently.

"Yes, you did," he argued. "You almost raped Eli, and then you gestured to me to join in."

"What? I did no such thing," Anna asserted, scowling at the folklorist, who still had blood on her lips.

"There's the manipulator here!" Anna tried to persuade Chuck that they were both victims of some sort of hypnotic manipulation embedded in Eli's story.

Chuck didn't buy it, or at least he pretended not to, preferring for the sake of his ego to imagine that he had been invited to join the passionate lovemaking of two

women. Eli, meanwhile, adopted a look that told Anna that she would deny everything if Anna tried to tell Chuck or anyone else what she believed, and thus would make Anna seem paranoid or loony.

"Oh, well, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. I'm getting dressed." Anna headed to the other bank, expecting Chuck to follow her, but when she turned around, like Orpheus ascending from Hades, she saw the Bulgarian woman sitting astride the pudgy, lonely man, who for now was in heaven.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Anna walked back to the main grounds alone, feeling vaguely betrayed by Chuck or Eli or both. Why, she wasn't sure, but their impromptu rutting somehow dishonored Rafael and the others--though she realized that none of them would really have cared in the least--*if they were alive*, she appended to her train of thought.

As she approached the surreal sensory collage of a white steel god still breathing an unnatural smoke and surrounded by prostrate, motionless supplicants, she saw that Naomi Bernstein had taken advantage of Anna's absence--and that of her own nemesis, the poet Berg--to begin organizing some sort of faction or perhaps even a political party. Standing around the stocky woman, recognizable from quite a distance by her frizzy black hair, loud plastic bangles, and heavy tortoise-rimmed glasses, were a large number of the remaining residents of the Institute, including both staff and campers, though there had never been a sharp distinction between the two.

As Anna got even closer, she discovered that Naomi was, indeed, rousing the rabble with words that from their very loudness sounded inflammatory. Anna couldn't

understand what there was to get excited about--after all, if there was some sort of threat to the Alpha Institute, weren't they all threatened equally? She walked resolutely toward the group to find out what was going on, and to stop, if she could, Naomi's political posturing from having any devastating effects. Naomi, however, blocked Anna's intentions by pre-empting her entirely.

"Oh, hello, Anna," Naomi said, partly to Anna and partly to her assembled group. "We were just talking about you. About Rafael, actually, but your name came up. It's a shame you guys weren't here while we were deciding where we ought to go from here--we could have used your input."

By 'you guys' Anna inferred that she meant Chuck and perhaps Eli in addition to herself. She also inferred that Naomi had purposely convened an ad hoc committee, presided over it, and rushed a resolution in favor of her own opinion, all in the short while that the three of them were at the waterfall, trying to escape from a grim reality that was all too inescapable.

"Well, it's also a shame you didn't wait for 'us guys' anyhow. What was the rush?" Anna demanded peevishly.

Unfortunately for Anna, her rhetorical question provided Naomi with just the target she needed. "I hate to tell you this, but there's the distinct possibility that something weird is going on around here, and I'm not sure I want to wait around and see what happens to us if we do nothing about it." She won with this rejoinder the usual murmur of assent. "Not only that," she continued, now with the evident backing of the crowd, "but while you two were gallivanting off to the waterfall or wherever, we were left to deal with--with *this!*" Naomi pointed dramatically at the

arrangement of slowly stiffening corpses behind her.

Anna felt a twinge of guilt for running away from such a mess, but she thought she had been quite reasonable in thinking that the bodies weren't going anywhere, and that no one was going to come tidy things up.

"So what is your solution to all this? It doesn't really seem like you needed much additional input."

"There are really two issues, both fairly simple, and we just have to be rational, here," Naomi asserted. "We've got to take care of *this*"--she pointed again, this time even more dramatically--"and we've got to get someone out here to take us into town. No one wants to

walk, and no one wants to try the Range Rover, though personally I don't see why we shouldn't give it another try. There were just too many people in it, and they all panicked when the car had some kind of electrical problem. But if it'll start, we could just send one or two into town--"

"OK, why don't you drive it into town, and we'll wait here until you bring back the cavalry," Anna interrupted her. From the blank look on her face, it seemed that Anna's sarcasm was lost on Naomi.

"I don't think that will be necessary. We've already called the sheriff's substation, and they're sending someone out here right away. And I'm pretty sure they're going to send some rescue trucks and the coroner. We told them there's no need for a doctor."

As Naomi spewed her optimism, Anna couldn't help staring at the untouched pile of human destruction not twenty yards from where Naomi and her crowd were standing. Though in actuality it had only been a couple of hours since the last of the suffocated bodies had been pulled from the car, the strong sun and hot temperatures had sped the decomposition process enough that a faint odor of intestinal gases was wafting in their direction. Everyone was aware of it, but like a fart among

socialites, the decomposition of the dead was politely ignored by the living. Anna checked the height of the sun, as if by means of a calculation or two she might be able to estimate the time of maximum tissue deterioration or bacterial activity. She looked away from the pale blue-grey heap, and wondered momentarily whether she should bother to tell Naomi that her expectations were unlikely to be fulfilled any time soon.

"Ah, here come your friends," Naomi gestured. "How convenient. I'm so jealous of that little--"

Anna turned to see the glum faces of Chuck and Eli, who were just returning. She thought it curious that there wasn't even a trace of an after-sex glow on either of their faces, as if the vision now before them had instantly been enough to wipe out any feelings of joy or happiness. She certainly could understand how that might happen, but she wondered, from the dark aura that seemed to follow them, what their response would have been if they *hadn't* just been screwing. At least they were holding hands.

From a distance, Eli seemed more distraught than Chuck, and in fact hedged a little as they approached, causing Chuck to inadvertently yank her arm, which she then pulled away from him rapidly, as if in retaliation.

Anna saw them exchanging a few words, and from what she could make out, Eli clearly didn't want to come any closer--to *what?*--than she already was. Chuck didn't try very hard to persuade her, but instead he let her go, off in the direction of the cabins. Chuck, his face on the verge of a scowl, kept approaching the crowd. Eventually, he reached Anna, under the concerted gaze of everyone in Naomi's camp.

Naomi thought it best to ignore the little melodrama that had taken attention away from her, and began blathering to her people about her ideas for the Institute's future, as if she were running for president in an emergency election to replace the deceased incumbent.

"Hi," Chuck said softly, pulling Anna aside, more or less out of earshot of Naomi and blocked from view of the horizontal bodies by the intervening thicket of vertical ones.

On top of Chuck's usual and unmistakable olfactory presence, he now also smelled of sex--of sex with Eli, to be precise--and the funky scent provoked in Anna a curious mixture of revulsion and jealousy. She wasn't quite sure of whom she was jealous, but in any case she didn't want to get as close to Chuck as he apparently

felt like getting to her. Between Chuck and the increasingly evident aroma of decay and sweat, Anna felt she was in an airy pool of bacteria.

"Hi," she said, not looking at Chuck. "You guys have fun? What happened to Eli?"

"What's going on here?" Chuck asked, pretending not to hear Anna's slightly snide questions.

"See for yourself. Naomi's taking over. She's got my vote--she promised to bring the entire New York State Police to Alpha."

Chuck turned to listen.

"...and once we've safely evacuated everyone, and we've made sure we're not in any real danger, I don't see why we can't come back here and continue the Institute. I think that's what Raf would have wanted, don't you?"

"Yeah!" everyone shouted in unison, now ready to win one for the Gipper.

"Wull, uh, I mean, er, like what if we all really *is* in some kine o' danger, ma'am?" Chuck's poor imitation of a hick didn't amuse anyone.

"Look, Charles," Naomi addressed him directly, "you may not agree with us, but at least we're trying to do something about our situation. What have you been contributing? We've got a serious situation on our hands,

and we've got to find some answers, so everything will get back to normal. You got any objections to that?"

Chuck shook his head, but kept up his deliberately incongruous mimicry. "Why, no, ma'am. I surely don't. But I ken tell y'all right naow, ain't gonna get back to no normal. That's fer darn sher."

Naomi's frown revealed her annoyance at Chuck's lack of seriousness, which was undercutting her attempt to inherit authority by fiat.

"Oh, that's a lot of nonsense. Yes, we have had more than our share of...accidents, but they are all perfectly explainable. Mr. Ouspensky probably died of natural causes, and we know that the detective was attacked by a rabid animal. And that--" she pointed yet again, her long index finger with its painted silver nail indicating the Range Rover--"that is what comes from panic and irrational beliefs." Naomi smiled triumphantly.

"Then what's the rush to get out? And what about the two people last night--Biff or something, and that little woman?" Anna couldn't resist pointing out the inconsistency of Naomi's posturing.

"I'm sure they reached town and probably went back to New York," Naomi replied confidently, "And we're not in any rush to 'get out,' as you put it, but merely to

demonstrate once and for all that we are in no serious danger. Except, of course, from possibly dangerous animals."

The crowd watched the verbal dueling between their leader and her uninvited challengers like it was a tennis match.

"OK," Chuck said, "Since you're so sure, why don't we all go make sure those two really got out of here?"

"There's no reason for all of us to go," said Naomi, reading the reluctance on the faces of her followers.

"Let's just you, me and Anna go."

"Fine," Chuck said. "I'll even lead the way."

There was no need to discuss where to start. Everyone remembered quite clearly the direction the pair had headed from the cafeteria, which was essentially along the rough path that led directly through a brief stretch of woods to the road going into town. The three-- Chuck, Naomi and Anna--took off together on a diagonal to the point thirty yards from the cafeteria where the odd couple had last been seen.

Anna, who was trailing a couple of paces behind the other two, was getting quite nervous as they approached the tree line. They were quite a way from the crowd they had left behind, and further still from the car and the

Administration building, yet she could still smell decay. She wondered for a moment whether it might be Chuck's hygienic practices again, but assured herself, after taking a couple of hefty sniffs, that it was definitely something else, something dead.

She began to feel slightly nauseated, but she tried to attach the feeling to the recollection that she had not eaten since the evening before--in fact, none of them had, since breakfast had been pre-empted by the unfortunate accidental deaths of ten people.

Soon the three reached the beginning of the path, which was not much more than some cut away limbs and trampled underbrush. Most of the trees at this point were evergreen, and Anna smelled a heady mixture of pinesap and whatever it was that was decaying. She hoped to hell that it was her imagination, or just the olfactory residue from the other dead bodies, but her nervous stomach told her otherwise.

When they were completely protected by the pine canopy, big, fat horseflies and loud mosquitoes began to attack every inch of exposed flesh, so that between the three of them, a slap was heard about every two or three seconds. The air was still and heavy under the motionless

piners, and it was difficult to get enough oxygen from normal breathing.

Naomi and Chuck, though leading the way, did not appear to be all that eager to find any more bodies. A cursory stroll along the path, with an occasional kick at a small pile of leaves or twigs to uncover nothing more than more leaves and twigs, would have been enough for them to be able to convince themselves that they had conducted a thorough search and, fortunately, come up empty-handed.

Anna, however, could not deny the input of her senses. Whether it was her nose or some other sense, operating subliminally, she didn't know, but something drew her, silently, off the path, to the right. She said nothing to Chuck or Naomi as she fell behind and drifted away, and she was so quiet about changing her direction that they didn't realize she was no longer behind them.

Not more than ten steps off the path, she saw something, visible through a layer of pine needles, that definitely didn't belong in the woods. It was shiny, enamel, and had colors that were visible nowhere else in this small forest. Nervously, she bent over to pick it up, brushing aside the pine needles.

It was a lacquered box, with a painting of some sort of scene on its top. The box was caked with a layer of mud and compost, so she couldn't make out the scene until she scraped away the dirt with her thumb and forefinger. She thought the box might be Russian, but the colors weren't black and red like all the other ones she'd seen. Rather, it was a combination of browns, blues and a little gold and yellow. At last, the scene on the box revealed itself to her: it was a picture of a woman, very thin, sitting at the side of an open hole in the ground, like a grave. It was disturbing, not at all like the usual fairy tale scenes depicted on the mass-produced Russian boxes. Yet despite the plague-like morbidity of the painting on this box, Anna thought there was also something beautiful, something absolutely true about it. The craftsmanship of the rendering itself was superb, the unnatural colors were balanced deftly, and a sense of true physical death was palpable in the detail of the thin flesh of the woman.

What was it that made this scene so familiar and vivid to Anna? She looked closer, trying to recognize the woman, or perhaps the background. The triangular face and short dark hair were not unlike her own, but the scale was too small to see any more than a cursory resemblance.

The background was no more than a sketch of a walled city or fortress, a full moon.

Her dream again! She'd almost forgotten the detail of the lacquer box from that persistent dream of Bân--a dream that continued to yield, like a large archaeological dig, a fragment here, a shard there. Anna couldn't remember what the box in the dream looked like, but she remembered there being a grave of some sort. Whatever the differences in the actual details of the gift box in her dream and the muddy one in her hand, she knew that for her, they were one and the same object. She also knew, since she had no other explanation for why she had stepped off the path, that she was supposed to find this box.

The feel of the decorated object in her hand was strange. It seemed heavier, more drawn to the earth, than she would have imagined, considering its size. In fact, it seemed almost magnetized, like a compass needle, directed not straight down, but down and further in the direction away from the path. Anna could have struggled against the sensation emanating from the decorated box, and she would have won, but she decided to let herself be led.

It was not going to be pleasant when she reached the place she had to go, but, like the announcements she received from her dreams, she understood that it would be at her own peril if she chose to ignore the impulse that seemed connected to the image of the woman sitting beside a grave.

She walked through the underbrush at a constant pace, as though she knew where she was going. Low pine branches struck her gently on the face and shoulders, and her ankles were getting scratched from coarse stalks and bristly leaves, but she couldn't feel anything. She realized she was heading deeper into the wood, because less and less light was able to penetrate. Even though it was early afternoon on a sunny day, the dwindling light made it seem more like evening.

All of a sudden, the odd feeling of being pulled by the hand just stopped. She had reached her destination. She began to look around. About fifteen feet away, she saw something on the ground, behind a clump of ferns. It was of a greyish hue, and looked to her like the soles and heels of human feet. She had no doubt whose feet they were, for there were exactly two pairs, more or less intact, and they were of remarkably different sizes. Assuming these feet were still attached, she knew that

beyond the ferns she would come across the bodies of the pair that had been so eager to leave the night before. As much as she felt like avoiding going any further in the direction of the bodies, she had come this far in the belief that she was being shown something--though her hypnogogue was at the moment invisible--and that in fact she had no choice but to complete the task before her.

She approached slowly, to see if perhaps she could detect some movement, but the ankles and feet, side by side, toenails down, remained perfectly still. She thought she might call out and perhaps wake them--after all, there was the slightest chance they were merely sleeping--but she

decided against it, as though her voice might disturb the otherwise profound silence.

When she reached the ferns, she took a deep breath and held it, and looked away, trying at the last moment to escape her obligation to witness the truth. Then, with one swift jerk of her head, she faced the dreaded vision.

What a vision it was. Stretched out on a king-sized bed of leaves, as if prepared specially for them, were the bodies of the hefty Bill Johnson and his diminutive partner, whose name Anna still didn't know. Her name was now a virtual irrelevancy. Certainly the carnivorous

field rodents that scampered away as Anna came into view could have cared less about a name for the enormous feast that had been placed before them.

The pair's clothes were still on, but they had been ripped and gnawed in a few places, presumably to expose more meat. Their shoes, oddly, were gone and nowhere in sight, yet their feet were quite intact. Though the identities of the two bodies, from their size alone, were unmistakable, the flesh of their faces had been desecrated by the local animals, though most of their features were still whole, and Anna could recognize them.

Anna threw up. She didn't mean to, but it was such an automatic, visceral response at the sight of two more corpses that she almost gagged on her dry heave. Though no one was around, she became embarrassed, in part because some of her spittle had landed on the legs of both bodies. Anna wiped her mouth with her arm, thought about wiping her vomit from the bodies but then thought better of it, then turned and began to run. She'd dropped the box when she began to heave, and as she ran, back toward the path, she wondered irrationally whether her fingerprints on the box might be used as evidence against her when the bodies were again found, the next time by

the police. Then she remembered the police would never come, and her momentary anxiety departed.

She reached the path, and stopped. She listened. To her right, she could hear Naomi's voice, and it sounded as if they were coming back in her direction. She headed toward the voice.

"Hey! Anna! What happened to you?" It was Chuck's voice, and evidently he could see her before she could see him.

"Nothing," she answered, as the pair came into view. "I just figured there was no point in the three of us all looking in the same place, so I went off on my own."

Naomi and Chuck came right up to her before saying anything further. "Well? Did you find anything?" Naomi demanded.

Anna tried not to hesitate, but she did. "No," she lied. She didn't understand why she had just lied, but for some reason, she didn't trust Naomi, or didn't want to tell her about the bodies, even though she knew she ought to disclose her profound discovery. She could always tell Chuck later, after they'd returned, but even that might not be necessary. He seemed to know she wasn't telling the truth, and he indicated as much by winking at her.

"Well that's good," Naomi responded. "I guess we can go back and tell everyone it's safe, that they made it out of here."

"Wouldn't it just be better if we said we didn't *find* anything?" Chuck asked. "Personally, I don't want the responsibility of telling them it's safe. There's a huge difference between saying we didn't find anything and saying it's safe."

"Whatever. But let's get out of here. It's muggy, and the bugs are killing me. We can figure out how to phrase it when we get back."

The three returned to the main grounds by the same path they had come, Naomi all the while trying to convince the other two that they should say everything was safe. Chuck was almost willing to go along with her, since, he rationalized, they had just been in the woods, and nothing had happened to them. In fact, he now wondered, as they headed back, why they hadn't just kept on going. They were at one point perhaps as close as five minutes from the road into town, and they hadn't seen the least sign of danger. But then, he remembered that Anna must have seen something, something important, for her to lie so blatantly. So he really wasn't sure whether they could have gotten out or not.

The crowd, in Naomi's absence, had ceased to be much of a crowd. A handful of people were still standing where they'd been left, but the others had dispersed. Some stood or sat on the grass, chatting in small groups. A few others had headed to the pool or back to their cabins. The smell of toast and burning grease was evidence that the cafeteria had at last been opened, and several of the crowd had gone there.

As the threesome emerged from the woods, those who were still hanging around started to converge again, as if on cue. Naomi took charge.

"Come on, everyone. I smell food. Let's all meet at the cafeteria. We have something to tell you."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For several minutes, the cafeteria was filled with the squawking of wood against wood, as oak chair legs were dragged across the hardwood floor to create new combinations of seating. The snapping of pop tops could be heard sporadically, as people opened their cans of juice or soda. Since everyone wanted to hear what Naomi had to say, only the few who couldn't wait stood in line to get breakfast. When it seemed that no more of the curious or concerned were going to straggle in, Naomi, without bothering to ask Chuck or Anna, stood up and took the floor.

"OK, everyone. I've--we've got some news for you. And it's better than you think." It was taking a while for the people to settle down, but at last the din started to abate. Naomi, ever the politician, let the silence develop for a moment, before she continued.

"First of all, since there was a request that we determine the fate of Bill Johnson and his friend--"

"Excuse me. But don't you think it would be polite of you people to at least learn her name?" a woman's voice called out from near the window. "It was

Louise...is...Louise Campbell. She was from Connecticut, I think. I knew her."

"Thank you for that information," Naomi responded sincerely. "Louise Campbell. Anyway, I can tell you that three of us conducted a search of the woods around that path that cuts through to the road, and we found no sign of any 'foul play,' as they say."

"That's cool," opined a young rock-and-roll musician wearing a black T-shirt with his band's name--the Crazy Gods--emblazoned in silver heavy metallica lettering, "but, like, what if they like, didn't exactly stay on the path, you know?"

"Well, first of all, that's highly unlikely. They left at night, and we were all pretty worried there might be danger, so I can't see them leaving the path. Besides, the path, I think, is about the shortest distance to the road, so why would they leave it?"

The rock star could have argued his point further, but he really didn't care, having made his point. No one else wanted to object to Naomi's flawed suppositions, not even Chuck.

"So I think we should all assume they made it safely into town."

Anna bit her lip, annoyed at herself for her inability to say out loud what she had seen, but she reassured herself it was probably best to say nothing.

"That means that this ridiculous fear about leaving is just that--ridiculous. We can probably walk out of here any time we want. In fact, instead of coming back here to tell you what we found, or rather, didn't find," Naomi praised her own self-sacrifice, "we could have just gone into town ourselves--we were no more than a few minutes from the road, I could hear cars going by, and none of us were hassled in

the least." She looked at Chuck and Anna to make sure they weren't going to contradict her somehow.

"So why dincha?" asked the heavy metal musician.

"Like I said, we simply felt it best to come back and tell you ourselves there was nothing to worry about. Besides, I think we ought to stick around and wait for the cops, don't you?" She intoned the word 'cops' in such a way that it smacked of Chicago, 1968.

"Well, we shouldn't *all* have to wait," said a pockmarked man with a slight British accent.

Naomi was reluctant to acknowledge the logic being put forth by the masses, who had detected some disparity between her words and actions. "Since they're on their

way anyway," she argued, "we might as well relax. We're all here, we can relax, and when they come, they can make absolutely sure everything is alright. Then after they've taken care of the Range Rover, I'm sure they'll take anyone who still wants to go back into town."

Anna was caught in the middle, between Naomi's potentially destructive naïveté and her own awareness of the psychological and social consequences of divulging to a borderline irrational crowd the fact that their greatest dread was closer than they imagined--closer, by far, than Naomi knew. She wished someone in the group would ask Naomi why the police cars and other vehicles promised so many times and so long ago still hadn't arrived.

Her wish was granted. A voice she recognized came from the screen door. "Why do you think nobody's coming out here?"

It was Jim, Alpha's driver. Anna, along with everyone else who recognized him, gasped. It was as if he'd come back from the dead, for everyone, despite their willingness to pretend everything was alright, deep down knew that no one had gotten out since Ouspensky had died. Yet here was this fresh kid, his glistening muscles and

big smile evident proof that he was, indeed, as alive as everyone in the cafeteria, if not moreso.

His mere presence was disturbing, for it raised new hopes, yet at the same time undercut the foundation of the new reality that had been solidifying at the Alpha Institute since the onset of a series of inexplicable events. In that new reality, they were all doomed, and the choice of an optimistic or pessimistic response was merely a matter of politics, primarily a function of style, and the need to deny or accept one's fate. Now this unexpected incursion, this foreign molecule or virus had, merely by uttering a few words more charged with significance than *Noli me tangere*, confirmed that the psychic membrane surrounding the Institute was at the very least semi-permeable. And this called for a revision of the recently accepted paradigm. For the whole sequence from the death of Ouspensky to that of Goldman had come gradually, subconsciously, to be viewed by everyone as one of simple cause and effect, a domino effect initiated by some as yet unknown sin or Mover. Now, with the voluntary return of one of their own, who had managed to penetrate to the outside world with undaunted ease, the whole scheme, all the way down to their collective fear and revulsion, had to be called into question as

being little more than the petty self-interest that accompanies the fear of death.

"Jim!" shrieked Anna, who then became embarrassed by her evident familiarity with the Institute's driver.

"How'd you get back here?"

"Oh, so you heard about the van. Well, I stayed in town after I couldn't get it started, then caught a ride out here on the main on route nine then walked the rest of the way. The van's still at Haber's Garage."

"No. I mean, no, we didn't hear about the van. But we thought--well, we just thought you weren't coming back, is all."

Jim took to his celebrity status with natural ease, sauntering into the midst of the assembly, pulling up a chair, and sitting down with his chest to its back. "Oh, so you think I'm like the rest of them? I may be a local boy, but I've worked out here long enough, so I know better."

His cryptic response was lost on everyone. "Like the rest of whom?" Chuck asked. "Better than what?"

"Well, I just thought you were talking about the folks in town. What they've been saying about y'all--about the Institute and such. I had a heck of a time finding a ride out here. Everyone in town's spooked. They

got some pretty weird ideas about what goes on out here. Of course, some of them aren't all that far off, but then I'm used to it, and they're not."

Everyone in the room, but especially Anna and Chuck, immediately understood why there had been such an unbelievable delay in vehicles arriving from town. It seemed incredible, irrational, that a hysterical belief should so possess an entire town that even its sworn militia and administrators would act in accordance with it, but if what Jim was implying were true, then basically the whole town had gone crazy with fear of the Alpha Institute. Perhaps, thought Anna, that fear wasn't as irrational as it might at first glance appear.

"Jim," Naomi called out, emulating Anna's familiarity, "While you were in town, did you happen to see or hear anything about a couple of Alphans? A large guy, Bill Johnson, and a smaller woman, Louise?"

"No, ma'am," Jim smiled, clearly enjoying being the focus of everyone's attention. "But I can tell you this: if they came right into town anytime after I dropped that first van load off to the Amtrak, they wouldn't have met with all that friendly people. Some people were going on about how you're all wacko, living in a dreamworld and that, and calling the sheriff or the troopers at the drop

of a hat. And then others--I got to confess, I spent a little time at the Rheingold Inn bar last night, and people got to talking--others think what goes on out here is downright immoral, and you got it coming, whatever you get." Jim

paused, then added thoughtfully, "Of course, there *is* some pretty warped stuff happens out here, and I don't know if it's not God that's actually bringing down His wrath."

When Anna heard the faint trace of fundamentalism in Jim's reasoning, she shuddered, realizing that even he was not entirely credible in his current glory as The One Who Had Returned. She wondered what sort of immorality he was referring to, and whether her own behavior might fit into that category according to Jim. More than that, she wanted to know where he got the idea that some *dies irae* was at hand, if the townspeople believed that the pleas from the Institute amounted to just so much hot air.

"Well I doubt that what has happened around here lately is the result of divine retribution," Naomi said, "but it certainly is interesting that even you, who worked here--"

"Don't I still?" Jim interrupted.

"Why, yes, of course--what I mean is, it's strange that you would think there's something immoral going on here. What, exactly, is it you find so immoral?"

"I'd rather not say what I've seen, if you don't mind." Jim's tone of voice suggested that a little more prodding would have paid dividends, but Naomi decided not to prod.

"I think a more interesting question of our revenant," Chuck intervened at long last, "would be whether he might be willing to take--I guess I mean 'lead'--some of us back into town."

"Sure, only I don't have the van, like I told you. What about the Rover?"

Jim's apparent lack of awareness about the status of the Range Rover meant that he had not yet seen the bodies piled up around it. It was hard to believe, although in principle, someone walking from the road straight to the cafeteria might not have noticed, considering the distance, anything particularly odd about the area in front of the Administration building.

"Oh, you don't know?" Anna asked, not disguising her incredulity. "I don't advise you to go look, but right...right...in front of the...Administration--" Anna could not continue, because the image of Rafael's face as

his head fell forward into her hands presented itself to her at the wrong moment.

"There was some kind of freak electrical malfunction," Chuck continued, distracting Jim from Anna's display of grief. "And some people got trapped inside, they couldn't get out in time. If you'd seen what happened, maybe you wouldn't be so quick to buy into the narrow-minded beliefs of the people in town. We've got a real problem out here, people are dead, and none of those fuckers seem to give a damn." Chuck began to get angrier than he'd been in a long time. Ordinarily, his Buddhist practice kept him cooled out, but Anna's tears at the recollection of Rafael had triggered his own suppressed feelings.

Jim was completely flustered by what he had just heard. He had never seen a dead body in his life, and now he was being told that there were several almost within view of where he sat. "I don't know about any of that," Jim tried to apologize for the attitudes of the locals. "They just don't understand what goes on out here, and we--they--hear all kinds of stories. Fact is, maybe they're just scared to come out here, and don't want to let on. So they keep sayin', 'Yeah, we'll be right out,' but then they never get around to it."

That possibility struck everyone present as almost a believable answer to the question of why no one had arrived despite repeated calls for help, but certainly the state police, who were obliged to clean up massive bloody pile-ups on the Taconic State Parkway every so often, should have had no problem responding to calls regarding a much less dramatic accidental suffocation. So exactly what they might be afraid of was still a mystery, especially since they were on the *outside*.

"Scared, schmared," said Naomi with an exaggerated Yiddish inflection. "There's no excuse, if that's their problem. Look, Jimbo: if they're not going to respond to our phone calls, we've got to get into town, if only for the sake of sanity. We've got to do something about all these...people, and some people here are getting real scared, not to mention stir crazy. So we've got to show everyone there's no problem getting out of here, right? You know anything about cars?"

Jim smiled as his glory increased. "Me? Cars? Two years at BOCES, and I've been hanging around mechanics most of my life. Woulda fixed the van, if I'd had tools. But I didn't."

"That's *great!*" Naomi urged. "Think you can find out what's wrong with Raf's Range Rover?"

"Probably. But, I mean--isn't it in the middle of--I mean--"

"Yes, it is. But you can deal with it, we can push the car somewhere else. Hey, everyone, Jim's going to fix the car and drive some people into town! Let's help him move it to a better spot. Come on, you guys. Chuck! Come on, go help move the car."

Jim's expression told Anna that he didn't like being committed by Naomi, and Chuck's sour look told her that he didn't like being bossed around by her. Nevertheless, Chuck, along with most of the other men in the group and a few women, including Naomi, got up and exited the cafeteria to go help Jim move the Rover to a less obnoxious location. Anna looked around at the people who were left. Mostly women in their thirties and forties, with worried looks on their faces. The departure of the men provoked a great deal of conversation, mostly speculation about whether the car could be fixed, who would be allowed to go on the first trip into town, who would want to go on the first trip. But at one table, occupied by mostly younger women in their late twenties, including the blonde actress, Anna overheard a discussion about what a hunk Jim was, how brave he was to walk back and to offer to go into town, and how no one sitting at

that table would mind learning more about some of his other talents.

Anna ordinarily would have smiled at such girl talk, and in fact, similar thoughts had crossed her mind on occasion, especially when she'd seen him on a hot day with his shirt off and his jeans riding low on his waist. But at the moment, though she felt admiration for him and grateful that he--unlike, apparently, anyone else at the Institute--possessed mechanical aptitude, there was something about his very presence that was uncanny, perhaps even untrustworthy. The circumstances themselves would not allow her the luxury of a casual erotic twinge in sympathy with the other women, who apparently were better able to suppress their revulsion at the extremity of their situation. But there was something else blocking her ordinary, human response, and she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

She assumed that the business with the car was going to take awhile, and in any case she was not particularly interested in being among the first pioneers to prove it was possible to get off the grounds of the Alpha Institute. Staying in the cafeteria didn't appeal to her, either, though she needed food, so she decided to get a couple of pints of yogurt and go back to her room and

wait until she heard something one way or the other about Jim's luck with the car. She ate one of the yogurts as she ambled back to her room. The events of the day, such as they were, combined with the heat and the fact that Anna had been up since the crack of dawn, conspired to make Anna admit to herself that she was fatigued.

As she opened the door to her cabin--where she hadn't been seemingly for ages--and saw the inviting, partially unmade bed, she considered whether she ought to stay awake, or give in to her fatigue. In the back of her mind, she had a vague apprehension about what her dreams might be like, and whether in the midst of all this psychic strangeness, she would be able to control them.

Anna took stock of herself, to see whether there was a realistic expectation that if she lay down on the bed, she would be able to resist going to sleep. Quickly determining that she probably wouldn't be able to stay awake more than ten minutes once her head hit the pillow, she decided that starting to meditate was the best way to enter her dream world, and to enhance her ability to control the dream itself.

She pushed the bolt on the door to make sure no one would come in, and she pinned up the print cotton bedspread that served as a curtain whenever she felt the

need for privacy. She sat down on the bed, right in the middle. She checked to make sure that if she fell back, she wouldn't hit her head. Sitting straight up, her legs fully extended on the bed, she closed her eyes and began to let herself fall. From the quickness with which she entered the hypnogogic state, she knew she would be dreaming very soon. She tried as long as she could to remain aware of her surroundings.

She could hear, as her mind became still, the very distant blur of voices, which she assumed were coming from the group that had gone to help with the car. She also heard the cawing of crows high in the sky, while inside her room there was a fly or two, and one mosquito, which she decided to ignore. Her stomach rumbled slightly, reminding her that she still had another yogurt if she wanted it, and she could hear her breathing start to slow down. She measured it against the soft tick of her alarm clock.

Further in the distance, but coming closer, was the faint but distinct sound of horse's hooves. She hadn't considered horses as a way out of the Institute, but in light of the risk apparently posed by automobiles, she knew why horses had been sent.

Actually, as the sound got louder, Anna realized it was only one horse, and it was approaching her cabin at a gallop. She looked out the window. *That's odd*, she said to herself, *I thought I put up the curtain. It must have fallen.* And indeed, the curtain was now hanging from only one push-pin. The other one, she noticed, was on the floor. It was a different color from the one she thought she had used.

The gallop became even louder, and as she continued to look out the window, she saw a dapple grey coming right out of the woods, heading right toward her. As it came into view, she could see that the horse was mounted by a man. At first, she thought from his size and the color of his hair that it was her father, but then she realized it was Rafael.

The mare stopped outside her window, and Rafael, who was as usual wearing pressed blue jeans and a denim work shirt, but was inexplicably barefoot, dismounted. The horse then turned, and galloped away.

Rafael had come in neither through the window nor the door, but there he was, in her room nevertheless. Anna could feel her pulse rising and her breathing quickening, both now greatly outpacing the tick of the

clock. He stood by the bed and gestured to her to stand up. She did.

She looked into his eyes. They were the same dead eyes she had seen when his head had fallen into her hands, yet here he was, in the flesh, alive. The depth of his eyes was mesmerizing, and as Anna peered into them, she thought she could see the flicker of an intense white light, deep inside them, while closer to their surface, there burned some kind of fire, a bright orange-red.

The sore on Anna's right breast began to hurt terribly again. At first, the pain was mild, but as she thought about it, all the while looking into Goldman's dead blue eyes, it became sharper and sharper. Yet the location of the increasingly intense pain was right next to the site of equally intense pleasure, as she felt Goldman's cold thumb and forefinger teasing her nipple.

She looked down at herself. She was no longer in her clothes, and Rafael's hands were cupping both her breasts. Blood from the wound in her right breast was dripping over his hand, onto the floor.

"Take off my clothes," Rafael said to her at last. "I cannot do it myself."

"Are you a vampire?" Anna asked him, thinking that perhaps vampires were not able to undress themselves.

Rafael said nothing, and Anna began to unbutton his shirt. Even as she removed it, pulling the sleeves over his stiff, unyielding arms, she could still feel his cold hands under her breasts, as if the feeling of his hands had been separated from the hands themselves. She dropped the shirt on the floor, and looked at the curly grey hair on his chest. He had no nipples, and no navel, but otherwise he was normal.

She thought about whether at this point, she ought to intervene, and begin controlling the dream, in case Rafael was a vampire--or something worse. But something--perhaps the white light behind his eyes--told her that he was in charge, and that everything would be alright.

She unbuckled his thick, black leather belt, and unbuttoned the top button of his fly. She could now feel his hands between her legs, preparing her, even though his arms appeared to be still at his side. She hoped, at any rate, they were his hands. She dared not look, just in case.

The rest of the buttons did not need to be undone, for all of a sudden there were none, and she began to pull his jeans down over his hips. She stopped, as if to make sure this was what she really wanted, and tried to ascertain whether, when she finally let go of his jeans,

she would be confronted with anything monstrous or grotesque.

Beneath the blue cotton, she could see the outline of the head of his erection, so she decided it would be OK to finish undressing him. She dropped his pants. Everything was normal in that department. Everything was better than normal.

"I will now heal you," Goldman said to her, doctor that he now was. "When you are healed, you will know something about life and death. You will know which to choose."

Rafael pressed Anna to him gently. She felt his cold hardness pressing against her. She became embarrassed at the touch of his genitals against hers, not out of any shyness, but out of a simple moral inhibition against having sex with a dead person. Yet, somehow, he didn't seem dead at all.

Though his touch at first had been cold, when he pushed her back up on the bed and entered her, he immediately was as warm and alive as he had been when she knew him. A wave of deep regret came over her that she had only had sexual intercourse with him after he had died, but this dream was so lifelike, so real, that it didn't make much difference. Except it was only a dream.

As they were making love, Anna noticed that the pain near her nipple was completely gone. At one point, she had looked down and noticed that Rafael was tenderly sucking the wound, but she was becoming so ecstatic, she didn't give it a second thought.

Soon, it was all over. Her eyes closed, she felt him shudder on top of her. Her own climax came in enormous waves, and surpassed any she have ever experienced while awake. She opened her eyes to see her lover, but he was no longer there. She was disappointed, but she knew he would be gone, like Eros in the Apuleius tale. Instead, there, between her legs, where she had just felt the quivering body of the resurrected Rafael Goldman, was a small lacquer box. Painted in fine reds and golds against a black background was an image of Adam and Eve. Eve was holding the fruit in her hand. A sly serpent, wrapped around a tree, seemed to be whispering in her left ear. Anna listened for a second, then heard clearly: the word was 'yes'.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On her way back to waking consciousness, Anna held on to the word 'yes' as though it were a valuable ticket she could not afford to lose. She didn't know, from inside her dream, exactly what it meant, but she knew that if she kept it, took it with her, she would eventually understand it. Rafael had implied as much.

The stark reality of her encounter with Rafael began to fade as she prepared herself for waking. She looked around at her environment one last time, to see if anything else needed to be taken with her. The box itself, of course, and also the fact that the cut on her breast had been healed. There would be, she assumed, no physical evidence of sex with Rafael, but she thought she ought to at least remember that he had arrived on a horse and that he was barefoot.

She awoke quickly, her eyes opening wide. She felt fully rested, and had made her journey back with full recollection of everything she had wanted to remember. She did not bother to look at her clock. She sat for a moment on the bed, as if to solidify her feelings. Then she looked down at herself.

She was still wearing the clothes she'd been wearing quite a while now, which was reassuring, even though it underscored the fact that Rafael had reappeared only in her dream. The cut, which had been a dull pain most of the day, no longer even itched, and this made Anna smile at Rafael's shamanistic healing technique. She thought about the image from the Garden of Eden and the word 'yes', and tried to determine what was so essential about it, but its meaning was slipping away from her. But she still had the word and the icon with which it was linked, so she wasn't concerned.

She was sticky and hot. The day had become more humid, and there was much less light coming through her makeshift curtain than there had been when she first tacked it up. She walked over to the window, and pulled it down. The darkness was not due to lateness of the hour, but rather to the fact that enormous thunderheads had begun to roll in from the west. She thought she could hear thunder rumbling in the distance, over the Catskills, but she couldn't be sure. Nevertheless, she was sure of one thing: soon, it would be raining hard.

She decided to change her clothes and go back to the main lawn to see what was happening with Jim and the car before it started to pour. She was hungry for something

besides yogurt, and wondered whether there was anything left over in the cafeteria besides sandwiches. Her plan was to eat something after checking out the car situation, then return to her room and write down her dream and contemplate its significance.

She changed into exactly the same outfit she had on, except fresh and clean. She wadded up her old clothes and stuck them in her laundry bag, which was hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Ordinarily, she would have preferred to take a shower before changing into clean clothes, but to do

so seemed superfluous, since she was probably going to get soaked in the rain anyway.

Anna walked slowly toward the Administration building, unable to resist the strange pleasure of her dream, which still made her tingle. She passed through an odd spectrum of emotion as she walked away from her room and bed, where she had had an ecstatic experience with a dream lover, and toward the site where the real corpse of that very same personage was lying in the heat.

As she passed not far from the cafeteria, she could smell burning fat, meaning that at least the grill was still open. She was particularly hungry for a Cobb salad, but thought it too much to wish that the staff had gone

to the trouble to make a full menu. But at least there'd be something.

Perhaps it was the heaviness of the atmosphere, but there wasn't a trace of decay in the air. Anna looked toward the Administration building. Out front, the Range Rover was gone, as she'd expected. But so were all the bodies--which she had not. Instead, she saw more clearly as she approached, there was a small mound of fresh dirt, about two feet higher than the rest of the ground, and spanning an approximate square, ten feet across.

*Oh my God,* thought Anna, *what have they done?* The nausea she had felt when she first had to deal with the bodies being pulled from the car, and had been feeling most of the day, was nothing compared with how she felt now, unable to avoid the realization that they'd all been buried in a mass grave. She balked at the idea of continuing, but her curiosity, and her need to find out what happened to everyone, forced her to continue.

At last she reached the mound of dirt. Three rusty and muddy shovels lay beside the mound, made up of clumps of upturned turf and rocks. There was no doubt in her mind: the size of the hole was just large enough to fit the bodies in a single layer if they were arranged neatly rather than being thrown in haphazardly. She understood

the motive for digging such a hopefully temporary grave, but as she thought of the ignominy of Rafael--and the others--having dirt thrown on top of them, perhaps without any sort of ritual, she could hardly bear it.

True, the hot day was wearing on, and the condition of the bodies would begin to pose a health hazard. The impending threat of rain would mean that digging would be harder once it started. And, since Anna more than anyone else at this point was convinced that the so-called authorities would never arrive to dispose of the bodies in a more customary fashion, the idea of putting the bodies underground made a certain amount of sense. Still, she sort of wished she'd been able to see Rafael one last time, if only to say good-bye. And perhaps to persuade herself that he was really dead.

Yes! the word 'yes' appeared before her like a bolt of lightning from the thunder clouds overhead. She had asked Rafael in her dream if he was a vampire. At the time, he had not answered her. But he had left her the answer: yes! Hadn't Popova mentioned in her story that in the Balkans, vampires can originate from violent or premature death and improper burial? Didn't Rafael therefore qualify? Perhaps, she thought, he could only answer yes at the exact moment his body had been thrown

into the hasty grave--perhaps until then, until he was merged with the earth, he was merely a corpse.

What did that mean, then? In what sense was he a vampire? He had made love to her, had even healed her wounded breast. True, he had drunk her blood, but not in real life, and she felt more alive, after that deep relaxation, than she'd felt in a long time. Weren't vampires supposed to be draining? She knew from Eli that there were enormous differences between the vampires of Slavic lore and those literary ones modeled on Stoker's Count Dracula. Even so, she could not understand how Rafael could be a vampire. Nevertheless, she was certain that the word 'yes,' which she had so carefully preserved from her dream, was the answer to the question that she herself had posed, 'Are you a vampire?' She would have to think about it more, perhaps in connection with the lacquer box.

The manifest content of her dream had obvious antecedents: the lacquer box she had found in the woods, near the bodies of Bill and Louise, was the source of the image in her dream (although this didn't explain why she dreamed of a lacquer box *before* she stumbled across the one in the woods). The night those two had departed, Chuck had said something about 'Adam and Eve,' which

would explain the dream reference to the Garden of Eden. Even the serpent, Anna mused, bore a certain likeness to the snake that had swum in front of her face at the waterfall. Even Raf's eyes, as she'd looked into them right after he'd died--perhaps his soul at that point still hadn't separated completely from his body--were there in her dream.

His bare feet. She remembered that she had thought it was important to note he was barefooted. Could that be related to the fact that Adam and Eve, aka Bill and Louise, were barefoot, and in fact it was their feet that Anna had seen first? Perhaps *they* were the vampires, not Rafael? It was all too confusing...

"Did you see him again?" It was Eli. Anna half expected her, in light of her current train of thought. It was as if her dreams were some sort of radio that Eli could tune in to.

"Oh. It's you," Anna said, looking at Eli queerly, then noticing that she was standing, by coincidence, barefoot in the loose earth on top of the tumulus. "What? Oh, yes. How did you know? Don't bother to answer that--I think I know. Where are the others?"

"You've been away for a long time," Eli replied enigmatically. "Much has changed. It is not good--for you

or me. Or--them." A parody of Naomi, Eli pointed with her index finger down at the mound on which she was standing.

Just then, the sky directly above them was lit up by an extremely close flash of lightning, which was followed almost immediately by a resounding clap of thunder, which in turn scared Eli so much that she grabbed Anna out of fear.

Anna, who liked to think of herself as fearless, was also frightened by the unexpected boom, and instinctively held Eli in return. But then this momentary and perfectly natural embrace seemed to last just a little too long, and Anna tried to find a way of extricating herself from the Slavic woman's hug without insulting her.

The means was provided as if *ex machina*, for it began to pour. Anna squirmed free of the folklorist's clutch, with the pretext that they'd best run for cover. She ran to the Administration building, and jumped up on the porch, which was partially covered by a roof.

Eli, instead of following her to cover, just stood where she'd been left, the rain soaking her almost immediately. From the forlorn look on Eli's face, Anna thought perhaps mixed in with the fresh raindrops, there might be a few tears, though if Eli was crying just because Anna didn't want to stand there getting soaked

and hugged embarrassingly at the same time, that was ridiculous.

As the rain began to soak through Eli's clothes, Anna felt guilty, but didn't know exactly what to do. Eli was, after all, a grown woman, not some cat that was being abandoned. But what was she supposed to do, go stand in the rain with her? Where was the sense in that?

Remembering the strange little woman's obsession with water and purification rituals, Anna at last gave in to her guilt, and went and stood in the rain with her. It was a warm rain, and in fact it felt good as it began to rinse off in the accumulated grime from the hot day. Since the folklorist was barefoot, Anna kicked off her sandals. The mud of the grave mound, already soaked from the downpour, oozed through her toes. Both Eli and Anna spontaneously began to curl their toes, squeezing the mud through them playfully, as though they were kids again.

Anna thought for a second about how odd it was that Eli seemed to be able to control her, or at least influence her to do things she otherwise wouldn't think of doing, without saying a word. Though Eli had denied being able to read people's minds, she'd never denied that she had this strange power to influence other people--or at least, Anna.

The mud began to get thinner, and since the mound had not been packed very tightly, the movement of their feet caused them to gradually begin sinking into it. It felt good, even sexy, on Anna's ankles, though she was just the tiniest bit worried that she wouldn't stop sinking, that perhaps her foot might even touch the arm or leg of one of those buried underneath. After all, she had no idea how deep the bodies had been buried, but it couldn't have been too deep, considering how hot the day was and how wide the hole was. But that troubling thought was completely offset by a strange desire to regress, to play in the mud, perhaps even have a mud fight. She could see herself, flinging mudpies at

the folklorist who, in retaliation, would smear mud all over her, until they fell down in the mud together, laughing at the sucking noises as they tried to pull their legs out, but couldn't...

"There is the ancient Slavic myth of the Earth Diver," Eli said, breaking Anna's reverie.

"Oh? Tell me," said Anna, a girl asking her mother to tell her a story.

"There is not much to tell, without telling you all about the creation of the world, and I don't think we have time for that. But this story, which perhaps goes

back to the time of Zarathrustra, is about the Earth Diver, who must go down to the bottom of the sea to get mud, from which he is to create the physical world. For before then, there was only ocean. Our sinking into the mud, it is like this story, I think. It reminds me of it."

For Anna, the fact they were now standing almost up to their knees in mud, as the rain poured down on them, was too similar to their quasi-mystical encounter in the waterfall to be coincidental, and she began to wonder when Eli would take over her imagination once again.

But, curiously, that didn't happen. Anna decided to take the opportunity to find out what Popova had meant when she had said that much had changed. "You said that I had been away a long time. What did you mean? What happened?"

"Do you want the dead to know? We will be touching them soon," Eli replied without really answering.

No sooner had Eli made that assertion, than Anna felt her right foot touch something. It felt like cloth. She wanted to scream, and get out of the mud, but she calmed herself. *Oh, shit*, she said to herself, *here we go again. The Bulgarian mind control bit. I'll ignore it this time, and see what happens.* But it wasn't the same.

This felt real. There was no aura of detachment from the rest of the world, all the other sights and sounds were there, including those of some people in the distance who seemed to be returning.

"No," Anna said resolutely. "And I don't want them to drag me down to visit them, either. I'll get out of this mud, and you can tell me then." Anna struggled against the quicksand-like mud, the vacuum around her feet and ankles making it extremely difficult to pull them out. Recalling from her childhood being warned not to struggle violently, as this would only drag you down faster, Anna very slowly wiggled her right foot to break the seal of the vacuum, then pulled it slowly out of the mud and put it down one long stride further to the edge of the mound. Then she repeated this exercise with her left foot, until she was able to walk. She gingerly stepped off the mound, which was already much less pronounced than it was when she'd first seen it, as the rain began to wash away the top layers. At last she was standing on more solid ground, and felt she could also more easily get a straight answer out of her mysterious playmate.

"Now, I don't know about you, but I feel a lot safer when my feet aren't touching somebody's arm. So tell

me...what happened? What is it, exactly, that 'isn't good,' as you put it?"

"You are right," Eli said. "I, too, should get out of the mud. For you see? They are coming back. Perhaps we should not let them see us."

For a second, Anna thought Eli meant the dead. Then she realized Eli was talking about the others. "Not let them see us? Why? What's *wrong*?" Anna demanded, quite worried.

"Let us go over there," Eli pointed to a ramshackle outbuilding, a small dilapidated shed not far from the showers.

Anna thought it was ridiculous to be hiding, but she didn't want to get into some mind control contest with Eli, so she capitulated. The two walked briskly until they were inside the shed.

The shed was filled primarily with hand tools used for gardening and small agriculture: pushmowers, pruning shears, hoes, rakes, a scythe, a couple of sickles, and an assortment of rusted iron objects ranging from horseshoes to an old anvil. It smelled of musty hay and dryrot, and spider webs were everywhere. No sooner had they reached the shed than the rain let up, than the rain

let up, and a bright ray of sunlight shone through the still ominous clouds.

"We can see them from here, and they won't be looking for us."

"Who? Who won't be looking for us, exactly? And why in hell would they be looking for us, anyway? What have we done? I mean, I was *asleep*, for Chrissake. At least, I think I was. What could *I* have done to piss 'them' off?"

"You don't understand--that boy--Jim, you call him. After he fixed the car, it was like the women thought he was some sort of god. He seems to have some sort of power over them. And he is saying things, bad things, about us. About you and me. And your friend Berg."

This was complete news to Anna, who was shocked. "What? What kind of things? Why you and me? And Chuck--where's Chuck?" A million more questions raced through her head. Then the obvious struck her: the one thing they all had in common was their escapade on the flat rock by the waterfall. Had Jim, the moralist, witnessed something and misinterpreted?

"This boy promised to take some people into town tomorrow, but he understood that it will be dangerous to drive it until a spell is lifted."

"A spell? What kind of spell? Hello? This is the twentieth century. What kind of crap is that?" Anna was almost shouting.

"Shhh! There they are," Eli whispered.

Sure enough, Jim was leading a crowd of people right into the Administration building. His shirt was off, tucked provocatively inside the front of his jeans, and his taut flesh was still shiny from the rain. Anna recognized the women who had been discussing his masculine charms in the cafeteria, who were now right behind him. Included in that

advance guard of Bacchantes was again the young actress whom Anna had earlier assumed to be Naomi's lover. Naomi herself was in the rear of the crowd, looking bedraggled and out of breath. She was having a hard time keeping up with this reorganized group, and Anna surmised that somehow, she had lost virtually all of the political power she had been trying to accumulate since the incident in the Range Rover. That power, such as it was, as illusory and temporary as all power, seemed to have abandoned her, and willy-nilly to have conferred itself now upon the unconscious stud who was, like Elvis or Michael Jackson, too stupid to not take it personally.

"What kind of spell?" Anna repeated in a loud whisper. "What in God's name are you talking about? And what's going on? Where's Chuck?"

"I am a witch," Eli said quite seriously. "And so are you. And so is Berg. That is what this boy is saying. And they have lost their minds. They now believe him."

"But *why*?" Anna asked, trying to avoid raising her voice.

"I don't know how, but he convinced them that everything began when I came here. I tried to tell him-- for they accused me of this--that this Mr. Ouspensky had died, and I was not yet here, and that I was on the stage telling a story when the other man, the second man died. But that doesn't matter, he says to them that I am evil, immoral. And he tells them that he saw us--you, and me, and Chuck--doing magic rituals in the waterfall. And that those two, the two who they say left, are not alive, he has seen their bodies, and they have been drained of blood. Like a vampire had gotten them, he says. Only I tell him that real vampires do not do this, do not drink blood, that is only in the books and movies, which they do not understand. But this makes it worse for me, and they all frighten me. But then they went away, over the hill."

Anna found the entire explanation incredible, and wondered whether this wasn't just Eli the Storyteller, or Eli the Manipulator, doing her thing. But there was something real in her voice, in the way she told of Jim's accusations, that sounded legitimate. Eli didn't sound particularly afraid, as much as worried. And Anna recalled her own suspicions when Jim's judgmental moralism had first shown itself. But witchcraft? Vampires? Even Eli knew such things were merely folklore, or existed only in dreams, or were perhaps convenient labels for behavior that didn't fit neatly into normal social categories. Why would a group of intelligent, educated people swallow such an absurd explanation, one offered, moreover, by none other than someone whose most impressive credentials were that he knew how to drive a van and was able to fix a car that probably had something very minor wrong with it?

On top of that, Anna certainly didn't like the idea of being guilty by association. She wondered what sort of nonsense Jim had made up to embellish the truth, which was probably simply that he had seen them sitting around naked at the waterfall, and most likely had then stuck around to watch the fun between Eli and Chuck. But how could such shenanigans have been turned into witchcraft?

And had Jim really stumbled upon Johnson and Campbell, too, or was he just scaring these people? Maybe he wasn't as stupid as he looked, but, she asked herself, what possible reason could he have--aside from some perverted drive for power--for making up these stories, for turning people of the Institute against her, and Eli and Chuck?

Chuck! "Where's Chuck?" Anna asked one more time.

"I don't know," Eli answered neutrally. "They blamed him, and I have not seen him since. I only know that he is being accused."

Anna looked around at all the farm implements in the shed, and imagined, for a second, the worst. "We've got to find him," Anna stated, then added, "But this is absurd. I'm going to go and talk to these idiots. If what you say is true, they're being completely irrational. And that doesn't make any sense, especially if the car is fixed and they don't have to feel trapped anymore." She was speaking in her normal tone of voice, no longer afraid of being discovered. "I *know* these people. They are my colleagues, friends. Or at least my students. They'll listen to me."

Anna began to walk out of the shed, intent on reasoning with the group now, apparently, completely under the sway of Lord Jim. Eli grabbed her arm. "That is

not wise. I would advise you to listen to them, to find out their mood, before you put yourself in their midst. You do not know how quickly this boy has convinced them. I myself do not know how, but I know that they all follow him, and no longer know the truth."

The truth. In the last few days, beginning, she thought, with her first dream of the icon painter, Anna had gradually come to understand the impossibility of such a concept, or at least that it would always be in conflict with something closer to illusion, opinion, point of view, subjectivity. No longer did she believe that there was on the one hand a real world and on the other, a dream world, or at any rate that there was a neat division or boundary, apart from the one superimposed by memory and language, between the two. So she could understand how these people had become so easily misled, but not *why*. Or maybe it was the other way around. In any case, the force with which Eli had grabbed her arm suggested that perhaps it really would be wiser for her to learn more of what was going on, before placing herself squarely in the middle of a situation from which it might not be easy to get out.

"What should we do?" Anna asked.

"Follow me," Eli whispered.

She led Anna around the back of the Administration building. As they came near the open windows of Rafael's office, Eli took Anna off behind a nearby maple tree, so that they might be able to hear but not be seen. Eli pointed to the window, indicating that Anna should try to hear what was being said.

Jim's voice was quite recognizable: "...It is true. I saw it with my own eyes. The three of them, naked as jaybirds, doin' some kind of sacrifice. They had a strange lookin' knife, and they took a big ol' black water snake and slit its belly, then as the blood run out, they each held the snake up, said some kind of words, and then let that blood run into their mouths. Then they said something else. I couldn't hear, 'cause of the water, but I know for sure they were up to something.

"I'll tell you this much: it was unholy, what they were doin'. I won't even tell you about their little orgy down there--it almost turned my stomach. If there've been some strange goings-on around here, I guess you know where to look. I don't want to say that they're responsible for Mr. Goldman and the others, because I know for a fact there was a short circuit in that car, because I fixed it. But ask yourself this: how come an

almost new fifty thousand dollar car gets a short circuit just when there's too many people in it to get out?"

"Do you think we can get out?" someone else in the room shouted out. "I mean, do you think it's safe?"

"If you're talking about the Rover, you bet it is. And I plan on taking her out of here tomorrow, you ladies will all go into town with me, and we'll even come back here, to show them who's boss. But I personally don't trust any of 'em. That Anna, she's a weird one."

From behind the maple, Anna bristled with rage.

"And the bearded guy, I don't like him. And that little foreigner, well I'm pretty sure she's behind all this. I don't know how they're doing it, but I think they've got to be stopped, don't you? If they're going to have sacrifices, we should have one, if you get my meaning."

"We do," several female voices said at the same time.

That was enough for Anna, who wanted to barge in on this lying evangelical usurper and expose him for the fraud he was. But Eli saw what Anna was about to do, and restrained her. She pulled Anna back around the Administration building, out of earshot.

"I'm going into there and pop that phony on the nose," proclaimed Anna.

"You don't understand. That is not a very good idea. You may not realize this, but that phony, as you call him, has got some very real sort of power, some kind of hold, over the others, and they now believe that we were performing perverted sex and magic rites in order to kill people. We are the enemy. We killed Rafael and the others. Or I did, and because you and Chuck were under my spell or something, you helped me. They believe this. And I do not know what they want to do to us. So far, they have not begun to look for us. But I think it is only a matter of time."

"Why is he doing this?" Anna asked uncomprehendingly. "What did we do to him? Is he jealous? What does he hope to gain from this?"

"In my opinion, he is a natural cult leader, who just happened to come across the right situation to exercise his power. Perhaps he did not even know the power was there, until now. Do you not see who follows him? They are women. He is their savior. To have power, he needs to have something to save them from. That is us. Evil. All redeemers must have evil."

"Well he certainly works quickly, doesn't he? I mean, he just came back today--"

The moment Anna uttered the words 'came back,' the word 'yes' reappeared visibly in front of her mind's eye. 'Yes,' she had understood, had something to do with Rafael's visiting her after his death. But could she have misunderstood it? Could Rafael's return from the dead in her dream have symbolized Jim's return from town? Or, she hesitated to think, trying to maintain her rationality, was it possible Jim never made it into town? Had he been lurking by the waterfall? Or, had Jim returned from the dead, not Rafael?

Anna slapped herself in the face in self-derision, and not particularly gently at that, for even beginning to entertain such absurd notions. Jim's body was not at all like that of a decrepit corpse, and the attraction that several of the younger women seemed to feel toward him was hardly unnatural, much less supernatural. So there wasn't the least tangible shred of evidence that Jim was anything other than a kid who'd figured out when he was onto a good thing. The only trouble was that in order to hold on to that good thing, it would have to be at the expense of Eli, Anna and Chuck. Still, in the back of her mind, there now was a stronger connection between

her dream of Rafael and Jim's strange charm than she'd previously thought.

"I think we should go. I think someone is out on the porch," Eli urged.

"Is all this really necessary, all this sneaking around?" Anna asked. "Do we really have to be afraid of these people? It seems ridiculous to me."

Eli didn't bother to answer Anna, but led her back quickly to the shed, so they could talk. They at last reached the old farm building, whose purpose seemed to have passed away long ago, leaving only the bones of scythes and sickles and pitchforks, left over from the years in which the part of the land on which the Institute now stood had been farmed. Anna looked around at the place as if she were checking out an apartment she was thinking of moving into. She hoped she would not really have to move into this one.

"We can't stay here forever," Anna said, relieved to be able to talk in a normal voice again. "I'm starved. And I have to go to the bathroom. And all my stuff is in my room. If you don't think we should just deal with this, I mean act normally, you'd better have a pretty good plan."

"Look," Eli said with a tone of impatience, "I, too, am hungry. We can get to the cafeteria again when no one is around. I've been watching. It seems that these people go where Jim goes, so they are not organized, and they are not hunting for us...yet. So as long as he's not near the cafeteria, we can get food. We ought to stock up. And you can go back to your room and use the toilet, but I don't think we should risk a shower, though there's always the waterfall. I doubt they'll go down there. I looked into the old barn when I was walking around this morning. It is much bigger than this, a better neighborhood, with lots of places to hide if we need to, but the problem is, to get to it from here, you have to cross an open field, and you can be seen from Goldman's office. And it is even further away from the cafeteria and your room. Shall we go there? We will be able to relax a little, and figure out what to do."

"Oh, what the hell," Anna said with a sigh.

The pair decided to walk instead of run or crawl, assuming that this would draw the least attention if someone spotted them. The still damp stubble of the coarsely mown grass and straw stung their ankles, and occasionally thistles scratched their legs enough to draw blood. The sun was at last dropping into the slightly

elevated horizon of the Catskills, and lingering cumulus clouds in the west hid just enough of the sun for a brilliant sunburst to fan out over half the western sky. Anna wanted to stop and look at it, but as she paused, Eli yanked her by the hand.

They soon reached the barn. Once inside the large barn door frame, they turned around to see if anyone was coming. No one was in sight.

The barn smelled of musty hay and tired motor oil. There was a defunct tractor staring at them, its first visitors in years. It didn't even blink at the newcomers.

There were a couple of bales of useless hay, and Anna started to sit down on one of them. Eli stopped her, kicking the bale over. "Snakes like hay," Eli said without elaboration. Then she sat down on it herself, and patted the space next to her. Anna sat down.

"Thanks. I hate snakes."

"I know. I saw you in the water."

"So. Here we are. Home sweet home. What's the plan?"

"Why do you think I have a plan?" Eli asked. "This is almost as new for me as it is for you. I have not even had time to think about what to do--I have been too busy just trying to see what is going on. All I know is that we must stop this boy somehow before he persuades his

followers to come looking for us. If they are not looking for us now, I think it is because he wants to acquire more power. He said--you heard him, yes?--he is going into town, and taking some people with him, and that he is going to return. Why should he return, I ask myself--or, I mean, why should those who go with him want to come back?

"It can only be because he wants to prove he is their savior. If he can leave and return at will, he will be able to convince the others that he has power over the evil force that has taken so many lives. Then he will come after us, for we are the evil ones."

"OK, I see your reasoning, and I kind of even agree with it," Anna said. "But I don't see how this--pardon the expression--dumb--kid can control these people, who otherwise, at least the ones I know, have very large egos. Don't cult leaders usually prey on people with not much going for them in the personality department? The people here just don't fit that profile. Sorry, I don't get it--especially that they should give this kid, the fucking *van driver*, for Chrissake, all this power, so soon!"

"I cannot answer that, myself," Eli replied. "But learning how he has obtained his power is less important

than stopping him. Perhaps if we could find out if some of the people are not as deeply under his influence as others..." Eli paused, as if she were turning something over in her head. "Your dreams," she continued excitedly. "You can control your dreams, yes?"

"We-e-ll," Anna stammered, dumbfounded. "Yes. I mean, sort of. I'm still learning the technique, but I'm not very good at it yet. As if you didn't know. So what's that got to do with anything?"

"I don't know, I thought somehow--I have no idea whether such a thing is possible--but maybe somehow in a dream you could find out if any of these people who follow him really are not completely under his...influence. Then, we might have someone inside his circle to help us, and perhaps we could divide the group against itself. Then they would forget about me--us--and he would be neutralized."

Anna tried not to smile at such an East European idea--or at such an East European Cold War phrase as 'neutralized,' for that matter--but she couldn't stop herself. This weird tendency to literalize the occult struck her, at least when she'd encountered it among Russians in recent years, as amusingly naive. It was a great plan, Anna thought, except for one thing: you can't

just go around walking into people's dreams like they were museums or office buildings.

"Well, actually, Eli," Anna replied, wiping the smile off her face, "you're probably better at that sort of thing than I am. It sounds like a good idea. Why don't you do it?"

"I would," Eli replied matter-of-factly, "except I can only enter other people's dreams when I am invited."

This remark struck Anna as curious, because she didn't recall ever inviting Eli into her own dream, but that didn't seem to stop her. There was something else odd about what Eli had just said: it provoked a dim recollection of something she'd read once, she thought it was out of *Dracula*, about how vampires cannot cross thresholds without being invited. Anna noted the structural coincidence, and promised herself she would think about it when all this was over.

"Certainly there are more practical options we ought to consider first?"

"On the contrary. We should resort to the practical only after the impractical has failed." Eli smiled, telling Anna that she understood how unrealistic her suggestion sounded. It was the first authentic smile Anna had seen in a long time, and its hopefulness was

reassuring. Eli's ability to chuckle at her own outrageousness went a long way very quickly toward lowering the barrier that Anna had erected, then just left there, following the near-menage at the waterfall. Still, the idea of using her dreams to spy on people struck her as somehow ethically wrong, even if it were possible.

"If I understand you, you want me to do some dream reconnaissance. And how, exactly, am I supposed to do this, just sort of doze off, then go asking various characters whether their allegiance to Lord Jim can be bought? What if they're not asleep? How do I get inside their consciousness (*un-*, actually)? And where will you be, O great Bulgarian princess?"

"Maybe--and this will seem even crazier to you than my original idea--maybe you can 'invite' me to go with you, then I could help. I believe I have ways of telling if people's lives and their beliefs are in harmony. I can feel it. If they are not, then there is the chance we can bring the life back in accord with the belief, before Jim succeeds in doing the reverse."

"Well, I'll think about it, Eli," Anna said, "but right now, I'm not very tired."

"But I am. I shall go to sleep. Perhaps I will wake up with a better idea. Take me with you if you go anywhere."

Eli stood up from the bale of hay, and looked around for some place to sleep. By chance, hanging on a rusty nail by the door was a woolen horse blanket, dirty, with a few holes, but otherwise not in bad shape. She went over to the door, and took it down. Being so short, she had to stretch, but by shaking it from the bottom, she freed it from the nail. In the process, the accumulated dust flew everywhere. Anna thought it was curious that Eli didn't sneeze or cough in the middle of all that dust, but then, perhaps Eli just wasn't at all allergic--some people were like that.

Eli brought the old blanket over to a bare spot on the dirt floor of the barn, shook it again, and spread it out. It wasn't very large, but when Eli lay down on it, she left enough room for Anna, just in case.

"Wake me in a couple of hours. Or, on second thought, don't, unless you have to. I don't know if it's a good idea if one of us keeps watch. It would be good if there was a third person with us. Oh, well. I am going to--how do you say?--hit the hay. *Dobra nosht.*"

Anna continued to sit on the hay bale, which had gotten considerably lower from having two people sitting on it. She watched Eli drift off to sleep, and it looked as though Eli was dead to the world within minutes.

Anna felt like crying, but more urgently, she felt like peeing. Even though there were only women there, and Eli was already asleep, Anna hunted for a more private place. She remembered about the snakes, and consequently tried to find a place that she would find comfortable and a snake would not.

Finding no place in the barn that was suitable, she went out the back door of the barn. No buildings were in sight, and there were only trees and overgrowth around her. Just then, she heard rustling in the woods, and wanted to run away, but she heard Chuck's voice.

"Anna! Am I relieved to see you!" Anna turned to see the thick form of the poet coming out from behind a thicket.

Rather than try to hide her embarrassment, she was so glad to see Chuck that she had the presence of mind to greet him on his own terms. "Oh, hi, Chuck," she said nonchalantly. "I'm afraid I can't say I'm relieved. Eli's in there. She just went to sleep. She'll be glad to know you're OK. Shall we wake her up?"

"Not just yet," Chuck said, hugging Anna warmly.

"I've got some stuff to tell you."

"Can it wait for a second? And could you please look the other way?" Anna asked modestly.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Walking back to the barn, Chuck and Anna decided to stay near the door at the end away from Eli, so as not to wake her with their talking. Chuck found a stack of dusty wooden crates. He took down two, and turned them upside down and placed them on the ground. They sat down on them, facing each other somewhat awkwardly.

"So tell me, Chuck--what happened? How did you end up in this part of the world?"

"I might ask you the same thing, but since you're with Eli, I'll assume she told you all about the rapid turn of events, with our resident Jim Jones and everything."

"Not everything. For instance, who dealt with all the bodies? And what the hell, in your humble opinion, is really going on? I have a feeling Eli's overreacting."

Chuck shook his head solemnly. "I'm afraid not, or else I wouldn't be concerned for my own safety. That driver kid, he's a real piece of work. I don't know how all that, I don't know exactly what to call it--charisma?--descended on him so suddenly, but one minute, he's right there with us, helping to push the car away so he can work on it without having to be surrounded by a

lot of dead bodies, the next, he's ordering us to dig the mass grave for them. The funny thing is, no one questioned him--we all fell right into line.

"I mean, it only made sense, we should do *something* about those bodies. It was clear no one else was going to come take care of them. But the idea of this kid telling us what to do--and we did it! After that, and especially after he fixed the car, it was like he was automatically a king or even a god."

"I still don't get it. He's just an ordinary kid," Anna interjected. "I rode into town with him just the other day, he seemed perfectly nice, kind of immature, nice body but not much upstairs, you know? Why are all these women--is it mostly women, like Eli says--following him? What's he *saying* to them?"

"That's just it: his party line is extremely trite. He's got some spiel made up of TV talk show lines about how we're immoral, evil, have to be dealt with, all that. Meaning, unfortunately, you and me. But ordinarily, people at Alpha wouldn't buy such crap if their lives depended on it. Doesn't seem to matter--ever since fixing the car, he's like the fire god, or the guy in that Kipling story. He's got the Truth with a capital T, just because he came back from the town."

"Like a shaman."

"Like what?"

"A shaman. It's like he's returned from the other world--in this case, just town, of course--and he's got all this power. Moses, Jesus, Orpheus. You know, those guys. There's something really weird about a van driver. Though I don't know--Jesus was a run-of-the-mill carpenter, right?"

Chuck pondered the implications of what she was saying, thinking there was something a little dangerous if not downright absurd about connecting Jim with Jesus. He was tempted to go into a long discursus on the nature of shamanism and mimesis, but decided there were more urgent matters at hand. "Well, yes. OK. So somehow this ordinary kid goes into town and comes back, and since he's the only one to come back, a lot of weird energy gets dumped on him. The point is, that energy, for some reason, is being directed against us. I don't know why. But we've got to deflect it or neutralize it before this gets serious."

"Speaking of serious," Anne laughed, "I've just got to tell you what Eli thought we should do. She thought I should somehow *dream* my way into their midst, the followers, and find out if there was anyone who wasn't

totally tuned in to Jim's message. Then Eli was going to somehow use that information to divide the group against itself. Then, according to her, we'd be home free. Isn't that an outrageous idea?"

"Not exactly," Chuck said, contrary to Anna's expectations. "I mean, the principle, of finding an ally or a spy, and breaking up their apparent solidarity, makes a certain kind of sense. Doing it in your dreams-- well, I don't mean to offend you, but I think our problem is in the real world."

"Maybe," Anna countered. "But thinking a little bit more about this guy, I'm not totally convinced that the charisma, as you call it, is really his. It feels, from what you say, like he's, I don't know, some kind of zombie, a channel for some animating power outside him. He just doesn't strike me as possessing the sorts of intuitions necessary to manipulate so many people so quickly with such obvious hogwash. And I think I know who may be providing him with that power..."

Chuck decided to be very patient with this offbeat, even for him, line of reasoning. "Who do you think it is? Certainly not Eli!" The thought had actually occurred to him earlier, but he'd rejected it, since she was the main target of Jim's literally witch-hunting accusations.

"Of course not. But I think she knows. Do you remember that dream I told you?"

"Sort of. About the icon painter, a Bulgarian wedding, that one?"

"Right. Well, I didn't tell you this, but I later had a continuation of that dream, or another dream about the same icon painter. And I discussed it with Eli. She claims to know who he is--some kind of ancient god named Bân. Remember in the story she told us on the rock about the icon painter who wanted to put his painting in the church? Well, she says that according to the folklore, he's never finished it for some reason, and is still looking for it. And if he finishes it, it will be the end of time. There's more to it than that, but I'll let Eli tell you so I don't screw it up. I thought it was all folklore, but there were some other strange coincidences, and I have a feeling that everything

that's been happening here in the last couple of days is connected with this dream of mine. It kind of makes me think that maybe Jim isn't far off."

Chuck was totally taken aback by her revelation. "That's quite a confession. If I understand you, you're trying to tell me that some guy in your dreams is in fact a god archetype, and that all the shit that's been going

down around here is the result of your dreams? So whether the world ends soon or not is kind of up to you? Gee, if you were a capitalist, you could really cash in. Or out."

Anna stood up from her uncomfortable crate and tugged at her denim shorts. "The end of the world is a little drastic, I'd say. But it certainly could be the end of *our* world, couldn't it? Who's going to stop this, since we have no idea where it's coming from? All the people who have died--except maybe Bill and what's-her-name, and probably them, too--died accidentally, or of seemingly natural causes. There are no murderers, or even monsters from another planet, running around, so how can we stop a force that apparently doesn't exist?"

Chuck nodded at the philosophical truth behind Anna's complaint. "There may not be any murderers yet, but if this situation here gets out of hand, if Jim decides we're a threat to his little game, whatever it is, I'm not so sure we won't have to worry about that."

"Naomi!" Anna exclaimed suddenly, completely changing the subject.

"Naomi? My favorite person. What about her?"

"She's the weak link. I think because of her sexual orientation, she probably doesn't really have the psychic hots for Jim. Plus, she probably resents the fact that

she lost a lot of power when he came on the scene. Remember how she thought she owned the place this morning, after the accident? She's the leverage--if Eli's scheme is at all possible--against Jim and his group. She can be pulled away, I think. If we could just get her to challenge Jim somehow."

Chuck thought for a second about Anna's hypothesis. "Even if we could, there's no love lost between her and me, so she probably doesn't like you, either. Why would she speak up on our behalf?"

"She wouldn't have to defend us--she's just got to break his psychological hold on the group. They've been mesmerized, they're somehow not themselves. It happened fairly quickly, perhaps it can be made to *unhappen* just as quickly."

"Nothing can *unhappen*. The problem is more serious than I thought." It was Eli's voice. Neither Anna nor Chuck had heard her approach, and both were startled.

"I couldn't sleep soundly," Eli continued, sitting down on the crate from which Anna had just stood up. "I am not like you, Anna. When I am troubled, my mind will not allow me to rest. Instead of sleeping, I contemplated our reality." Eli became silent. It was such an odd statement that her audience did not know what to say.

After a very awkward and protracted silence, Eli at last decided to expound. "Our reality is this: the young man who is turning those people against us--he is, I now know--because I felt it, I saw it, he was in a story that told itself to me as I tried to sleep--he is in fact dead. He is a vampire."

Although she made this assertion in total seriousness, Chuck couldn't help laughing. "A vampire?" he chuckled. "Where are his fangs? Why isn't he in his coffin? Why isn't he running around sucking blood like good vampires are supposed to do?"

Eli dismissed Chuck's facetiousness. "Ask her. She understands."

Anna found herself in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, the notion that Jim was a vampire seemed, in fact, to have been her idea originally, and she didn't know how Eli would have known that, unless there were some corroborating evidence, physical or otherwise. On the other hand, now that someone else had stated it out loud, the whole idea, if taken literally, seemed preposterous. She didn't want to let her ambivalence be used to persuade Chuck, but she couldn't help it.

"Well? What about it?" Chuck asked Anna, standing up so as not to have to be looking up at her. "Do you

believe Eli? I'll try it on if you think it means something. But what, precisely, do we mean by 'vampire' here?" He turned and looked down at Eli. "I mean, we're just being metaphorical here, aren't we? The guy doesn't look dead to me, or even undead, and those followers of his, they don't think so, either."

"Do you agree he must be stopped?" Eli asked Chuck. "That he will do something very serious if we do not stop him?"

"Ye-e-s, I guess so," Chuck hesitated. "As long as you put it like that. But what makes you think he's some kind of vampire? Just because he's preying on people's beliefs?"

"Yes. And because I saw him, in my story--what Anna would call a 'dream'--get killed. Along with the others in the van. There was an accident. For some reason, he came back here. I know he is a vampire. And that if he is allowed to take people in the car tomorrow, even more people will die."

Eli's voice trembled with sincerity, and thus, except for the total absurdity of her proposition, there seemed to be something almost believable about her logic. Especially for Chuck. Anna resisted accepting Eli's hypothesis a little longer.

"Eli, I, too, had such a feeling," Anna said, "but there's something wrong with the conclusion. You yourself said that something was wrong, that Jim's power or whatever was coming from somewhere else. Why do you now believe that a person who seems physically so alive is somehow a vampire?"

"Look. Does it matter if he is a vampire, a revenant, someone who has come back from the grave? I happen to know--because I have been studying such things all my life--that this person is not a person, and that if he is not stopped, people will die. You may choose not to believe me," she looked straight at Chuck as she said this, "but it

doesn't matter. He intends to destroy us, and we must destroy him first, if we cannot stop him otherwise. There are several ways of killing a vampire, but you will remember from my story that the easiest is to cut off his head, separating the mind from the body completely. We must be ritually purified to do this, of course, since it is also a form of sacrifice, and we must do it at a time of transition, such as at dawn..."

Anna was terrified by the trusting look on Chuck's face. "Chuck, certainly you're not going to buy in to what Eli's proposing. She's asking you to commit murder!"

"The morality of it isn't the issue," Chuck replied, distancing himself by means of abstraction. "If it is a sacrifice and if we are purified, then it isn't murder. Besides, her logic intrigues me. The guy is either a vampire--whatever one means by that--or not. But from what I have already seen today, I am certain that he intends to destroy us, because we represent a threat to his power structure. Whether he himself kills us, or has us killed, is irrelevant to me: I don't believe we can save ourselves unless (a) we flee, which appears to be a not very viable option, or (b) destroy his influence, which is also not very likely, considering our marginalized position, or (c) destroy *him*. Forced to make a moral choice with respect to killing versus being killed, I should always opt for the former."

Though they were Chuck's words and clearly enough revealed Chuck's tendency to play logic games, Anna had the feeling that, emotionally, Chuck was under the influence of the woman who had pleased him earlier down by the waterfall.

Anna tried to persuade Eli and Chuck that their version of the truth was as much an unverifiable fantasy as that espoused by those who were willing to believe in Lord Jim, and that their destructive intentions were

distorted and immoral. But to no avail. Seeing that she was getting nowhere with her pleas that they reconsider taking such drastic action, she decided it was best to cool down and see if she could talk sense into them later. She thought she might be able to appeal to Chuck by reminding him that in Eli's world view, vampires could only be destroyed by decapitation or immolation, neither one of which would be particularly pleasant nor particularly easy to perform even in the event that the intended victim was *not* a vampire, but just a misguided crackpot into whose hands too much power had suddenly come.

Anna's stomach suddenly and audibly reminded her that any attempt to further deny her hunger would be met with serious retaliation. It would soon be totally dark out, the last light of the sun just starting to pass away. She decided she would risk going by the cafeteria, and if a crowd was there, she would then see if she could get to her room safely, where she had a stash of slightly stale chocolate-covered wheat cookies, which she'd bought in preparation for an excursion to Saratoga for the annual jazz festival, but

which was canceled at the last moment.

"Obviously, I am the odd man out again, so I won't try to talk you out of your nefarious plans any further for now--it'd be a waste of breath. I'll just say one last time that the action you propose is extreme, excessive, immoral, illegal, unnecessary, and probably dangerous. Even if this kid is a vampire, I mean in the sense that he is sucking energy from otherwise healthy people, don't you know that this is the era of compassion for the vampire? Didn't you see Coppola's *Dracula*? Haven't you read Anne Rice?

"In any case, I think you are being hasty, especially since you have no real evidence that anyone means any harm to you. As a consequence, I cannot in good conscience even *think* about getting involved with your scheme, whatever it is. So I think I'm off to try to find something to eat."

Chuck and Eli were unmoved by her opposition, and although Anna could no longer see the details of their faces due to the encroaching darkness, she could sense their disappointment that they had failed to win her over to participate in the plan to destroy the local vampire before he killed them.

Anna made her way out of the barn and headed in the direction of the cafeteria. There was enough ambient

light from the buildings with lights on that she had a general sense of where she was going, but the ground itself was dark, and there was no path to speak of between the barn and the main grounds. She thought she saw a light on in the cafeteria, but it was not brightly lit. That, in her opinion, was a good sign, because it meant that there was probably not a group of people inside. She walked straight toward it, occasionally stubbing her toe on a rock or losing her footing in the grass.

Along the way, she thought of other things she had wanted to say to Chuck and Eli against their intentions. Her most salient argument, which she had not advanced at all because it had not occurred to her until now, was that taking action against Jim would verify his contention that they were evil. If he was anything like other cult leaders she'd read about, paranoia would be its own justification: the evil that had been ascribed to Eli, Chuck and Anna would thus be visible, tangible, and would most likely have the effect of prompting those in his group who possessed sufficient chutzpah to seek revenge in case something happened to their leader.

It being too late to say all this to Chuck, in hopes that he might fall less under Eli's seductive powers,

Anna let her mind wander over the problem of the destruction of vampires. Would Chuck really allow himself to be coaxed into committing such a violent act as decapitation, even in the belief that he was merely destroying what would otherwise destroy him? It seemed so unlike him: for as long as she'd known him, he had always espoused total non-violence and pacifism in all its forms, and his Buddhist practices--admittedly filtered through American values--had seemingly enabled him to recognize the illusory nature of

human morality. Perhaps, Anna surmised, Chuck had somehow convinced himself that attacking Jim, or a vampire, was merely an act of cutting through illusion, and he thus allowed himself to imagine this was a perfectly acceptable thing to do. But it was more likely that out of no reasoning more complex than simple male lust, he had endowed Eli's ramblings with more veracity than they deserved.

Anna had until dawn, if Eli had meant what she'd said, to decide upon the best way to block the misguided intentions of Chuck and Eli, and she knew that was plenty of time. Having something in her stomach would permit her to focus more clearly, since she would be less distracted by hunger, and perhaps even sleep would provide her with

a less clouded sense of how she could intervene to prevent an action whose consequences would be both unpredictable and irrevocable.

She at last reached the cafeteria building. As she had guessed from a distance, there were only a couple of lights on inside, one in the kitchen area, the other in the back of the main dining area. No noise came from inside, so Anna was confident that no one was there. But to be on the safe side, she approached quietly, ducking down and staying always inside the penumbra along the wall, until she got to a window from which she could see the entire interior of the cafeteria.

Carefully standing up so she could peer in, Anna looked over the sill into the dining hall. The room was not empty. There, sitting alone at a table, with a Diet Coke and a pint of yogurt, was Naomi. Her skin was damp with sweat, and her white cotton dress was soaked under the arms. Her thick glasses, without which she probably couldn't see very far, were on the table in front of her. She sat staring out into the darkness surrounding the room, and the look on her face was a combination of bewilderment and simple blankness.

Anna watched her for a few moments, to make sure that she was alone, and to see if she could figure out

why Naomi was no longer with the others. Naomi continued to stare out the window, not moving at all except to have a spoonful of yogurt. Anna concluded that for some reason, Naomi had been separated from the group. Could it have been intentional? Had one of the followers realized that Naomi was a weak link, not fully committed to the group's ideals, whatever those were? Anna decided to take a chance that she could talk to her without being betrayed. She screwed up her courage and went around to the front entrance.

She entered slowly, with her index finger up to her lips, cautioning Naomi not to say anything. She walked softly over to the table where Naomi was sitting.

"Am I in danger here?" Anna asked right off the bat, but in a muted voice.

"That all depends," said Naomi in her normal voice, which to Anna seemed like a bellow. "Of course you are. I think we all are. But if you mean, are you in danger from me, well, no. I assume, since I haven't seen you around, that you are aware of the mass hysteria around here."

Anna nodded.

"That kid is amazing." Anna gathered Naomi was referring to Jim, the Van Driver. "In the space of a couple of hours, he had us all believing he could get us

out of here, but that only he could do it. I almost believed it myself."

"You mean you don't?" Anna asked, then interrupted herself. "Before you answer, do you mind if I go over there and get something to eat?" She pointed at the cafeteria line, where there were still a couple of individual pizzas and a few other things that could be reheated in a microwave. "I'm totally starved."

"Be my guest," Naomi replied politely. "As you can see, I had the same idea."

Anna found a tray, and loaded it up with pizza, a pre-wrapped tuna sandwich, and a green salad in a plastic container from the refrigerator. It didn't occur to her to ask why all this stuff was left out without a cashier, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially since she'd forgotten her wallet in her room and didn't have any money with her. She didn't want to ask Naomi for any, so as much as she wanted a product of the Coca Cola company from the machine, she opted for a Snapple from the cooler with a sliding door. She took her tray over to Naomi's table and sat down.

"So," Anna said, digging wolfishly into her salad, "I think you were saying that you almost bought Jim's act. Do you think you could explain all this to me? It

all happened so suddenly. Last I knew, it was the middle of the afternoon, Jim said he thought he could fix Raf's car before he'd even looked at it, and I said to myself, 'That's cool,' and went and took a nap. The next think I know, I find out I'm public enemy number one--or maybe two or three, but right up there--and everyone here has this weird religious faith in Alpha's van driver. Not only that, but all the bodies are buried--which is probably against the law, to just dump them in the ground, but who gives a damn--without so much as a prayer or a pine box. Just how in hell did all that happen so quickly?"

Anna began to stuff her face with pizza while Naomi answered. "It's very difficult to explain, even now. I'm not sure I understand it. It just kind of happened. It was as if this guy, this kid--and if I went that way, I'd have to call him a hunk--all of a sudden was like a god. I don't know whether it started with him--I mean, I don't know if he somehow planned it--or with all the people, including me, who were starting to go a little nutzo trying to get out of here. It was like the more we thought about getting out, the more important it became. I mean, I admit, I was trying like hell to pretend there was nothing wrong, but you saw me: I was scared. I'm over

that, now. I know we're all going to die here, and Jim isn't going to save anyone."

Anna almost choked on a piece of pepperoni when she heard Naomi's fatalistic remark. "What? You're probably right, Jim isn't going to save us, except maybe by fixing the car. It's fixed, right? So if that's the case, why don't we just take it?"

"Well for one thing, there's the little matter of the keys. He's got 'em. For another thing, he says he's fixed it except for one last detail--he probably yanked a spark plug wire or something--which he said he'd fix in the morning. So he knows us: nobody's going anywhere, until he's ready. He's got us by the balls."

"OK. So why do you think we're all going to die? Why is everyone panicking? I myself keep wavering back and forth with all kinds of ideas about what's really happening, but I mean we've been stuck here for what? a few days now? People get pulled out of earthquake rubble two, maybe even three weeks later, still healthy. Why are we all so desperate so soon? Are we that flabby and weak? I don't get it."

Naomi said nothing for a minute, choosing instead to scoop out the last of the yogurt-coated purplish boysenberry seeds from the bottom of the white plastic

cup. "I don't know. I can just feel it. There's no way out. It's not like it's difficult: we're maybe five minutes from town, ten from the train to the City. The car will run, there probably aren't rabid wolves running around. But it isn't going to let us out--whatever 'It' is. It fools us into thinking we have hope, it sends us a false messiah. Whatever this force is, it's just playing with us. Let's face it: you don't make saviors out of bus drivers unless you've got a sense of humor. We're fucked."

Naomi had a point: there certainly didn't seem to be anything intrinsically powerful about Jim, so his power was merely an illusion, shared, or maybe granted, by those who wanted him to be their redeemer. The question Anna couldn't answer satisfactorily was, Who had created the illusion? Was it, as Naomi hinted, some malevolent force, playing with the citizens of Alpha in some sort of deadly cat-and-mouse game? Or had they all subconsciously just projected the power onto him, made him a savior, without even giving him a chance to deny the crown? In which case, what Eli and Chuck were intending to do was not so much kill a vampire as sacrifice a king. Perhaps there was no difference, in fact.

"So how come you were able to break away from him, but not the others? Aren't you in danger? Aren't you some kind of threat?" Anna polished off the pizza. At last, her sense of impending starvation was starting to abate.

"It was kind of mutual. At first, I went along with it. But I never was as persuaded as the others by this guy's vision of reality. When he started going off on how you and Chuck and Popova were evil, I knew he was just one of those fundamentalists. I mean, I'm not Berg's great buddy, as you know, but I know better than to call him evil. And I said so. Well, after that, they basically squeezed me out, made me feel really uncomfortable with their vibes. Jim had some idea about how they could take over the Institute, it would be all "ours," and the only danger was from the Outside, the people who weren't coming to help us because they were

plotting against us. Right out of Waco. I said this was all nonsense, that if anything, the people in town were scared shitless. He agreed with that, but then used it to promote this idea that they were afraid because people at the Institute had "the Power," he called it. Anyway, we all came to the cafeteria together, but when they all left--I have absolutely no idea where they went,

but I assume back to their rooms--I just kind of stayed here."

"So what do you think is going to happen? You think he's really going to try to have Chuck and me and Eli killed or something? I mean, should we be worried? Chuck seems to think so."

"I don't know," Naomi sighed. "To be honest, I think he's hit the wall. So long as he was just spouting his phony utopian ideas, I think people--especially the women, for obvious reasons I'm sad to say--were willing to believe in him, since he promised to get us into town and all that. But I'm not sure how many were just kind of going along, you know? Since he was supposedly the ticket out of here, a lot of people I think didn't want to piss him off, since he had control of the car and people are still too scared to try it on foot. Including me, to be honest. But I think it was all starting to fade, people were grumbling, didn't buy it. Especially when he started implying that maybe we ought to do something about you "immoral renegades." Immoral! What, did he catch you guys getting it on or something? Like anyone around here is going to think that's immoral. And then he had this sick fantasy about you performing a sacrifice."

Anna suddenly lost the appetite she had left. The consequences of what Naomi had just told her were quite disturbing, namely that far from possessing some absolute, supernatural hold on everyone at Alpha, Jim was--as she'd wanted to believe, deep down--just someone who did not know how to handle the power inherent in his situation--a situation, moreover, that he did not create. And if he was just some boy, basking as long as he could in the glory of being young in the middle of a youth-worshipping culture, and knowing something about cars among a bunch of technophobes--a combination far from unique and whose appeal was temporary at best--then he was hardly the dangerous "vampire" that Eli had persuaded Chuck that he was. She reconsidered how serious they were about doing him in.

Earlier, before talking to Naomi, Anna had been less concerned. Though she believed that Chuck and Eli were probably going to go off and talk about eliminating a vampire, now the horror of it--if it was more than just talk--began to sink in. They would, if they went all the way with their plan, be committing murder. She could not allow that to happen, she would have to find a way to stop them. Yet she was not in a position to go directly to Jim, or any of the others, for they might in turn

decide to pre-empt the pair of fearless vampire killers by killing them instead.

At the same time, she wasn't quite sure she could trust Naomi, so Anna decided it was best not to tell her about what Eli and Chuck were up to, even though she felt she might need Naomi's help. "Yes, I overheard him describing how we killed a snake and drank its blood. Charming. I have no idea where he got such a strange idea. Been watching too many horror movies, I suppose. Still, I'm worried about what he could stir up with such fantasies. Why would anyone believe them?"

Naomi, finished with her snack, stood up from the table, and Anna wondered whether her rhetorical question had struck a nerve. "Like I said, when he started saying things like that, he started to lose credibility. Maybe some were willing to believe a story like that, just because it's morbid or sexy. But if they did believe it, it just means they didn't want to question him. Who knows? Anyway, if you don't mind, I'm going to go back to my room. It's been a long, strange day, and I keep thinking that maybe if I go to sleep, when I wake up, all of this will have been a dream. I certainly hope so--too much weird stuff has happened too quickly for this to

have really happened, so maybe tomorrow, everything will be back to normal. So. See you tomorrow, I guess."

Naomi took her can and plastic cup and placed them in their respective recycling bins. Anna was tempted to ask her whether she thought it might be safe for her to return to her room, but decided Naomi probably wouldn't know. Instead, she just said goodnight, and watched Naomi walk slowly out of the cafeteria. Anna figured she could use the peace and quiet of the large empty room to figure out what to do about Chuck and Eli.

She knew she still had until dawn to come up with a plan that wouldn't backfire, wouldn't trigger vengeance or preemptive violence, but would stop two people in the grip of a powerful delusion from doing something horrible. She didn't know exactly where to start, where to look for them, or even where to find Jim, as a last resort.

Her hunger assuaged, and with nothing else to do and nowhere else to go, she closed her eyes for a minute, hoping to clear her mind.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

More than the simple smell of decay, Rafael had about him the odor of damp earth mixed with the acridity of swamp gas. It wasn't quite a nauseating smell, perhaps because it was so complex, but it was off-putting enough to allay any feelings of sexual attraction.

He approached from the distance, emerging from a copse of pines, and she recognized him well before his facial features could be discerned, as if his smell alone could identify him. He walked with a slightly arrogant swagger, confident of his position in nature, and as he passed through the grassy meadow, all sounds and movement around him seemed to cease, as though he was in some sort of sphere or shell that enclosed them. The smell became stronger the closer he got, and it soon became clear that it was originating in the brownish patches of drying mud that covered his forehead and cheeks and clotted in his hair. His denim shirt and blue jeans, which were still neatly pressed, were also muddy. He was not, curiously, barefoot this time, and his eyes were no longer lively, but rather the telltale filmy blue-grey orbs of a person no longer alive. Regardless of whether Rafael in this form ought to be called a vampire or not, he definitely

qualified as an animated corpse, a revenant. Anna did not want him to come any closer, though she felt a certain pity for him in this humble diminished state, and she still could not forget the desire she had felt for him during their last encounter.

He came closer anyway, demonstrating that she was not in control of this dream, or at least of the undead character who was now standing right in front of her, trying to stare into her eyes with eyes that had no pupils. She could not be sure whether the rank mudstained figure before her was in fact who he appeared to be, or on the contrary, someone who had merely taken on the semblance of Rafael. Or perhaps it was the absence of animating spirit, the essence of a person that distinguishes him or her from a genderless complex of chemicals, that differentiated this foul mimetic presence from the person she had known and perhaps even loved. In any case, she didn't trust him.

"You entered our world," the man before her uttered, although the words didn't seem to be coming out of his mouth--which, she noticed, was surrounded by elongated spots of dried blood. "What did you see?"

The question was intoned as something of a demand, yet Anna could not figure out what he wanted, since she

had no idea what he'd meant about "our world." *Whose* world, exactly, was left unspecified, and she recalled crossing no frontier. She didn't answer.

"What did you see?" her interlocutor repeated. Anna was surprised by the repetition, because she had generally understood that in dreams, unlike real life, repetition is rare, because it is unnecessary. Again she did not answer.

The distorted figure of Rafael then took off its shirt with a swift gesture that was far simpler than would have actually been required for the task. On his bare chest, instead of the grey hair like that possessed by Rafael, were strange markings, mystical symbols of some sort unlike anything she'd ever come across. They were not tattoos, but rather appeared to be natural markings in his skin, which also was very dry and wrinkled.

"The painting. Where is it?" the imitator demanded once more.

Anna at last understood him: he must have been talking about her encounter with the Darkness, when she had lost contact with her body--when Ouspensky had died. This intersection of the real world--in the form of a sleazy New York City art dealer--and the mythological or

imaginal realm--in the notion of a fictitious painting which existed only in Slavic folklore--was difficult for Anna fully comprehend, even though most of her work with dreams represented a feeble attempt to break down the boundary between the two domains. The question now being put to her by Rafael--or whoever this intruder was--suggested that the boundary to be concerned with was not that between reality and fantasy, but one running parallel, namely that between the living and the dead. The Darkness, she now guessed, was "their world," and from this she could only infer that it was also the world of the dead. Ouspensky was dead.

Was it possible to take things, or even information, out of that world the way one might export pottery from Ireland? Could a secret brought back into her own world provoke the dead to cross over into her dreams in search of it? The man standing before her, with his serious tone, seemed definitely to want something from her, and the feeling she got was that she'd taken it from him, but for the life of her, she had no idea how to answer him. She had not seen the painting, she had no idea where it was--all she had seen was absolute darkness.

Anna could not honestly say that she had not seen the painting, either, because she could not be sure that

the icon depicting the Wheel of Life that had been magically exhibited by Eli was not the painting in question, and it was also possible that the painting being referred to was the image on the lacquer box, though she doubted it. "I saw only darkness," she therefore replied.

"You are lying. You know where it is," said the man, whose visage was beginning to resemble less and less that of Rafael Goldman. He then removed his blue jeans with the same swift and magically uncomplicated gesture used to dispense with his shirt, and now stood before her, naked. Anna noticed that somehow his boots had disappeared as well.

"Do not try to hide it from me," he said impatiently. "It is in your memory, and I will enter you and find it if you do not tell me. Then you will have to die, like the others."

His threat terrified her, because she knew that, like Rafael, he was literally going to try to enter her. But this was not Rafael, but rather a repulsive, deteriorating copy, a real vampire, perhaps, whose very presence was starting to nauseate her. She did not want to look at his nakedness, but she could not avoid

noticing that his legs were covered in flecks of blue and gold paint. She now knew for certain, this was Bân.

Anna could sense the heart in her sleeping body beating wildly, and her breathing becoming rapid and erratic. She felt that if she did not wake up soon, she might overtax her cardiovascular system, and die indeed. Was this how Ouspensky had died--of fright, inside his own dreams?

Bân's rancid odor seemed to disappear with her recognition of his true identity, but she was still repulsed. She felt him coming closer to her, and she felt the dry skin of his upper legs brush against the insides of her thighs. With a single, forceful but not violent gesture, he somehow removed her clothes, and inside this very dream, Anna could now remember the final details from her first dream of Bân. As the recollection became more vivid, Anna's physical response became more intense and panicky, and she knew it was imperative that she wake up soon, before her heart outpaced life itself.

"Tell him, and he will go away." Eli's voice was very welcome in its familiarity, so that Anna relaxed a little, but nevertheless its presence in this dream circumstance raised questions that Anna found disconcerting. Literally from out of nowhere, Eli's face

appeared over Bân's shoulders, Eli was smiling, almost laughing, as Bân began to move even closer to Anna, pressing himself against her. "Just tell him where it is," Eli urged softly.

Anna could feel her breathing going so fast that she felt about to faint--the consequence of which she imagined would be her own death if she allowed it to happen inside this dream. She couldn't scream, she couldn't wake up. Her heart was pounding as Bân prepared to enter her. Since she could not tell them what they wanted to know, she had no choice but to give in, to open herself to him....

The hardness of the table was uncomfortable against Anna's cheek, and her jawbone actually hurt. Her heart was still racing, but her breathing was somewhat less erratic than it had been while she was asleep. As she looked around the cafeteria, she tried to establish whether or not Bân, or Eli, or whoever the dream figure was, had actually succeeded in penetrating her, like some sort of incubus, before she was able to wake herself up. She thought that if he had, she would never have woken up, but she had no idea why that might be true.

She looked outside. It was still quite dark out, but the portion of sky visible through the eastern windows was exhibiting the slightest tinge of orange. Since that light was coming through above the trees Anna reckoned that she had slept too long, and it must now be very close to dawn. The clock on the wall above the refrigerator said 5:30, but it was frequently wrong due to power fluctuations, so Anna

chose not to rely on it. All she needed to know was that she had very little time to find Chuck and Eli.

From the events of her dream, Anna came quickly to the inescapable conclusion that Eli was in league with the very same character that was at the center of her unusual vampire tale. That, or perhaps Eli was the physical manifestation of a fantastic figure. Whatever the relationship between Bân and Eli, their alliance was about to bring about the destruction of at least two more lives--Jim's and Chuck's--if she didn't stop Chuck in time.

She stood up from the table where she had dozed off, and contemplated her actions. Would it be better to try to find Chuck and Eli, who, if she reasoned correctly, probably began their ritual near the waterfall, and thus try to prevent them, physically if necessary, from

carrying through their misguided action? Or would it be more efficient to try to reach Jim in time, even though she had no idea where he would be sleeping?

Outside, in the cool air of the blood hour, Anna stood still for a second and looked at the sky. A couple of early jays were yammering in the east, but aside from the hum of the fluorescent light over the door of the cafeteria and the high-pitched harmony of cicadas, she heard nothing, at least at first.

A moment later, however, she thought she could hear the hushed sibilants of whispering. She couldn't make out the voices, but she assumed they belonged to Eli and Chuck. Though it was hard to tell exactly where they were coming from, they clearly were moving in a direction away from the waterfall. She secretly rejoiced that she had decided to not seek them there, for she might have missed them, leaving the cafeteria building maybe a moment sooner, and would then have been too late.

She now had to quickly determine how to find Jim before they did. She assumed, from the direction Chuck and Eli seemed to be headed, that he was in one of the cabins, and was unlikely to be alone. She calculated that the cabins were roughly equidistant from her present position and the place where the whispering had come

from. Her only hope was that Chuck and Eli were also ignorant of which cabin Jim was in, though she doubted they wouldn't have been smart enough to determine that first. There was still an outside chance that they were both wrong, that Jim, in his usurpation of Rafael's position, had decided to sleep in Rafael's apartment at the back of the Administration building. But she doubted it, since to do so would risk losing his tenuous grasp on the wills of those still loyal to him.

It was still too dark to run. The dim horizontal light in the east was not bright enough to illuminate the ground, which Anna knew might be uneven. Nevertheless, if she walked, and if Eli and Chuck had the advantage of knowing precisely where Jim was sleeping, she would not get there in time to stop them from killing this supposed vampire. She decided to chance it.

She began to jog, outrunning the low visibility only slightly. Her eyes gradually got used to the little light there was, but the lack of well defined shadows played tricks on her depth of field. What she thought was solid ground as often as not turned out to be anything but, sometimes taking the form of a sandy patch, other times a rock or indentation in the ground.

It was rough on her feet, even though she was wearing sandals, and she dared not take them off, although she knew she was less sure-footed with them on.

After getting the feel of the ground, and with the experience of several mishaps to tell her what was solid and what was not, she became confident enough to increase her pace, and she began to jog a little faster.

As she ran, she thought she could hear voices from time to time, though she couldn't be sure because the sound of her own heavy breathing was loud enough to drown out faint sounds in the distance. But if her hearing served her, it seemed as if the voices came from a spot much closer to the cabins than she was. She couldn't recognize them, and didn't want to stop so she could hear whether they belonged to Chuck and Eli. But if they had somehow gotten as close as it sounded, it was imperative for her to reach the cabins sooner. She increased her speed one more notch, breaking into a full run.

Her sense of balance was now very precarious. As her legs stretched out in front of her, it became a matter of faith that her feet would land on something solid in the darkness. For a while, her faith paid off, because she ran swiftly, without faltering in the least, though she wished even more that she could lose the sandals. Anna

felt that she now had enough time to at least disrupt the plans of her two cohorts. Even if she personally wasn't in time to stop them, she would get close enough that she might be able to wake people up, and Chuck and Eli would then be disarmed. Of course, such an action might also be to condemn them to the irrational judgments of a mob.

The rhythm of her stride felt good. Anna had never been particularly athletic or competitive, but she had strong legs and was built like a natural runner, and she could run fairly fast when she wanted to. But just as she was feeling confident about trying to run even faster, her stride was broken, when her right foot landed on a rock. The rock wasn't very large, but it was oddly shaped and sloped sharply enough on one side that it caused her sandal, which had not been fastened tightly, to move around from her sole to the side of her foot. As a consequence, the arch of her foot ended up on the other side of the rock. In the darkness, without any visual cues to help her orient herself, this break in her stride became irrecoverable, and she started to tumble.

Though she couldn't actually see the ground that she knew her face was about to hit, she could almost feel it coming up to meet her. Her face then hit the ground, hard, a split second before she would have wished, since

she hadn't had time to try to get a hand out to protect her face or break her fall.

The ground was rocky and not particularly soft, having already dried out from the quick rain earlier in the evening. When she hit, first her nose, then her forehead, and finally her mouth and chin, it hurt so much she couldn't help yelling out in pain. Her upper lip was split as it tried unsuccessfully to stop the sharp rock upon which her mouth landed from breaking two of her teeth. The shock of her teeth breaking was like a jolt of electricity that ran through her entire body. She could taste the blood that was oozing into the back of her throat.

But the pain now searing virtually every inch of her ripped up face was nothing compared to the pain she was registering in her ankle--the same, guilty ankle that had been so unreliable as to give way when the foot beneath it encountered an unforeseen rock.

Whether she'd actually broken her ankle or sprained it, she couldn't tell, but the pain was so great, the result was the same: she would be unable to go any further, unless she was braver than she generally gave herself credit for being.

She was sure her inadvertent cries of pain had alerted Chuck and Eli that she was outside the cabin area, and she hoped against hope that the noise had frightened them off rather than prompted them to hurry. From her position on the ground, immobile at least until the pain in her ankle subsided to the point where she wouldn't go into shock from trying to walk on it, her only chance was to try to wake everyone up before Chuck and Eli arrived. She was still pretty far away, and couldn't tell whether her voice would carry well enough to be capable of waking anyone up.

Considering the pain she was in, screaming wasn't going to be a problem. But before starting a barrage of meaningless yelling, which might actually produce the unintended result of alerting Eli and Chuck, while throwing those it was intended to warn into panic or confusion, Anna thought she should see if she could withstand the pain in her ankle enough to get closer, perhaps even reach someone's cabin in time to wake them up and convince them to intervene. It briefly occurred to her, as she contemplated exactly how much pain she would have to bear in order to rescue Jim, that this whole enterprise was a fantasy, that in fact Chuck and Eli would never in their wildest dreams contemplate cutting

off someone's head, vampire or no vampire, and that in fact she had sprained her ankle racing against no one, against phantoms, or perhaps against a couple of innocent people strolling around in the early morning. She wanted to believe this, not simply because it would release her from the obligation of having to test her now terribly swollen ankle, but also because it made a lot more sense than to imagine that someone like Chuck could ever do such a thing. Yet if she was wrong, if Chuck, somehow under Eli's influence, had been persuaded this was the best thing to do,

namely destroy Jim before Jim destroyed the others, then by failing to try at least one last time, she would have to accept the responsibility for probably disastrous consequences.

She felt her right ankle with her hand. The surface was completely numb, but as she applied pressure with her fingers, the pain closer to the joint was almost unbearable. She tried to imagine if there was any way she could walk on it. The joint was so weak, that she knew it would continue to give way any time it was subjected to more than the slightest pressure. If she'd had time, she would have tried to improvise a splint or bandage from her shirt or bra, but she was already losing precious

time, and was doomed to lose even more because in the best case, she would be limping extremely slowly.

Anna got herself into position to stand up in such a way as to avoid putting any weight on her right foot. Pushing herself up with her arms, and using her left leg to bear all her weight, she was able to stand up without a great deal of pain, at least until she at last had to use her other leg for balance. Then the pain began in earnest.

She tried to hobble on her left leg, dragging her right, using it merely as a counterbalance so she wouldn't fall forward. But the contact of her ankle with the ground was excruciating. She'd only gone about five yards when she began to feel faint, and she knew that the throbbing in her ankle was overloading her nervous system. Her desire to prevent a human catastrophe was overwhelmed, finally, by the limits imposed by human physiology. She collapsed not far from where she'd begun her valiant but short-lived effort, now being punished by a pain that felt ten times greater than it had five yards back.

She began to howl in agony. She screamed with all her being. Untempered by any sense of propriety, she bawled as she hadn't done probably since she was an

infant, if then. But the result of her screaming was that the pain in her ankle actually seemed to subside a little, and in those seconds when she was conscious enough to think about it, she hoped that her unmodulated cries would indeed wake up the Institute, if not the dead.

At one point, Anna stopped her screaming by sheer force of will, even though her ankle was still throbbing viciously, basically because she needed to catch her breath. But instead of silence when her crying ceased, she thought she heard an echo: in the distance, from the direction of the cabins, there was screaming, of the same utterly painful sort, and it sounded a lot like hers.

It only took a second for Anna to realize it was not an echo at all. It continued much too long after her own wailing had ceased, and as she listened more closely, she could discern that the voice was not similar to hers, but was higher pitched, a little younger.

Anna then briefly thought that maybe the parallel screams were some sort of hideous, mocking imitation of her own uncontrollable outbursts. Then, reconsidering, she came to her next conclusion, that they were some sort of antiphonal response, as if another woman in the dark were listening, and understood the language of pain.

Finally, the true, and only, reason a woman would be screaming at the Alpha Institute at dawn on this particular day displaced all other possibilities. Anna could no longer avoid attaching the frightening sounds to a mental image of the young actress coming upon (or, worse, being forced by circumstances to watch) the ritual decapitation of her lover for the night, Alpha's very own van driver, Jim.

The screaming in the distance wouldn't stop, and in fact, seemed to multiply into a chorus of men's and women's voices crying at their loudest. Anna, hearing this collective anguish from several hundred yards away, understood finally not only what had just happened in her unavoidable and unintentional absence, but also what now had to happen. She knew, for example, that she was next. She was the last defense, the last person who could stop Bân from finding, hence finishing, his painting of the *Death of Darkness*. She was, in other words, the last person who could stop the people left at the Institute from killing each other. And God only knew whom else.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

If Anna was right, if the lamenting she heard clearly coming from the area of the cabins was indeed the collective response to some willful and violent sacrifice performed by Chuck and Eli, then that meant that the last taboo--perhaps the only one ever strictly observed at Alpha, the taboo against taking human life--had been broken. And without that vestige of civilization, of man's interpretation of the will of the gods, now literally all hell would break loose.

The generally peace-loving New Age ideology of the Institute had become a sham, no longer capable of masking the greed and self-centeredness that motivated its clients in the other domains of their compartmentalized lives. But as much as Anna felt remorse over the destruction of Rafael's noble enterprise, her first concern at the moment, aside from overcoming the pain still gnawing at her consciousness, was to save herself.

She had never thought of herself as Chuck's enemy, nor could she imagine that she'd ever offended Eli in the brief but intense time she'd known her. Yet she knew without the slightest doubt that she was in danger. Who Eli really was still wasn't clear to her, but ever since

her last dream, and now seeing the control she exerted over Chuck, Anna knew that Eli represented a force that was not entirely human.

Eli, in Anna's opinion, was either some sort of servant of Bân, like Renfield, perhaps, or else she was the manifestation of Bân himself. It really didn't matter: she had the ability to enter Anna's dreams, *uninvited*, and also to provoke a nonviolent person like Chuck to commit a horrendous deed. If Eli and Bân were so closely connected, and if Bân still believed that Anna alone knew where his painting was being hidden, then he-- or she--would soon be coming after her.

There was, Anna understood, now looking down at her piteously swollen ankle in the first small light of dawn, no place to hide. For the first time she admitted to herself unequivocally that leaving the grounds of the Institute was not, in fact, an option, and probably never really had been since Eli arrived there, if not before. And to try to hide in such limited space from someone with powers like Eli's, would be an exercise in futility. Eli would have to do nothing more than persuade the rest of the people at the Institute that Anna and Chuck were together responsible for the most recent and bloody tragedy, and the mob would be able to track her down and

destroy her in no time. Then they would be called upon to destroy each other, at each person's door being laid the blame for all the grief caused by their inability to escape, and only then would it become possible for them to export their fear beyond the perimeter of Alpha. Just as planned, Anna assumed.

To give herself just a little more time in which to figure out what turf she would meet Bân on for the final time, she had to find a place where she could not easily be found. The cabins were out of the question, as were the waterfall and the old farming outbuildings. The cafeteria was too exposed, and the Administration building too obvious. Wherever she decided to go, she knew she would have to get there soon, because the sun was coming up quickly, and Eli would be able to find her, since her cries of agony when she had sprained her ankle had more than likely given away her position.

*The Rover!* The answer was given to her as a gift, in the form of one more brief recollection of Rafael's face falling into her hands. She didn't know exactly where the car had been pushed--she hadn't seen it since it had been moved--but she knew it must be off to her left somewhere, on the other side of the Administration building. If she could only just get there soon enough, without making any

noise. But meeting both of those conditions was going to be difficult, even though the pain in her ankle had lessened somewhat.

She decided she might be able to make it if she could provide her ankle with a little support. Since she now had a little more time than when she was trying to stop Chuck and Eli from getting to Jim, she decided to take off her tank top. She twirled it into a rope, then tied it around her ankle as a sort of tourniquet. The pressure against the edema at first shot a bolt of pain through her that was so intense she had to bite her already torn lip to keep from yelling out. The blood from her lip started to flow again, and she could feel it now dripping onto her chest and stomach. Eventually, her ankle seemed to stabilize, and the makeshift bandage felt as though it might help her be able stand.

She thought about crawling toward the car, so she would be less visible, but it would be very slow and would probably leave a trail in the grass and dirt. She would have to try on foot. It was still dark enough that if she were seen, she would be nothing more than a shadow in the distance.

Anna made it to her feet. She stood for a second, testing both her ankle and her visibility. Then,

convinced that she had no options, she began limping furiously in the direction she imagined the Rover would be. At first her ankle merely hurt, but paradoxically the pain from hobbling soon became so great she was able to ignore it, the way people are able to go on ignoring the fact of death because it is so big and constant that the only other choice is to give up altogether. And Anna wasn't about to do that.

When she reached the front of the Administration building, she stopped for a second. She knew she couldn't be seen from the cabins anymore, and she doubted whether Chuck and Eli would come after her immediately.

She tried to avoid visualizing Chuck bringing down a rusty scythe onto the neck of the sleeping boy, but she needed to imagine that horrible scene so she could imagine what Chuck and Eli--now clearly acting in concert, it seemed--would do next. Would they stay there in the cabin, guiltlessly, while those who had earlier been charmed by Jim discovered that their king had been slain? Or would they, more likely, have fled quickly to avoid the vengeful wrath of the mob? In the

latter case, she imagined, they might head back to one of the barns or perhaps the waterfall. But how long they would remain in hiding was an open question.

Looking around, Anna tried to remember in which direction Chuck and the others had begun to push the Range Rover. She was standing not far from the mound that marked the mass grave of those who had died in the car she was now about to go hide in. As she saw that small tumulus, she realized that the ten or so bodies beneath it constituted merely the beginning of a plague now threatening to grow to much greater proportions. Once Bân obtained access to his unfinished icon, there was probably no boundary that could retain the impending destruction.

The lawn in front of the Administration building dropped off a bit to the left, onto a lower lawn. That was the most likely place for them to have pushed the car, since it would be easiest, once they got it moving, to roll it down a hill. Anna headed in that direction.

The shirt around her ankle had become very loose from all the dragging of her foot, and was now in danger of tripping her as she tried to make it down the short slope. She kneeled down and untied it, and was about to leave it there, thinking it had outlived its usefulness. But she quickly realized that it might give her away, so she stuffed it in her pocket rather than putting the muddy piece of cloth back on.

Standing at the edge of the slope, she looked around. She could see the Rover, about fifty yards away, in the middle of the lower field, as if it had been simply pushed over the hill and allowed to coast to a stop. In the far distance, she could still hear the din of voices, some screams but more commonly shouts. To Anna's relief, it did not seem as though any of the noises were getting any closer.

She almost ran up to the white metal box, as if it were a shrine that could heal her enormous pain. As she put her hand on the handle of the driver's side door, she could not help remembering how easily the door had swung open for her the last time she'd touched it. But this time, it was a different matter. The door was locked. She was certain that Jim had the keys, and she was not about to go get them from him.

She could see through the window that all the latches were down, in the locked position, but she thought she'd try them all, anyway. The two left doors were definitely locked. She hobbled uncomfortably around the front and tried the right side doors. The right rear door handle had a little play in it, and for a second, Anna thought it might open. But the seductive movement in

the handle only happened once, after which it became as motionless as all the others.

Anna assumed that such an expensive car would have an interlock so that if the driver's door were locked, all the others would be locked as well, and therefore there wasn't much hope that the tailgate door would somehow be unlocked. Still, having not very much else to do at the moment besides

try everything, it was worth a shot. She hobbled around to the back of the car.

She tried the latch. It, too, was locked--at least the handle was. But the door itself had not been closed tightly, so that the door opened about an inch away from the gasket around the frame. She pulled on the door as hard as she could, thinking she might be able to break the lock, but to no avail. She then considered breaking one of the windows, but remembered that several people had already tried and been unable to break the windows from the inside, and besides, breaking the windows might make a lot of noise, which was the last thing she wanted to do.

It was too dark to see how the actual lock mechanism worked. Anna doubted she would be able to figure it out

anyway. But she thought maybe she could just fiddle with it, and maybe she'd push the right thing the right way.

She stuck her index finger in the opening between the door and the frame at about the same level as the handle. She touched a complex mechanism of cold steel that seemed as immovable as the door handles. Still, by moving her finger around and under various metal pieces, she at last found one that seemed to move a little. That was the one she wanted.

Sticking in another finger, she eventually had enough leverage to push the piece a little further in the direction it had originally yielded. A second later, and she heard the comforting click of the door latch being opened. As she opened the door, the car exhaled one long breath of stale, moist air that still smelled a little like burnt electrical wiring. Anna hesitated a moment, wondering whether climbing inside was the wisest thing to do. Then she decided it was.

Now what? was the question that leapt irrepressibly to mind. The first thing, of course, was to close the tail gate as quietly as she could, then get as low on the floor in front of the rear seat as possible so she couldn't be seen unless someone were peering directly in through the rear window.

It was only a matter of time before someone stumbled across her, and the time would probably be less than she would hope for, because Anna was certain that Eli would figure out where she was fairly quickly. Settling into her defensive, and more or less helpless, position on the floor, Anna began to pore over the potential outcomes of her situation. Sitting awkwardly in the stifling stillness of the car, Anna could see the sky getting lighter in the east. At some point she knew she would have to get out of the car or roast, since she couldn't open the windows and the only reason the temperature inside the car was at all tolerable--probably already over 90 degrees, Anna gauged from the way she was sweating--was that the sun had been below the horizon for several hours.

She began to imagine what it must have been like, to be inside such a closed, cramped space and seemingly have no way out. The absurdity was that it was their own anxiety and fear that had trapped everyone in the car. If they had done as Rafael had urged, if everyone had remained calm, there

might have been a much less depressing result.

In the clammy, stuffy heat, even as the car's sole occupant, she could empathize with the feelings of panic

and breathlessness that must have beset her predecessors. *But they should have listened to Rafael*, she told herself.

"You will have to fight him back in time. Remember your name. I will be with you."

The radio couldn't be on, not without the key. And there was no one else in the car, she'd made sure of that while she was trying the doors. Yet the voice, which sounded a little like Rafael's but not exactly, came clearly from the front seat. Anna sat up and peered through the space between the front seats. She half hoped she would see Rafael sitting there, so that the voice would be more than just a hallucination, but she knew if she did, Rafael himself would be a hallucination, too.

Whether she was fortunate or unfortunate in finding no one to whom to ascribe the voice she'd just heard, she wasn't quite sure, but she casually assumed that the inside of a car where so many people had died prematurely or even violently was bound to be occupied by ghosts, by lingering human memories, even with voices.

What the voice had meant was very obscure, but Anna was wise enough not to ignore it. She could feel that it had come from Rafael--the real Rafael, not an imitator--and therefore was on her side, protective. She wanted to

ask him, as if in a theosophical seance, exactly what he'd meant, but she knew it didn't work that way. Rafael had said what he needed to say, and no more. He would not repeat himself, even for her.

If nothing else, Anna understood from this brief instruction in the form of an aural hallucination, that in order to go "back in time," she would have to enter another state of consciousness. And not being a shaman or a magician, the only other state she knew how to enter willingly, other than the one she was in, was sleep. More specifically, dream.

But how could she go to sleep again? The sun was rising, as was the interior temperature of the car. She had overslept at the table in the cafeteria, and wasn't the least bit tired. And on top of it all, the pain in her ankle--

The pain! Like the pain in her breast, which had disappeared after her erotic encounter with Rafael's "ghost," the pain in her ankle had gone away just as magically following Rafael's instruction. With the pain gone, she still might not be able to sleep, but she could at least enter a state of deep meditation. And the advantage over sleep would be that she would be aware of actual danger, either in the form of people approaching

the car, or the temperature approaching an unbearable degree. But whether she could go back in time, that was another matter. How far back, and what her name had to do with anything, were questions she would have to leave until she encountered someone--Rafael?--who was in a better position to answer them.

She positioned herself as comfortably as she could on the floor, but there simply wasn't enough room for her to relax. She hated the idea of moving to the carrying compartment in the back of the Rover, because she would be quite visible through the tailgate window, but the trade-off would be that she would otherwise have to just sit there, unable to relax, and wait until someone discovered her, and then it would be too late. So she clambered over the back seat and sat down in the middle of the luggage compartment. She had a clear view of the Administration building, and of the very tree behind which she and Eli had overheard Jim talking about sacrifice. She closed her eyes, causing the maple tree and nearby white building to dissolve. The only way out of Alpha, she mused, was delta.

She heard Rafael's hypnotic voice coaxing her deeper and deeper into her own consciousness. She didn't know what he was saying, his words--if words they were--were

indistinct. But she knew he was leading her, perhaps back in time.

Her mind began to grow dark, or at least she had the feeling of moving into darkness, and she became afraid, remembering the death of Ouspensky. But she could still hear Raf's gentle, coaxing voice, and knew she had no choice but to trust it. Him.

Soon, the darkness was as absolute as it had been when she had left her body during her class, but this time, she knew exactly where her body was, down to the last follicle. When it seemed the darkness could become no darker, Anna began to hear voices. At first, she thought they might be outside the car, that she'd been discovered, but even so, she resisted the temptation to open her eyes. The voices continued, and were speaking in a foreign language, one whose rhythms and accent seemed vaguely familiar, but which nevertheless she could not understand a single word of. They seemed to be arguing, or discussing some matter of grave seriousness, as if in a trial. She eavesdropped, and as she listened, the darkness began to recede like stage curtains being drawn aside.

A tall man, wearing a monk's habit, was being taken from a small, barren room by medieval soldiers. Anna

watched her own dream as though she were the roving eye of a tracking movie camera, able to penetrate every wall, see inside every chamber.

The tall man was not struggling, but rather, like Christ on the path to Golgotha, seemed to understand his mission, his fate, and was resigned to it. Anna wished she knew what was being said, since she had no idea what was going on in this dramatic scene before her, but she tacitly understood she was obliged merely to observe, not to participate in a more active fashion.

The monk was delivered by his military escorts to a very regal looking man sitting on a throne in an almost empty room. The seated man began to ask the monk a number of a questions. The king or emperor, Anna thought, looked a great deal like her father: he, too, was tall, with a professorial smile and brilliant eyes, a scraggly grey beard and curly

grey hair. He was strikingly handsome in this particular reality, and as she watched him questioning the monk from his enormous and beautiful purple velvet throne, Anna realized that she felt the same sort of respect for him that she had felt for her father in the days when he was at Columbia.

From what Anna could tell, the monk was some sort of political prisoner, who was being offered an opportunity to recant, but refused. He frequently looked upward, and gestured toward the sky, as if to suggest that angels from on high might at any moment come down and remove him from this predicament. But his flagrant refusal to recant made the king angry, and the king's eyes flashed like her father's used to whenever he would fly into an uncontrollable rage so that Anna would be terrified that he might kill her or her mother.

Out of anger, the man on the throne stood up abruptly and gestured to the guards that the monk be taken away. They led him into a large, elliptical courtyard, which reminded Anna of the courtyard where the wedding party was taking place in her original dream of the icon painter, but everything now was more refined, more ornate, with gold sculptures and purple banners everywhere. A tall marble obelisk with inscriptions in Greek stood at one epicenter of the courtyard.

Behind the procession of soldiers surrounding the old monk was the emperor, whose face, Anna noticed, exhibited a definite cruelty, and he walked with an air of derision she deemed unsuitable, considering the presumable difference in their stations in life.

Right in the center of the courtyard was a large pile of felled trees, mostly pines, that had been arranged in a mountainous heap. Several men with torches were standing around the base of this mountain, and at a quick but ceremonial signal from the emperor, who had now come forth to address a large crowd of spectators, they threw their lit torches in among the branches.

Because of all the pine sap, the pyre was blazing almost immediately. Anna stared with curiosity at the slightly blasé look on the monk's face, which she assumed was masking--for what else could he really feel?--utter terror at the prospect of being burned alive.

The emperor again began to speak heavily to the monk, offering him one last chance to avoid the inevitable immolation that was awaiting him, but the monk broke into a mad, outrageous laugh. Whatever feelings of sympathy or pity for him Anna had allowed herself to feel for him quickly vanished. She chastised herself for so easily being persuaded to take the side of the authorities, and realized that she and her mother had both similarly capitulated to the arrogant authority of her father.

Someone from the crowd just then broke through, and tore off the cloak the old heretic was wearing. Waving it

tauntingly before his eyes, the intruder then cast it directly into the flames, as proof that it would be, like the monk's flesh, hardly impervious to the enormous consumptive power of the flames. But as the cloak withered to ashes in mere seconds, the monk pointed dramatically up to the sky above the pyre, as if in his version of things, the cloak had been, like he would be, rescued by angels, plucked from the flames.

The guards, again at a signal from their commander, surrounded the defiant old man, and began to conduct him to the blazing pyre. But he broke free of their grasp, and began walking toward the pile of wood on his own.

When he was about as close as anyone could get without being scorched by the heat, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Where is my painting?" the emperor asked, looking straight at Anna. Anna could not understand his speech, but the way he was staring at her, almost with hatred, told her he could have been asking nothing else.

How Bân had found her--or how she had found him, across all these centuries and seas--she had no idea, but his demand was unmistakable. His voice was unmistakable, as well: it was a perfect imitation of her father's.

The flames of the pyre grew higher, amplifying the emperor's rage. All of a sudden, Anna felt her wrists being locked in iron cuffs attached to heavy chains, and though she could not see those who were forcing her, she felt herself being dragged from wherever she was right into the scene she'd been passively watching--into this particular episode from Byzantine history.

"Where is my painting?" her father, the emperor, demanded again, sternly.

Anna was drawn even closer to the pyre. The iron of the shackles was getting so hot that they began to burn her wrists. She was standing next to the monk, whose wool habit was already beginning to smoke from the heat. She wondered how she could stand it. Then the old man began quite purposefully to walk into the flames. As he walked, he gathered up the chains attached to Anna's limbs, and was about to take her with him. Realizing that she was really about to die, unless she could stop him, she cried out, "Rafael!" She yelled it with so much force that it brought her back into contact with the world of the Rover and of the Institute outside it, and she wondered whether she'd actually yelled Rafael's name out loud and whether anyone had heard her.

At the very moment she uttered his name, she felt the blistering shackles drop away, and she ceased being pulled into the pyre with the lunatic heretic.

"Darkness must die! You cannot stop this. Who do you think you are?" The voice was again her father's, though now, it seemed, disembodied. "Where is the painting?"

With one enormous act of conscious will from inside this disoriented vision, Anna stared fixedly at the face of the old monk being consumed in the flames. A paradox of confusion and beatitude had been decided upon as his last facial gesture. Focusing on that craziness, Anna gradually

transformed the features of his face into those of the emperor, or rather, her father. The sheer anger on the transmuted face distorted it further, so that the man on the pyre looked neither like the old monk nor her real father. Instead, it took on the repulsive features of the mysterious icon painter she had met before--it was unmistakably Bân.

"You cannot kill me," Bân screamed at her, beginning to writhe in the flames. "Don't you know that? I am a god. You cannot kill a god."

In fact, Anna believed him, but nevertheless, she continued to focus on not letting Bân's image leave the

body that had, when it belonged to the monk, consigned itself to the flames so willingly.

"You cannot kill me," the gruff voice uttered in agony one last time, before the steam of blood evaporated and the flesh burst into flame.

As if the fire itself could not stand the taste, it issued no bellowing clouds, but simply one thin blue line of smoke, rising from the very center of the pyre.

With the sun now well above the horizon, it was already sweltering inside the car. Anna had never lost touch with her physical environment, and was glad to be back from her psychic sojourn so she could at last let herself out of the car. For a second, the tailgate wouldn't open when she tried it, and she momentarily began to panic. But she calmed herself down and tried the interior handle once more, and the door opened easily. Before climbing out into the bright morning, she turned around toward the front.

"Raf?" she asked quietly, giving him one last chance to reappear, perhaps even to persuade her that it had all been a dream. But as fuzzy as the boundaries were between her waking existence and her dream existence, Anna knew without any doubt that only part of what had happened to

her in the last few days took place in her dreams. She had to admit to herself, however, that she might not be able to tell which part was which.

In the distance, approaching the Institute from the direction of town, were several sirens, and their wailings were so distinct that she knew that the police, the fire department, and the rescue squad--all of whom had been contacted recently--were at last on their way. A little late, of course, but at least it meant that whatever spell or force had been keeping them away no longer existed...or at any rate, was no longer around Alpha.

It wasn't going to be easy to explain things. The deaths of the art importer Ouspensky and Det. Consigliare had already been explained in terms the outside world could accept. There was also a slight chance that autopsies on the bodies of Bill Johnson and Louise Campbell might reveal reassuring evidence that they, too, had died of explainable, if not exactly natural, causes. The deaths and subsequent hasty burial of everyone who'd been locked in the malfunctioning Range Rover would be shocking, but it would probably be easy

enough to prove that there had been an unfortunate electrical failure. But the beheading of the young van

driver, Jim--well, there would simply be no reason for that that anyone who had not been imprisoned at Alpha over the previous days would ever be able to understand. Nor would anyone be able to figure out how so many deaths had happened in such an unnaturally short amount of time.

Anna wondered whether she ought to go view Jim's body before the local authorities arrived. After all, his gruesome decapitation at the hands of Eli and Chuck was so far only speculation on her part. Perhaps it never really happened. Perhaps something else had provoked all the screaming that had in turn forced Anna to hide in the car and, ultimately, to confront the memory of her father in the form of an ancient dualistic god. Perhaps, she even considered, Jim had never really returned.

Eli Popova, Anna was certain, was gone. She could feel it. The diminutive folklorist with the sparkling eyes and long brown hair, who possessed a marvelous gift for retelling the eerie tales handed down over the centuries in her native Bulgaria, had probably either slipped away, across the stream beneath the waterfall and into the woods, or else vanished, like her dream counterpart Bân, into thin air. In any case, she would not be around to provide testimony, nor would she ever be

held accountable for the mind control she had exerted over poor, trusting Chuck.

Anna would of course try to explain what had really happened, but she knew she would have to soft-pedal any references to her hyperactive dream life, and thus would have a hard time explaining how she knew certain things about Eli. So Chuck would be on his own, though there was the possibility that the police might be willing to chalk the whole messy episode up to some sort of "mass hysteria," in light of their own irrational incapacity to fulfill their obligations. How everything would eventually be explained in the "real world," Anna no longer cared. She knew what she knew.

She had seen her cohorts--generally reasonable, competent people--become susceptible to a panic caused by nothing more than their unwillingness to accept the limitation imposed by death. And that disregard of an obvious truth had led them to the brink of destroying themselves.

Although it was Anna herself who finally dispatched the god Bân, along with his compulsive drive to return to his art--the masterpiece of which would, when completed, represent the end of the physical world--she could not consider him *evil*. After all, he was, indeed, a god, and

if it was to his advantage that people killed themselves, and therefore hastened the true end of the forces of darkness in the cosmos, she could not fault him for that. No, if there was evil, if the Alpha Institute had in fact been visited by a vampire, then the shape of that vampire was not as a lover--not Rafael, or Jim, or even Eli--but rather the formless and unacknowledged fear, hidden by taboo, that the

boundary between life and death might not be quite as definite as people want to believe in order to make their lives comfortable. And when that disclosure becomes irrefutable, the vampire becomes evident through the result, that loss of energy that is spent trying to restore the secure knowledge that life is real.

For now, life would go on. Bân, being a god, would continue to survive as long as human consciousness maintained such a pair of categories as the divine and the demonic. His painting, his supposed icon of the Death of Darkness, subtitled perhaps the End of Time, was itself merely an illusion, an object serving as a motive for Bân's occasional reappearance in the world. In fact, Anna at last understood, listening to the sirens getting louder as the emergency vehicles came onto the grounds

of Alpha, Bân's painting was no more real (or unreal)  
than Bân's pyre.

THE END