

Men Are Trouble

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2004 by James Patrick Kelly, Inc.

First Published in Asimov's Science Fiction, June, 2004.

I stared at my sidekick, willing it to chirp. I'd already tried watching the door, but no one had even breathed on it. I could've been writing up the Rashmi Jones case, but then I could've been dusting the office. It needed dusting. Or having a consult with Johnnie Walker, who had just that morning opened an office in the bottom drawer of my desk. Instead, I decided to open the window. Maybe a new case would arrive by carrier pigeon. Or wrapped around a brick.

Three stories below me, Market Street was as empty as the rest of the city. Just a couple of plain janes in walking shoes and a granny in a blanket and sandals. She was sitting on the curb in front of a dead Starbucks, strumming street guitar for pocket change, hoping to find a philanthropist in hell. Her singing was faint but sweet as peach ice cream. My guy, talking 'bout my guy. Poor old bitch, I thought. There are no guys — not yours, not anyone's. She stopped singing as a devil flapped over us, swooping for a landing on the next block. It had been a beautiful June morning until then, the moist promise of spring not yet broken by summer in our withered city. The granny struggled up, leaning on her guitar. She wrapped the blanket tight around her and trudged downtown.

My sidekick did chirp then, but it was Sharifa, my about-to-be ex-lover. She must have been calling from the hospital; she was wearing her light blue scrubs. Even on the little screen, I could see that she had been crying. "Hi Fay."

I bit my lip.

"Come home tonight," she said. "Please."

"I don't know where home is."

"I'm sorry about what I said." She folded her arms tight across her chest. "It's your body. Your life."

I loved her. I was sick about being seeded, the abortion, everything that had happened between us in the last week. I said nothing.

Her voice was sandpaper on glass. “Have you had it done yet?” That made me angry all over again. She was wound so tight she couldn’t even say the word.

“Let me guess, Doctor,” I said, “Are we talking about me getting scrubbed?”

Her face twisted. “Don’t.”

“If you want the dirt,” I said, “you could always hire me to shadow myself. I need the work.”

“Make it a joke, why don’t you?”

“Okey-doke, Doc,” I said and clicked off.

So my life was cocked — not exactly main menu news. Still, even with the window open, Sharifa’s call had sucked all the air out of my office. I told myself that all I needed was coffee, although what I really wanted was a rich aunt, a vacation in Fiji and a new girlfriend. I locked the door behind me, slogged down the hall and was about to press the down button when the elevator chimed. The doors slid open to reveal George, the bot in charge of our building, and a devil — no doubt the same one that had just flown by. I told myself this had nothing to do with me. The devil was probably seeing crazy Martha down the hall about a tax rebate or taking piano lessons from Abby upstairs. Sure, and drunks go to bars for the peanuts.

“Hello, Fay,” said George. “This one had true hopes of finding you in your office.”

I goggled, slack-jawed and stupefied, at the devil. Of course, I’d seen them on vids and in the sky and once I watched one waddle into City Hall but I’d never been close enough to slap one before. I hated the devils. The elevator doors shivered and began to close. George stuck an arm out to stop them.

“May this one borrow some of your time?” George said.

The devil was just over a meter tall. Its face was the color of an old bloodstain and its maw seemed to kiss the air as it breathed with a wet, sucking sound. The

wings were wrapped tight around it; the membranes had a rusty translucence that only hinted at the sleek bullet of a body beneath. I could see my reflection in its flat compound eyes. I looked like I had just been hit in the head with a lighthouse.

“Something is regrettable, Fay?” said George.

That was my cue for a wisecrack to show them that no invincible mass-murdering alien was going to intimidate Fay Hardaway.

“No,” I said. “This way.”

If they could’ve sat in chairs, there would’ve been plenty of room for us in my office. But George announced that the devil needed to make itself comfortable before we began. I nodded as I settled behind my desk, grateful to have something between the two of them and me. George dragged both chairs out into the little reception room. The devil spread its wings and swooped up onto my file cabinet, ruffling the hardcopy on my desk. It filled the back wall of my office as it perched there, a span of almost twenty feet. George wedged himself into a corner and absorbed his legs and arms until he was just a head and a slab of gleaming blue bot stuff. The devil gazed at me as if it were wondering what kind of rug I would make. I brought up three new icons on my desktop. New Case. Searchlet. Panic button.

“Indulge this one to speak for Seeren?” said George. “Seeren has a bright desire to task you to an investigation.”

The devils never spoke to us, never explained what they were doing. No one knew exactly how they communicated with the army of bots they had built to prop us up.

I opened the New Case folder and the green light blinked. “I’m recording this. If I decide to accept your case, I will record my entire investigation.”

“A thoughtful gesture, Fay. This one needs to remark on your client Rashmi Jones.”

“She’s not my client.” It took everything I had not to fall off my chair. “What about her?”

“Seeren conveys vast regret. All deaths diminish all.”

I didn't like it that this devil knew anything at all about Rashmi, but especially that she was dead. I'd found the body in Room 103 of the Comfort Inn just twelve hours ago. “The cops already have the case.” I didn't mind that there was a snarl in my voice. “Or what's left of it. There's nothing I can do for you.”

“A permission, Fay?”

The icon was already flashing on my desktop. I opened it and saw a pix of Rashmi in the sleeveless taupe dress that she had died in. She had the blue ribbon in her hair. She was smiling, as carefree as a kid on the last day of school. The last thing she was thinking about was sucking on an inhaler filled with hydrogen cyanide. Holding her hand was some brunette dressed in a mannish chalk-stripe suit and a matching pillbox hat with a veil as fine as smoke. The couple preened under a garden arch that dripped with pink roses. They faced right, in the direction of the hand of some third party standing just off camera. It was an elegant hand, a hand that had never been in dishwater or changed a diaper. There was a wide silver ring on the fourth finger, engraved with a pattern or maybe some kind of fancy writing. I zoomed on the ring and briefly tormented pixels but couldn't get the pattern resolved.

I looked up at the devil and then at George. “So?”

“This one notices especially the digimark,” said George. “Date-stamped June 12, 2:52.”

“You're saying it was taken yesterday afternoon?”

That didn't fit — except that it did. I had Rashmi downtown shopping for shoes late yesterday morning. At 11:46 she bought a \$13 pair of this season's Donya Durands, now missing. At 1:23 she charged 89 for a Waldorf salad and an iced tea at Maison Diana. She checked into the Comfort Inn at 6:40. She didn't have a reservation, so maybe this was a spur of the moment decision. The desk clerk remembered her as distraught. That was the word she used. A precise word, although a bit highbrow for the Comfort Inn. Who buys expensive shoes the day before she intends to kill herself? Somebody who is distraught. I glanced again at my desktop. Distraught was precisely what Rashmi Jones was not in this pix. Then I noticed the shoes: ice and taupe Donya Durands.

“Where did you get this?” I said to the devil.

It stared through me like I was a dirty window.

I tried the bot. I wouldn't say that I liked George exactly, but he'd always been straight with me. “What's this about, George? Finding the tommy?”

“The tommy?”

“The woman holding Rashmi's hand.”

“Seeren has made this one well aware of Kate Vermeil,” said George. “Such Kate Vermeil takes work at 44 East Washington Avenue and takes home at 465 12th Avenue, Second Floor Left.”

I liked that, I liked it a lot. Rashmi's mom had told me that her daughter had a Christer friend called Kate, but I didn't even have a last name, much less an address. I turned to the devil again. “You know this how?”

All that got me was another empty stare.

“Seeren,” I said, pushing back out of my chair, “I'm afraid George has led you astray. I'm the private investigator.” I stood to show them out. “The mind reader's office is across the street.”

This time George didn't ask permission. My desktop chirped. I waved open a new icon. A certified bank transfer in the amount of a thousand dollars dragged me back onto my chair.

“A cordial inducement,” said George. “With a like amount offered after the success of your investigation.”

I thought of a thousand dinners in restaurants with linen tablecloths. “Tell me already.” A thousand bottles of smoky scotch.

“This one draws attention to the hand of the unseen person,” said the bot. “Seeren has the brightest desire to meeting such person for fruitful business discussions.”

The job smelled like the dumpster at Fran's Fish Fry. Precious little money

changed hands in the pretend economy. The bots kept everything running, but they did nothing to create wealth. That was supposed to be up to us, I guess, only we'd been sort of discouraged. In some parts of town, that kind of change could hire a Felony 1, with a handful of Misdemeanors thrown in for good luck.

“That’s more than I’m worth,” I said. “A hundred times more. If Seeren expects me to break the arm attached to that hand, it’s talking to the wrong jane.”

“Violence is to be deplored,” said George. “However, Seeren tasks Fay to discretion throughout. Never police, never news, never even rumor if possible.”

“Oh, discretion.” I accepted the transfer. “For two large, I can be as discreet as the Queen’s butler.”

2

I could've taken a cab, but they're almost all driven by bots now, and bots keep nobody's secrets. Besides, even though I had a thousand dollars in the bank, I thought I'd let it settle in for a while. Make itself at home. So I bicycled over to 12th Avenue. I started having doubts as I hit the 400 block. This part of the city had been kicked in the head and left bleeding on the sidewalk. Dark bars leaned against pawnshops. Board-ups turned their blank plywood faces to the street. There would be more bots than women in this neighborhood and more rats than bots.

The Adagio Spa squatted at 465 12th Avenue. It was a brick building with a reinforced luxar display window that was so scratched it looked like a thin slice of rainstorm. There were dusty plants behind it. The second floor windows were bricked over. I chained my bike to a dead car, set my sidekick to record and went in.

The rear wall of the little reception area was bright with pix of some Mediterranean seaside town. A clump of bad pixels made the empty beach flicker. A bot stepped through the door that led to the spa and took up a position at the front desk. "Good afternoon, Madam," he said. "It's most gratifying to welcome you. This one is called ..."

"I'm looking for Kate Vermeil." I don't waste time on chitchat with bots. "Is she in?"

"It's regrettable that she no longer takes work here."

"She worked here?" I said. "I was told she lived here."

"You was told wrong." A granny filled the door, and then hobbled through, leaning on a metal cane. She was wearing a yellow flowered dress that was not quite as big as a circus tent and over it a blue smock with Noreen embroidered over the left breast. Her face was wide and pale as a hardboiled egg, her hair a ferment of tight gray curls. She had the biggest hands I had ever seen. "I'll take care of this, Barry. Go see to Helen Ritzi. She gets another needle at twelve, then turn down the heat to 101."

The bot bowed politely and left us.

“What’s this about then?” The cane wobbled and she put a hand on the desk to steady herself.

I dug the sidekick out of my slacks, opened the PI license folder and showed it to her. She read it slowly, sniffed and handed it back. “Young fluffs working at play jobs. Do something useful, why don’t you?”

“Like what,” I said. “Giving perms? Face peels?”

She was the woman of steel; sarcasm bounced off her. “If nobody does a real job, pretty soon the damn bots will replace us all.”

“Might be an improvement.” It was something to say, but as soon as I said it I wished I hadn’t. My generation was doing better than the grannies ever had. Maybe someday our kids wouldn’t need bots to survive.

Our kids. I swallowed a mouthful of ashes and called the pix Seeren had given me onto the sidekick’s screen. “I’m looking for Kate Vermeil.” I aimed it at her.

She peered at the pix and then at me. “You need a manicure.”

“The hell I do.”

“I work for a living, fluff. And my hip hurts if I stand up too long.” She pointed her cane at the doorway behind the desk. “What did you say your name was?”

The battered manicure table was in an alcove decorated with fake grapevines that didn’t quite hide the water stains in the drop ceiling. Dust covered the leaves, turning the plastic fruit from purple to gray.

Noreen rubbed a thumb over the tips of my fingers. “You bite your nails, or do you just cut them with a chainsaw?”

She wanted a laugh so I gave her one.

“So, nails square, round or oval?” Her skin was dry and mottled with liver spots.

“Haven’t a clue.” I shrugged. “This was your idea.”

Noreen perched on an adjustable stool that was cranked low so that her face was only a foot above my hands. There were a stack of stainless steel bowls, a jar of Vaseline, a round box of salt, a bowl filled with packets of sugar stolen from McDonald's and a liquid soap dispenser on the table beside her. She started filing each nail from the corner to the center, going from left to right and then back. At first she worked in silence. I decided not to push her.

"Kate was my masseuse up until last week," she said finally. "Gave her notice all of a sudden and left me in the lurch. I've had to pick up all her appointments and me with the bum hip. Some days I can't hardly get out of bed. Something happen to her?"

"Not as far as I know."

"But she's missing."

I shook my head. "I don't know where she is, but that doesn't mean she's missing."

Noreen poured hot water from an electric kettle into one of the stainless steel bowls, added cool water from a pitcher, squirted soap and swirled the mixture around. "You soak for five minutes." She gestured for me to dip my hands into the bowl. "I'll be back. I got to make sure that Barry doesn't burn Helen Ritzi's face off." She stood with a grunt.

"Wait," I said. "Did she say why she was quitting?"

Noreen reached for her cane. "Couldn't stop talking about it. You'd think she was the first ever."

"The first to what?"

The granny laughed. "You're one hell of a detective, fluff. She was supposed to get married yesterday. Tell me that pix you're flashing ain't her doing the deed."

She shuffled off, her white nursemaid shoes scuffing against dirty linoleum. From deeper in the spa, I heard her kettle drum voice and then the bot's snare. I was itching to take my sidekick out of my pocket, but I kept my hands in the soak. Besides, I'd looked at the pix enough times to know that she was right. A wedding. The hand with the ring would probably belong to a Christer priest.

There would have been a witness and then the photographer, although maybe the photographer was the witness. Of course, I had tumbled to none of this in the two days I'd worked Rashmi Jones's disappearance. I was one hell of a detective, all right. And Rashmi's mom must not have known either. It didn't make sense that she would hire me to find her daughter and hold back something like that.

"I swear," said Noreen, leaning heavily on the cane as she creaked back to me, "that bot is scary. I sent down to City Hall for it just last week and already it knows my business left, right, up and down. The thing is, if they're so smart, how come they talk funny?"

"The devils designed them to drive us crazy."

"They didn't need no bots to do that, fluff."

She settled back onto her stool, tore open five sugar packets and emptied their contents onto her palm. Then she reached for the salt box and poured salt onto the sugar. She squirted soap onto the pile and then rubbed her hands together. "I could buy some fancy exfoliating cream but this works just as good." She pointed with her chin at my hands. "Give them a shake and bring them here."

I wanted to ask her about Kate's marriage plans, but when she took my hands in hers, I forgot the question. I'd never felt anything quite like it; the irritating scratch of the grit was offset by the sensual slide of our soapy fingers. Pleasure with just the right touch of pain — something I'd certainly be telling Sharifa about, if Sharifa and I were talking. My hands tingled for almost an hour afterward.

Noreen poured another bowl of water and I rinsed. "Why would getting married make Kate want to quit?" I asked.

"I don't know. Something to do with her church?" Noreen patted me dry with a threadbare towel. "She went over to the Christers last year. Maybe Jesus don't like married women giving backrubs. Or maybe she got seeded." She gave a bitter laugh. "Everybody does eventually."

I let that pass. "Tell me about Kate. What was she like to work with?"

"Average for the kind of help you get these sorry days." Noreen pushed at my

cuticles with an orangewood stick. “Showed up on time mostly; I could only afford to bring her in two days a week. No go-getter, but she could follow directions. Problem was she never really got close to the customers, always acting like this was just a pitstop. Kept to herself mostly, which was how I could tell she was excited about getting married. It wasn’t like her to babble.”

“And the bride?”

“Some Indian fluff — Rashy or something.”

“Rashmi Jones.”

She nodded. “Her I never met.”

“Did she go to school?”

“Must have done high school, but damned if I know where. Didn’t make much of an impression, I’d say. College, no way.” She opened a drawer where a flock of colored vials was nesting. “You want polish or clear coat on the nails?”

“No color. It’s bad for business.”

She leered at me. “Business is good?”

“You say she did massage for you?” I said. “Where did she pick that up?”

“Hold still now.” Noreen uncapped the vial; the milky liquid that clung to the brush smelled like super glue’s evil twin. “This is fast dry.” She painted the stuff onto my nails with short, confident strokes. “Kate claimed her mom taught her. Said she used to work at the health club at the Radisson before it closed down.”

“Did the mom have a name?”

“Yeah.” Noreen chewed her lower lip as she worked. “Mom. Give the other hand.”

I extended my arm. “So if Kate didn’t live here, where she did live?”

“Someplace. Was on her application.” She kept her head down until she’d finished. “You’re done. Wave them around a little — that’s it.”

After a moment, I let my arms drop to my side. We stared at each other. Then Noreen heaved herself off the stool and led me back out to the reception room.

“That’ll be a eighty cents for the manicure, fluff.” She waved her desktop on. “You planning on leaving a tip?”

I pulled out the sidekick and beamed two dollars at the desk. Noreen opened the payment icon, grunted her approval and then opened another folder. “Says here she lives at 44 East Washington Avenue.”

I groaned.

“Something wrong?”

“I already have that address.”

“Got her call too? Kate@Washington.03284.”

“No, that’s good. Thanks.” I went to the door and paused. I don’t know why I needed to say anything else to her, but I did. “I help people, Noreen. Or at least I try. It’s a real job, something bots can’t do.”

She just stood there, kneading the bad hip with a big, dry hand.

I unchained my bike, pedaled around the block and then pulled over. I read Kate Vermeil’s call into my sidekick. Her sidekick picked up on the sixth chirp. There was no pix.

“You haven’t reached Kate yet, but your luck might change if you leave a message at the beep.” She put on the kind of low, smoky voice that doesn’t come out to play until dark. It was a nice act.

“Hi Kate,” I said. “My name is Fay Hardaway and I’m a friend of Rashmi Jones. She asked me to give you a message about yesterday so please give me a call at Fay@Market.03284.” I wasn’t really expecting her to respond, but it didn’t hurt to try.

I was on my way to 44 East Washington Avenue when my sidekick chirped in the pocket of my slacks. I picked up. Rashmi Jones’s mom, Najma, stared at me from the screen with eyes as deep as wells.

“The police came,” she said. “They said you were supposed to notify them first. They want to speak to you again.”

They would. So I’d called the law after I called the mom — they’d get over it. You don’t tell a mother that her daughter is dead and then ask her to act surprised when the cops come knocking. “I was working for you, not them.”

“I want to see you.”

“I understand.”

“I hired you to find my daughter.”

“I did,” I said. “Twice.” I was sorry as soon as I said it.

She glanced away; I could hear squeaky voices in the background. “I want to know everything,” she said. “I want to know how close you came.”

“I’ve started a report. Let me finish it and I’ll bring it by later ...

“Now,” she said. “I’m at school. My lunch starts at eleven-fifty and I have recess duty at twelve-fifteen.” She clicked off.

I had nothing to feel guilty about, so why was I tempted to wriggle down a storm drain and find the deepest sewer in town? Because a mom believed that I hadn’t worked fast enough or smart enough to save her daughter? Someone needed to remind these people that I didn’t fix lost things, I just found them. But that someone wouldn’t be me. My play now was simply to stroll into her school and let her beat me about the head with her grief. I could take it. I ate old Bogart movies for breakfast and spit out bullets. And at the end of this cocked day, I could just forget about Najma Jones, because there would be no Sharifa reminding me how much it cost me to do my job. I took out my sidekick, linked to my desktop and downloaded everything I had in the Jones file. Then I swung back onto my bike.

The mom had left a message three days ago, asking that I come out to her place on Ashbury. She and her daughter rattled around in an old Victorian with gingerbread gables and a front porch the size of Cuba. The place had been in the family for four generations. Theirs had been a big family — once. The mom said that Rashmi hadn’t come home the previous night. She hadn’t called and didn’t

answer messages. The mom had contacted the cops, but they weren't all that interested. Not enough time would have passed for them. Too much time had passed for the mom.

The mom taught fifth grade at Reagan Elementary. Rashmi was a twenty-six year old grad student, six credits away from an MFA in Creative Writing. The mom trusted her to draw money from the family account, so at first I thought I might be able to find her by chasing debits. But there was no activity in the account we could attribute to the missing girl. When I suggested that she might be hiding out with friends, the mom went prickly on me. Turned out that Rashmi's choice of friends was a cause of contention between them. Rashmi had dropped her old pals in the last few months and taken up with a new, religious crowd. Gratiana and Elaine and Kate — the mom didn't know their last names — were members of the Church of Christ the Man. I'd had trouble with Christers before and wasn't all that eager to go up against them again, so instead I biked over to campus to see Rashmi's advisor. Zelda Manotti was a dithering old granny who would have loved to help except she had all the focus of paint spatter. She did let me copy Rashmi's novel-in-progress. And she did let me tag along to her advanced writing seminar, in case Rashmi showed up for it. She didn't. I talked to the three other students after class, but they either didn't know where she was or wouldn't say. None of them was Gratiana, Alix or Elaine.

That night I skimmed *The Lost Heart*, Rashmi's novel. It was a nostalgic and sentimental weeper set back before the devils disappeared all the men. Young Brigit Bird was searching for her father, a famous architect who had been kidnapped by Colombian drug lords. If I was just a fluff doing a fantasy job in the pretend economy, then old Noreen would have crowned Rashmi Jones queen of fluffs.

I started day two back at the Joneses' home. The mom watched as I went through Rashmi's room. I think she was as worried about what I might find as she was that I would find nothing. Rashmi listened to the Creeps, had three different pairs of Kat sandals, owned everything Denise Pepper had ever written, preferred underwire bras and subscribed to *News for the Confused*. She had kicked about a week's worth of dirty clothes under her bed. Her wallpaper mix cycled through koalas, the World's Greatest Beaches, ruined castles and *Playgirl* Centerfolds 2000-2010. She'd kept a handwritten diary starting in the sixth grade and ending in the eighth in which she often complained that her mother was strict and that school was boring. The only thing I found that rattled the mom was a Christer

Bible tucked into the back of the bottom drawer of the nightstand. When I pulled it out, she flushed and stalked out of the room.

I found my lead on the Jones's home network. Rashmi was not particularly diligent about backing up her sidekick files, and the last one I found was almost six months old, which was just about when she'd gotten religion. She'd used simple encryption, which wouldn't withstand a serious hack, but which would discourage the mom from snooping. I doglegged a key and opened the file. She had multiple calls. Her mother had been trying her at Rashmi@Ashbury.03284. But she also had an alternate: Brigitbird@Vincent.03284. I did a reverse lookup and that turned up an address: The Church of Christ the Man, 348 Vincent Avenue. I wasn't keen for a personal visit to the church, so I tried her call.

"Hello," said a voice.

"Is this Rashmi Jones?"

The voice hesitated. "My name is Brigit. Leave me alone."

"Your mother is worried about you, Rashmi. She hired me to find you."

"I don't want to be found."

"I'm reading your novel, Rashmi." It was just something to say; I wanted to keep her on the line. "I was wondering, does she find her father at the end?"

"No." I could hear her breath caressing the microphone. "The devils come. That's the whole point."

Someone said something to her and she muted the speaker. But I knew she could still hear me. "That's sad, Rashmi. But I guess that's the way it had to be."

Then she hung up.

The mom was relieved that Rashmi was all right, furious that she was with Christers. So what? I'd found the girl: case closed. Only Najma Jones begged me to help her connect with her daughter. She was already into me for twenty bucks plus expenses, but for another five I said I'd try to get her away from the church long enough for them to talk. I was on my way over when the searchlet I'd attached to the Jones account turned up the hit at Grayle's Shoes. I was grateful

for the reprieve, even more pleased when the salesbot identified Rashmi from her pix. As did the waitress at Maison Diana.

And the clerk at the Comfort Inn.

3

Ronald Reagan Elementary had been recently renovated, no doubt by a squad of janitor bots. The brick faade had been cleaned and repointed; the long row of windows gleamed like teeth. The asphalt playground had been ripped up and resurfaced with safe-t-mat, the metal swingsets swapped for gaudy towers and crawl tubes and slides and balance beams and decks. The chain link fences had been replaced by redwood lattice through which twined honeysuckle and clematis. There was a boxwood maze next to the swimming pool that shimmered, blue as a dream. Nothing was too good for the little girls — our hope for the future.

There was no room in the rack jammed with bikes and scooters and goboards, so I leaned my bike against a nearby cherry tree. The very youngest girls had come out for first recess. I paused behind the tree for a moment to let their whoops and shrieks and laughter bubble over me. My business didn't take me to schools very often; I couldn't remember when I had last seen so many girls in one place. They were black and white and yellow and brown, mostly dressed like janes you might see anywhere. But there were more than a few whose clothes proclaimed their mothers' lifestyles. Tommys in hunter camo and chaste Christers, twists in chains and spray-on, clumps of sisters wearing the uniforms of a group marriage, a couple of furies and one girl wearing a body suit that looked just like bot skin. As I lingered there, I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the shade of a tree. I had no idea who these tiny creatures were. They went to this well-kept school, led more or less normal lives. I grew up in the wild times, when everything was falling apart. At that moment, I realized that they were as far removed from me as I was from the grannies. I would always watch them from a distance.

Just inside the fence, two sisters in green-striped shirtwaists and green knee socks were turning a rope for a ponytailed jumper who was executing nimble criss-crosses. The turners chanted,

“Down in the valley where the green grass grows,

there sits Stacy pretty as a rose!

She sings, she sings, she sings so sweet,

Then along comes Chantall to kiss her on the cheek!”

Another jumper joined her in the middle, matching her step for step, her dark hair flying. The chant continued,

“How many kisses does she get?

One, two, three, four, five ...”

The two jumpers pecked at each other in the air to the count of ten without missing a beat. Then Ponytail skipped out and the turners began the chant over again for the dark-haired girl. Ponytail bent over for a moment to catch her breath; when she straightened, she noticed me.

“Hey you, behind the tree.” She shaded her eyes with a hand. “You hiding?”

I stepped into the open. “No.”

“This is our school, you know.” The girl set one foot behind the other and then spun a hundred and eighty degrees to point at the door to the school. “You supposed to sign in at the office.”

“I’d better take care of that then.”

As I passed through the gate into the playground, a few of the girls stopped playing and stared. This was all the audience Ponytail needed. “You someone’s mom?”

“No.”

“Don’t you have a job?” She fell into step beside me.

“I do.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

She dashed ahead to block my path. “Probably because it’s a pretend job.”

Two of her sisters in green-striped shirtwaists scrambled to back her up.

“When we grow up,” one of them announced, “we’re going to have real jobs.”

“Like a doctor,” the other said. “Or a lion tamer.”

Other girls were joining us. “I want to drive a truck,” said a tommy. “Big, big truck.” She specified the size of her rig with outstretched arms.

“That’s not a real job. Any bot could do that.”

“I want to be a teacher,” said the dark-haired sister who had been jumping rope.

“Chantall loves school,” said a furry. “She’d marry school if she could.” Apparently this passed for brilliant wit in the third grade; some girls laughed so hard they had to cover their mouths with the back of their hands. Me, I was flummoxed. Give me a spurned lover or a mean drunk or a hardcase cop and I could figure out some play, but just then I was trapped by this giggling mob of children.

“So why you here?” Ponytail put her fists on her hips.

A jane in khakis and a baggy plum sweater emerged from behind a blue tunnel that looked like a centipede. She pinned me with that penetrating but not unkind stare that teachers are born with, and began to trudge across the playground toward me. “I’ve come to see Ms. Jones,” I said.

“Oh.” A shadow passed over Ponytail’s face and she rubbed her hands against the sides of her legs. “You better go then.”

Someone called, “Are you the undertaker?”

A voice that squeaked with innocence asked, “What’s an undertaker?”

I didn’t hear the answer. The teacher in the plum sweater rescued me and we passed through the crowd.

#

I didn’t understand why Najma Jones had come to school. She was either the most dedicated teacher on the planet or she was too numb to accept her daughter’s death. I couldn’t tell which. She had been reserved when we met the

first time; now she was locked down and welded shut. She was a bird of a woman with a narrow face and thin lips. Her gray hair had a few lingering strands of black. She wore a long-sleeved white kameez tunic over shalwar trousers. I leaned against the door of her classroom and told her everything I had done the day before. She sat listening at her desk with a sandwich that she wasn't going to eat and a carton of milk that she wasn't going to drink and a napkin that she didn't need.

When I had finished, she asked me about cyanide inhalers.

"Hydrogen cyanide isn't hard to get in bulk," I said. "They use it for making plastic, engraving, tempering steel. The inhaler came from one of the underground suicide groups, probably Our Choice. The cops could tell you for sure."

She unfolded the napkin and spread it out on top of her desk. "I've heard it's a painful death."

"Not at all," I said. "They used to use hydrogen cyanide gas to execute criminals, back in the bad old days. It all depends on the first breath. Get it deep into your lungs and you're unconscious before you hit the floor. Dead in less than a minute."

"And if you don't get a large enough dose?"

"Ms. Jones ..."

She cut me off hard. "If you don't?"

"Then it takes longer, but you still die. There are convulsions. The skin flushes and turns purple. Eyes bulge. They say it's something like having a heart attack."

"Rashmi?" She laid her daughter's name down gently, as if she were tucking it into bed. "How did she die?"

Had the cops shown her the crime scene pictures? I decided they hadn't. "I don't think she suffered," I said.

She tore a long strip off the napkin. "You don't think I'm a very good mother, do you?"

I don't know exactly what I expected her to say, but this wasn't it. "Ms. Jones, I don't know much about you and your daughter. But I do know that you cared enough about her to hire me. I'm sorry I let you down."

She shook her head wearily, as if I had just flunked the pop quiz. One third does not equal .033 and Los Angeles has never been the capital of California. "Is there anything else I should know?" she said.

"There is." I had to tell her what I'd found out that morning, but I wasn't going to tell her that I was working for a devil. "You mentioned before that Rashmi had a friend named Kate."

"The Christer?" She tore another strip off the napkin.

I nodded. "Her name is Kate Vermeil. I don't know this for sure yet, but there's reason to believe that Rashmi and Kate were married yesterday. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Maybe yesterday it might have." Her voice was flat. "It doesn't anymore."

I could hear stirring in the next classroom. Chairs scraped against linoleum. Girls were jabbering at each other.

"I know Rashmi became a Christer," she said. "It's a broken religion. But then everything is broken, isn't it? My daughter and I ... I don't think we ever understood each other. We were strangers at the end." The napkin was in shreds. "How old were you when it happened?"

"I wasn't born yet." She didn't have to explain what it was. "I'm not as old as I look."

"I was nineteen. I remember men, my father, my uncles. And the boys. I actually slept with one." She gave me a bleak smile. "Does that shock you, Ms. Hardaway?"

I hated it when grannies talked about having sex, but I just shook my head.

"I didn't love Sunil, but I said I'd marry him just so I could get out of my mother's house. Maybe that was what was happening with Rashmi and this Kate person?"

“I wouldn’t know.”

The school bell rang.

“I’m wearing white today, Ms. Hardaway, to honor my darling daughter.” She gathered up the strips of napkin and the sandwich and the carton of milk and dropped them in the trashcan. “White is the Hindu color of mourning. But it’s also the color of knowledge. The goddess of learning, Saraswati, is always shown wearing a white dress, sitting on a white lotus. There is something here I must learn.” She fingered the gold embroidery at the neckline of her kameez. “But it’s time for recess.”

We walked to the door. “What will you do now?” She opened it. The fifth grade swarmed the hall, girls rummaging through their lockers.

“Find Kate Vermeil,” I said.

She nodded. “Tell her I’m sorry.”

4

I tried Kate's call again, but when all I got was the sidekick I biked across town to 44 East Washington Avenue. The Poison Society turned out to be a jump joint; the sign said it opened at 9PM. There was no bell on the front door, but I knocked hard enough to wake Marilyn Monroe. No answer. I went around to the back and tried again. If Kate was in there, she wasn't entertaining visitors.

A sidekick search turned up an open McDonald's on Wallingford, a ten-minute ride. The only other customers were a couple of twists with bound breasts and identical acid-green vinyl masks. One of them crouched on the floor beside the other, begging for chicken nuggets. A bot took my order for the 29 combo meal — it was all bots behind the counter. By law, there was supposed to be a human running the place, but if she was on the premises, she was nowhere to be seen. I thought about calling City Hall to complain, but the egg rolls arrived crispy and the McLatte was nicely scalded. Besides, I didn't need to watch the cops haul the poor jane in charge out of whatever hole she had fallen into.

A couple of hardcase tommys in army surplus fatigues strutted in just after me. They ate with their heads bowed over their plastic trays so the fries didn't have too far to travel. Their collapsible titanium nightsticks lay on the table in plain sight. One of them was not quite as wide as a bus. The other was nothing special, except that when I glanced up from my sidekick, she was giving me a freeze-dried stare. I wagged my shiny fingernails at her and screwed my cutest smile onto my face. She scowled, said something to her partner and went back to the trough.

My sidekick chirped. It was my pal Julie Epstein, who worked Self-Endangerment/Missing Persons out of the Second Precinct.

“You busy, Fay?”

“Yeah, the Queen of Cleveland just lost her glass slipper and I'm on the case.”

“Well, I'm about to roll through your neighborhood. Want to do lunch?”

I aimed the sidekick at the empties on my table. “Just finishing.”

“Where are you?”

“McD’s on Wallingford.”

“Yeah? How are the ribs?”

“Couldn’t say. But the egg rolls are triple dee.”

“That the place where the owner is a junkliner? We’ve had complaints. Bots run everything?”

“No, I can see her now. She’s shortchanging some beat cop.”

She gave me the laugh. “Got the coroner’s on the Rashmi Jones. Cyanide induced hypoxia.”

“You didn’t by any chance show the mom pix of the scene?”

“Hell no. Talk about cruel and unusual.” She frowned. “Why?”

“I was just with her. She seemed like maybe she suspected her kid wrestled with the reaper.”

“We didn’t tell her. By the way, we don’t really care if you call your client, but next time how about trying us first?”

“That’s cop law. Me, I follow PI law.”

“Where did you steal that line from, Chinatown?”

“It’s got better dialogue than *Dagnet*.” I swirled the last of my latte in the cup.

“You calling a motive on the Rashmi Jones?”

“Not yet. What do you like?” She ticked off the fingers of her left hand. Family? School? Money? Broke a fingernail? Cloudy day?”

“Pregnancy? Just a hunch.”

“You think she was seeded? We’ll check that. But that’s no reason to kill yourself.”

“They’ve all got reasons. Only none of them makes sense.”

She frowned. “Hey, don’t get all invested on me here.”

“Tell me, Julie, do you think I’m doing a pretend job?”

“Whoa, Fay.” Her chuckle had a sharp edge. “Maybe it’s time you and Sharifa took a vacation.”

“Yeah.” I let that pass. “It’s just that some granny called me a fluff.”

“Grannies.” She snorted in disgust. “Well, you’re no cop, that’s for sure. But we do appreciate the help. Yeah, I’d say what you do is real. As real as anything in this cocked world.”

“Thanks, flatfoot. Now that you’ve made things all better, I’ll just click off. My latte is getting cold and you’re missing so damn many persons.”

“Think about that vacation, shamus. Bye.”

As I put my sidekick away, I realized that the tommys were waiting for me. They’d been rattling ice in their cups and folding McWrappers for the past ten minutes. I probably didn’t need their brand of trouble. The smart move would be to bolt for the door and leave my bike for now; I could lose them on foot. But then I hadn’t made a smart move since April. The big one was talking into her sidekick when I sauntered over to them.

“What can I do for you ladies?” I said.

The big one pocketed the sidekick. Her partner started to come out of her seat but the big one stretched an arm like a telephone pole to restrain her.

“Do we know you?” The partner had close-set eyes and a beak nose; her black hair was short and stiff as a brush. She was wearing a black tee under her fatigue jacket and black leather combat boots. Probably had steel toes. “No,” she continued, “I don’t think we do.”

“Then let’s get introductions out of the way,” I said. “I’m Fay Hardaway. And you are ...?”

They gave me less than nothing.

I sat down. “Thanks,” I said. “Don’t mind if I do.”

The big one leaned back in her chair and eyed me as if I was dessert. “Sure you’re not making a mistake, missy?”

“Why, because you’re rough, tough and take no guff?”

“You’re funny.” She smirked. “I like that. People are usually so very sad to meet us. My name is Alix.” She held out her hand and we shook. “Pleased to know you.”

The customary way to shake hands is to hold on for four, maybe five seconds, squeeze goodbye, then loosen the grip. Maybe big Alix wasn’t familiar with our customs — she wasn’t letting go.

I wasn’t going to let a little thing like a missing hand intimidate me. “Oh, then I do know you,” I said. We were in the McDonald’s on Wallingford Street — a public place. I’d just been talking to my pal the cop. I was so damn sure that I was safe, I decided to take my shot. “That would make the girlfriend here Elaine. Or is it Gratiana?”

“Alix.” The beak panicked. “Now we’ve got to take her.”

Alix sighed, then yanked on my arm. She might have been pulling a tissue from a box for all the effort she expended. I slid halfway across the table as the beak whipped her nightstick to full extension. I lunged away from her and she caught me just a glancing blow above the ear but then Alix stuck a popper into my face and splattered me with knockout spray. I saw a billion stars and breathed the vacuum of deep space for maybe two seconds before everything went black.

Big Ben chimed between my ears. I could feel it deep in my molars, in the jelly of my eyes. It was the first thing I had felt since World War II. Wait a minute, was I alive during World War II? No, but I had seen the movie. When I wiggled my toes, Big Ben chimed again. I realized that the reason it hurt so much was that the human head didn’t really contain enough space to hang a bell of that size. As I took inventory of body parts, the chiming became less intense. By the time I knew I was all there, it was just the sting of blood in my veins.

I was laid out on a surface that was hard but not cold. Wood. A bench. The place I was in was huge and dim but not dark. The high ceiling was in shadow. There was a hint of smoke in the air. Lights flickered. Candles. That was a clue, but I was still too groggy to understand what the mystery was. I knew I needed to remember something, but there was a hole where the memory was supposed to be. I reached back and touched just above my ear. The tip of my finger came away dark and sticky.

A voice solved the mystery for me. "I'm sorry that my people overreacted. If you want to press charges, I've instructed Gratiana and Alix to surrender to the police."

It came back to me then. It always does. McDonald's. Big Alix. A long handshake. That would make this a church. I sat up. When the world stopped spinning, I saw a vast marble altar awash in light with a crucifix the size of a Cessna hanging behind it.

"I hope you're not in too much pain, Miss Hardaway." The voice came from the pew behind me. A fortyish woman in a black suit and a roman collar was on the kneeler. She was wearing a large silver ring on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"I've felt worse."

"That's too bad. Do you make a habit of getting into trouble?" She looked concerned that I might be making some bad life choices. She had soft eyes and a kindly face. Her short hair was the color of ashes. She was someone I could tell my guilty secrets to, so I could sleep at night. She would speak to Christ the Man himself on my behalf, book me into the penthouse suite in heaven.

"Am I in trouble?"

She nodded gravely. "We all are. The devils are destroying us, Miss Hardaway. They plant their seed not only in our bodies, but our minds and our souls."

"Please, call me Fay. I'm sure we're going to be just the very best of friends." I leaned toward her. "I'm sorry, I can't read your name tag."

"I'm not wearing one." She smiled. "I'm Father Elaine Horvth."

We looked at each other.

“Have you ever considered suicide, Fay?” said Father Elaine.

“Not really. It’s usually a bad career move.”

“Very good. But you must know that since the devils came and changed everything, almost a billion women have despaired and taken their lives.”

“You know, I think I did hear something about that. Come on, lady, what’s this about?”

“It is the tragedy of our times that there are any number of good reasons to kill oneself. It takes courage to go on living with the world the way it is. Rashmi Jones was a troubled young woman. She lacked that courage. That doesn’t make her a bad person, just a dead one.”

I patted my pocket, looking for my sidekick. Still there. I pulled it out and pressed record. I didn’t ask for permission. “So I should mind my own business?”

“That would be a bad career move in your profession. How old are you, Fay?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Then you were born of a virgin.” She leaned back, slid off the kneeler and onto the pew. “Seeded by the devils. I’m old enough to have had a father, Fay. I actually remember him a little. A very little.”

“Don’t start.” I spun out of the pew into the aisle. I hated cock nostalgia. This granny had me chewing aluminum foil; I would have spat it at Christ himself if he had dared come down off his cross. “You want to know one reason why my generation jumps out of windows and sucks on cyanide? It’s because twists like you make us feel guilty about how we came to be. You want to call me devil’s spawn, go ahead. Enjoy yourself. Live it up. Because we’re just waiting for you old bitches to die off. Someday this foolish church is going to dry up and blow away and you know what? We’ll go dancing that night, because we’ll be a hell of a lot happier without you to remind us of what you lost and who we can never be.”

She seemed perversely pleased by my show of emotion. “You’re an angry woman, Fay.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I’m kind to children and small animals.”

“What is that anger doing to your soul? Many young people find solace in Christ.”

“Like Alix and Gratiana?”

She folded her hands; the silver ring shone dully. “As I said, they have offered to turn themselves”

“Keep them. I’m done with them.” I was cooling off fast. I paused, considering my next move. Then I sat down on the pew next to Father Elaine, showed her my sidekick and made sure she saw me pause the recording. Our eyes met. We understood each other. “Did you marry Kate Vermeil and Rashmi Jones yesterday?”

She didn’t hesitate. “I performed the ceremony. I never filed the documents.”

“Do you know why Rashmi killed herself?”

“Not exactly.” She held my gaze. “I understand she left a note.”

“Yeah, the note. I found it on her sidekick. She wrote, ‘Life is too hard to handle and I can’t handle it so I’ve got to go now. I love you mom sorry.’ A little generic for a would-be writer, wouldn’t you say? And the thing is, there’s nothing in the note about Kate. I didn’t even know she existed until this morning. Now I have a problem with that. The cops would have the same problem if I gave it to them.”

“But you haven’t.”

“Not yet.”

She thought about that for a while.

“My understanding,” said Father Elaine at last, “is that Kate and Rashmi had a disagreement shortly after the ceremony.” She was tiptoeing around words as if one of them might wake up and start screaming. “I don’t know exactly what it was about. Rashmi left, Kate stayed here. Someone was with her all yesterday afternoon and all last night.”

“Because you thought she might need an alibi?”

She let that pass. “Kate was upset when she heard the news. She blames herself, although I am certain she is without blame.”

“She’s here now?”

“No.” Father Elaine shrugged. “I sent her away when I learned you were looking for her.”

“And you want me to stop.”

“You are being needlessly cruel, you know. The poor girl is grieving.”

“Another poor girl is dead.” I reached into my pocket for my penlight. “Can I see your ring?”

That puzzled her. She extended her left hand and I shone the light on it. Her skin was freckled but soft, the nails flawless. She would not be getting them done at a dump like the Adagio Spa.

“What do these letters mean?” I asked. “IHS?”

“In hoc signo vinces. ‘In this sign you will conquer.’ The emperor Constantine had a vision of a cross in the sky with those words written in fire on it. This was just before a major battle. He had his soldiers paint the cross on their shields and then he won the day against a superior force.”

“Cute.” I snapped the light off. “What’s it mean to you?”

“The Bride of God herself gave this to me.” Her face lit up, as if she were listening to an angelic chorus chant her name. “In recognition of my special vocation. You see, Fay, our Church has no intention of drying up and blowing away. Long after my generation is gone, believers will continue to gather in Christ’s name. And someday they’ll finish the work we have begun. Someday they will exorcise the devils.”

If she knew how loopy that sounded, she didn’t show it. “Okay, here’s the way it is,” I said. “Forget Kate Vermeil. I only wanted to find her so she could lead me to you. A devil named Seeren hired me to look for you. It wants a meeting.”

“With me?” Father Elaine went pale. “What for?”

“I just find them.” I enjoyed watching her squirm. “I don’t ask why.”

She folded her hands as if to pray, then leaned her head against them and closed her eyes. She sat like that for almost a minute. I decided to let her brood, not that I had much choice. The fiery pit of hell could’ve opened up and she wouldn’t have noticed.

Finally, she shivered and sat up. “I have to find out how much they know.” She gazed up at the enormous crucifix. “I’ll see this devil, but on one condition: you guarantee my safety.”

“Sure.” I couldn’t help myself; I laughed. The sound echoed, profaning the silence. “Just how am I supposed to do that? They disappeared half the population of earth without breaking a sweat.”

“You have their confidence,” she said. “And mine.”

A vast and absurd peace had settled over her; she was seeing the world through the gauze of faith. She was a fool if she thought I could go up against the devils. Maybe she believed Christ the Man would swoop down from heaven to protect her, but then he hadn’t been seen around the old neighborhood much of late. Or maybe she had projected herself into the mind of the martyrs who would embrace the sword, kiss the ax that would take their heads. I reminded myself that her delusions were none of my business.

Besides, I needed the money. And suddenly I just had to get out of that big, empty church.

“My office is at 35 Market,” I said. “Third floor. I’ll try to set something up for six tonight.” I stood. “Look, if they want to take you, you’re probably gone. But I’ll record everything and squawk as loud as I can.”

“I believe you will,” she said, her face aglow.

5

I didn't go to my office after I locked my bike to the rack on Market Street. Instead I went to find George. He was stripping varnish from the beadboard wainscoting in Donna Belasco's old office on the fifth floor. Donna's office had been vacant since last fall, when she had closed her law practice and gone south to count waves at Daytona Beach. At least, that's what I hoped she was doing; the last I'd heard from her was a Christmas card. I missed Donna; she was one of the few grannies who tried to understand what it was like to grow up the way we did. And she had been generous about steering work my way.

"Hey George," I said. "You can tell your boss that I found the ring."

"This one offers the congratulations." The arm holding the brush froze over the can of stripper as he swiveled his head to face me. "You have proved true superiority, Fay." George had done a good job maintaining our building since coming to us a year ago, although he had something against wood grain. We had to stop him from painting over the mahogany paneling in the foyer.

I hated to close the door but this conversation needed some privacy. "So I've set up a meeting." The stink of the varnish stripper was barbed wire up my nose. "Father Elaine Horvth will be here at six."

George said nothing. Trying to read a bot is like trying to read a refrigerator. I assumed that he was relaying this information to Seeren. Would the devil be displeased that I had booked its meeting into my office?

"Seeren is impressed by your speedy accomplishment," George said at last. "Credit has been allotted to this one for suggesting it task you."

"Great, take ten bucks a month off my rent. Just so you know, I promised Father Elaine she'd be safe here. Seeren is not going to make a liar out of me, is it?"

"Seeren rejects violence. It's a regrettable technique."

"Yeah, but if Seeren disappears her to wherever, does that count?"

George's head swiveled back toward the wainscoting. "Father Elaine Horvth will

be invited to leave freely, if such is her intention.” The brush dipped into the can. “Was Kate Vermeil also found?”

“No,” I said. “I looked, but then Father Elaine found me. By the way, she didn’t live at 465 12th Avenue.”

“Seeren had otherwise information.” The old varnish bubbled and sagged where George had applied stripper. “Such error makes a curiosity.”

It was a little thing, but it pricked at me as I walked down to the third floor. Was I pleased to discover that the devils were neither omnipotent nor infallible? Not particularly. For all their crimes against humanity, the devils and their bots were pretty much running our world now. It had been a small if bitter comfort to imagine that they knew exactly what they were doing.

I passed crazy Martha’s door, which was open, on the way to my office. “Yaga combany wading,” she called.

I backtracked. My neighbor was at her desk, wearing her Technopro gas mask, which she claimed protected her from chlorine, hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, ammonia, bacteria, viruses, dust, pollen, cat dander, mold spores, nuclear fallout and sexual harassment. Unfortunately, it also made her almost unintelligible.

“Try that again,” I said.

“You’ve. Got. Company. Waiting.”

“Who is it?”

She shook the mask and shrugged. The light of her desktop was reflected in the faceplate. I could see numbers swarming like black ants across the rows and columns of a spreadsheet.

“What’s with the mask?”

“We. Had. A. Devil. In. The. Building.”

“Really?” I said. “When?”

“Morning.”

There was no reason why a devil shouldn't come into our building, no law against having one for a client. But there was an accusation in Martha's look that I couldn't deny. Had I betrayed us all by taking the case? She said, "Hate. Devils."

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

I opened my door and saw that it was Sharifa who was waiting for me. She was trying on a smile that didn't fit. "Hi Fay," she said. She looked as elegant as always and as weary as I had ever seen her. She was wearing a peppered black linen dress and black dress sandals with thin crossover straps. Those weren't doctor shoes — they were pull down the shades and turn up the music shoes. They made me very sad.

As I turned to close the door, she must have spotted the patch of blood that had dried in my hair. "You're hurt!" I had almost forgotten about it — there was no percentage in remembering that I was in pain. She shot out of her chair. "What happened?"

"I slipped in the shower," I said.

"Let me look."

I tilted my head toward her and she probed the lump gently. "You could have a concussion."

"PI's don't get concussions. Says so right on the license."

"Sit," she said. "Let me clean this up. I'll just run to the bathroom for some water."

I sat and watched her go. I thought about locking the door behind her but I deserved whatever I had coming. I opened the bottom drawer of the desk, slipped two plastic cups off the stack and brought Johnnie Walker in for a consultation.

Sharifa bustled through the doorway with a cup of water in one hand and a fistful of paper towels in the other but caught herself when she saw the bottle. "When did this start?"

“Just now.” I picked up my cup and slugged two fingers of Black Label Scotch.
“Want some?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Are we having fun or are we self-medicating?”

I let that pass. She dabbed at the lump with a damp paper towel. I could smell her perfume, lemon blossoms on a summer breeze and just the smallest bead of sweat. Her scent got along nicely with the liquid smoke of the scotch. She brushed against me and I could feel her body beneath her dress. At that moment I wanted her more than I wanted to breathe.

“Sit down,” I said.

“I’m not done yet,” she said.

I pointed at a chair. “Sit, damn it.”

She dropped the paper towel in my trash as she went by.

“You asked me a question this morning,” I said. “I should’ve given you the answer. I had the abortion last week.”

She studied her hands. I don’t know why; they weren’t doing anything. They were just sitting in her lap, minding their own business.

“I told you when we first got together, that’s what I’d do when I got seeded,” I said.

“I know.”

“I just didn’t see any good choices,” I said. “I know the world needs children, but I have a life to lead. Maybe it’s a rude, pointless, dirty life but it’s what I have. Being a mother ... that’s someone else’s life.”

“I understand,” said Sharifa. Her voice was so small it could have crawled under a thimble. “It’s just ... it was all so sudden. You told me and then we were fighting and I didn’t have time to think things through.”

“I got tested in the morning. I told you that afternoon. I wasn’t keeping anything a secret.”

She folded her arms against her chest as if she were cold. “And when I get seeded, what then?”

“You’ll do what’s best for you.”

She sighed. “Pour me some medication, would you?”

I poured scotch into both cups, came around the desk and handed Sharifa hers. She drank, held the whiskey in her mouth for a moment and then swallowed.

“Fay, I ...” The corners of her mouth were twitchy and she bit her lip. “Your mother told me once that when she realized she was pregnant with you, she was so happy. So happy. It was when everything was crashing around everyone. She said you were the gift she needed to ... not to”

“I got the gift lecture, Sharifa. Too many times. She made the devils sound like Santa Claus. Or the stork.”

She glanced down as if surprised to discover that she was still holding the cup. She drained it at a gulp and set it on my desk. “I’m a doctor. I know they do this to us; I just wish I knew how. But it isn’t a bad thing. Having you in the world can’t be a bad thing.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I kept my opinion to myself.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m trying to carry water in my hands but it’s all leaking out and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.” She started rubbing her right hand up and down her left forearm. “People keep killing themselves. Maybe it’s not as bad as it used to be, but still. The birth rate is barely at replacement levels. Maybe we’re doomed. Did you ever think that? That we might go extinct?”

“No.”

Sharifa was silent for a long time. She kept rubbing her arm. “It should’ve been me doing your abortion,” she said at last. “Then we’d both have to live with it.”

I was one tough PI. I kept a bottle of scotch in the bottom drawer and had a devil for a client. Tommys whacked me with nightsticks and pumped knockout spray into my face. But even I had a breaking point, and Dr. Sharifa Ramirez was pushing me up against it hard. I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her

forehead, her cheeks, her graceful neck. But I couldn't give in to her that way — not now anyway. Maybe never again. I had a case, and I needed to hold the best part of myself in reserve until it was finished. "I'll be in charge of the guilt, Sharifa." I said. "You be in charge of saving lives." I came around the desk. "I've got work to do, so you go home now, sweetheart." I kissed her on the forehead. "I'll see you there."

Easier to say than to believe.

6

Sharifa was long gone by the time Father Elaine arrived at ten minutes to six. She brought muscle with her; Gratiana loitered in the hallway surveying my office with sullen calculation, as if estimating how long it would take to break down the door, leap over the desk and wring somebody's neck. I shouldn't have been surprised that Father Elaine's faith in me had wavered — hell, I didn't have much faith in me. However, I thought she showed poor judgment in bringing this particular thug along. I invited Gratiana to remove herself from my building. Perhaps she might perform an auto-erotic act in front of a speeding bus? Father Elaine dismissed her, and she slunk off.

Father Elaine appeared calm, but I could tell that she was as nervous as two mice and a gerbil. I hadn't really had a good look at her in the dim church, but now I studied her in case I had to write her up for the Missing Persons Index. She was a tallish woman with round shoulders and a bit of a stoop. Her eyes were the brown of wet sand; her cheeks were bloodless. Her smile was not quite as convincing in good light it had been in gloom. She made some trifling small talk, which I did nothing to help with. Then she stood at the window, watching. A wingtip loafer tapped against bare floor.

It was about ten after when my desktop chirped. I waved open the icon and accepted the transfer of a thousand dollars. Seeren had a hell of a calling card. "I think they're coming," I said. I opened the door and stepped into the hall to wait for them.

"It gives Seeren the bright pleasure to meet you, Father Elaine Horvth," said George as they shuffled into the office.

She focused everything she had on the devil. "Just Father, if you don't mind." The bot was nothing but furniture to her.

"It's kind of crowded in here," I said. "If you want, I can wait outside ..."

Father Elaine's faade cracked for an instant, but she patched it up nicely. "I'm sure we can manage," she said.

"This one implores Fay to remain," said George.

We sorted ourselves out. Seeren assumed its perch on top of the file cabinet and George came around and compacted himself next to me. Father Elaine pushed her chair next to the door. I think she was content to be stationed nearest the exit. George looked at Father Elaine. She looked at Seeren. Seeren looked out the window. I watched them all.

“Seeren offers sorrow over the regrettable death of Rashmi Jones,” said George. “Such Rashmi was of your church?”

“She was a member, yes.”

“According to Fay Hardaway, a fact is that Father married Kate Vermeil and Rashmi Jones.”

I didn’t like that. I didn’t like it at all.

Father Elaine hesitated only a beat. “Yes.”

“Would Father permit Seeren to locate Kate Vermeil?”

“I know where she is, Seeren,” said Father Elaine. “I don’t think she needs to be brought into this.”

“Indulge this one and reconsider, Father. Is such person pregnant?”

Her manner had been cool, but now it dropped forty degrees. “Why would you say that?”

“Perhaps such person is soon to become pregnant?”

“How would I know? If she is, it would be your doing, Seeren.”

“Father well understands in vitro fertilization?”

“I’ve heard of it, yes.” Father Elaine’s shrug was far too elaborate. “I can’t say I understand it.”

“Father has heard then of transvaginal oocyte retrieval?”

She thrust out her chin. “No.”

“Haploidisation of somatic cells?”

She froze.

“Has Father considered then growing artificial sperm from embryonic stem cells?”

“I’m a priest, Seeren.” Only her lips moved. “Not a biologist.”

“Does the Christer Church make further intentions to induce pregnancies in certain members? Such as Kate Vermeil?”

Father Elaine rose painfully from the chair. I thought she might try to run, but now martyr’s fire burned through the shell of ice that had encased her. “We’re doing Christ’s work, Seeren. We reject your obscene seeding. We are saving ourselves from you and you can’t stop us.”

Seeren beat its wings, once, twice and crowed. It was a dense, jarring sound, like steel scraping steel. I hadn’t known that devils could make any sound at all, but hearing that hellish scream made me want to dive under my desk and curl up in a ball. I took it though, and so did Father Elaine. I gave her credit for that.

“Seeren makes no argument with the Christer Church,” said George. “Seeren upholds only the brightest encouragement for such pregnancies.”

Father Elaine’s face twitched in disbelief and then a flicker of disappointment passed over her. Maybe she was upset to have been cheated of her glorious death. She was a granny after all, of the generation that had embraced the suicide culture. For the first time, she turned to the bot. “What?”

“Seeren tasks Father to help numerous Christers become pregnant. Christers who do such choosing will then give birth.”

She sank back onto her chair.

“Too many humans now refuse the seeding,” said the bot. “Not all then give birth. This was not foreseen. It is regrettable.”

Without my noticing, my hands had become fists. My knuckles were white.

“Seeren will announce its true satisfaction with the accomplishment of the Christer Church. It offers a single caution. Christers must assure all to make no XY chromosome.”

Father Elaine was impassive. “Will you continue to seed all non-believers?”

“It is prudent for the survival of humans.”

She nodded and faced Seeren. “How will you know if we do try to bring men back into the world?”

The bot said nothing. The silence thickened as we waited. Maybe the devil thought it didn’t need to make threats.

“Well, then.” Father Elaine rose once again. Some of the stoop had gone out of her shoulders. She was trying to play it calm, but I knew she’d be skipping by the time she hit the sidewalk. Probably she thought she had won a great victory. In any event, she was done with this little party.

But it was my little party, and I wasn’t about to let it break up with the devils holding hands with the Christers. “Wait,” I said. “Father, you better get Gratiana up here. And if you’ve got any other muscle in the neighborhood, call them right now. You need backup fast.”

Seeren glanced away from the window and at me.

“Why?” Father Elaine already had her sidekick out. “What is this?”

“There’s a problem.”

“Fay Hardaway,” said George sharply. “Indulge this one and recall your task. Your employment has been accomplished.”

“Then I’m on my own time now, George.” I thought maybe Seeren would try to leave, but it remained on its perch. Maybe the devil didn’t care what I did. Or else it found me amusing. I could be an amusing girl, in my own obtuse way.

Gratiana tore the door open. She held her nightstick high, as if expecting to dive into a bloodbath. When she saw our cool tableau, she let it drop to her side.

“Scooch over, Father,” I said, “and let her in. Gratiana, you can leave the door open but keep that toothpick handy. I’m pretty sure you’re going to be using it before long.”

“The others are right behind me, Father,” said Gratiana as she crowded into the room. “Two, maybe three minutes.”

“Just enough time.” I let my hand fall to the middle drawer of my desk. “I have a question for you, Father.” I slid the drawer open. “How did Seeren know all that stuff about haploid this and in vitro that?”

“It’s a devil.” She watched me thoughtfully. “They come from two hundred light years away. How do they know anything?”

“Fair enough. But they also knew that you married Kate and Rashmi. George here just said that I told them, except I never did. That was a mistake. It made me wonder whether they knew who you were all along. It’s funny, I used to be convinced that the devils were infallible, but now I’m thinking that they can screw up any day of the week, just like the rest of us. They’re almost human that way.”

“A regrettable misstatement was made.” The bot’s neck extended until his head was level with mine. “Indulge this one and refrain from further humiliation.”

“I’ve refrained for too long, George. I’ve had a bellyful of refraining.” I was pretty sure that George could see the open drawer, which meant that the devil would know what was in it as well. I wondered how far they’d let me go. “The question is, Father, if the devils already knew who you were, why would Seeren hire me to find you?”

“Go on,” she said.

My chest was tight. Nobody tried to stop me, so I went ahead and stuck my head into the lion’s mouth. Like that little girl at school, I’d always wanted to have a real job when I grew up. “You’ve got a leak, Father. Your problem isn’t devil super-science. It’s the good old-fashioned Judas kiss. Seeren has an inside source, a mole among your congregation. When it decided the time had come to meet with you, it wanted to be sure that none of you would suspect where its information was actually coming from. It decided that the way to give the mole cover was to hire some gullible PI to pretend to find stuff out. I may be a little

slow and a lot greedy but I do have a few shreds of pride. I can't let myself be played for an idiot." I thought I heard footsteps on the stairs, but maybe it was just my own blood pounding. "You see, Father, I don't think that Seeren really trusts you. I sure didn't hear you promise just now not to be making little boys. And yes, if they find out about the boy babies, the devils could just disappear them, but you and the Bride of God and all your batty friends would find ways to make that very public, very messy. I'm guessing that's part of your plan, isn't it? To remind us who the devils are, what they did? Maybe get people into the streets again. Since the devils still need to know what you're up to, the mole had to be protected."

Father Elaine flushed with anger. "Do you know she is?"

"No," I said. "But you could probably narrow it down to a very few. You said you married Rashmi and Kate, but that you never filed the documents. But you needed someone to witness the ceremony. Someone who was taking pix and would send one to Seeren ..."

Actually, my timing was a little off. Gratiana launched herself at me just as big Alix hurtled through the doorway. I had the air taser out of the drawer, but my plan had been for the Christers to clean up their own mess. I came out of my chair and raised the taser but even 50,000 volts wasn't going to keep that snarling bitch off me.

I heard a huge wet pop, not so much an explosion but an implosion. There was a rush of air through the doorway but the room was preternaturally quiet, as if someone had just stopped screaming. We humans gaped at the void that had formerly been occupied by Gratiana. The familiar surroundings of my office seemed to warp and stretch to accommodate that vacancy. If she could vanish so completely, then maybe chairs could waltz on the ceiling and trashcans could sing Carmen. For the first time in my life I had a rough sense of what the grannies had felt when the devils disappeared their men. It would be one thing if Gratiana were merely dead, if there were blood, and bone and flesh left behind. A body to be buried. But this was an offense against reality itself. It undermined our common belief that the world is indeed a fact, that we exist at all. I could understand how it could unhinge a billion minds. I was standing next to Father Elaine beside the open door to my office holding the taser and I couldn't remember how I had gotten there.

Seeren hopped down off the bookcase as if nothing important had happened and wrapped its translucent wings around its body. The devil didn't seem surprised at all that a woman had just disappeared. Maybe there was no surprising a devil.

And then it occurred to me that this probably wasn't the first time since they had taken all the men that the devils had disappeared someone. Maybe they did it all the time. I thought of all the missing persons whom I had never found. I could see the files in Julie Epstein's office bulging with unsolved cases. Had Seeren done this thing to teach us the fragility of being? Or had it just been a clumsy attempt to cover up its regrettable mistakes?

As the devil waddled toward the door, Alix made a move as if to block its exit. After what she had just seen, I thought that was probably the most boneheaded, brave move I had ever seen.

"Let them go." Father Elaine's voice quavered. Her eyes were like wounds.

Alix stepped aside and the devil and the bot left us. We listened to the devil scabble down the hall. I heard the elevator doors open and then close.

Then Father Elaine staggered and put a hand on my shoulder. She looked like a granny now.

"There are no boy babies," she said. "Not yet. You have to believe me."

"You know what?" I shook free of her. "I don't care." I wanted them gone. I wanted to sit alone at my desk and watch the room fill with night.

"You don't understand."

"And I don't want to." I had to set the taser on the desk or I might have used it on her.

"Kate Vermeil is pregnant with one of our babies," said Father Elaine. "It's a little girl, I swear it."

"So you've made Seeren proud. What's the problem?"

Alix spoke for the first time. "Gratiana was in charge of Kate."

7

The Poison Society was lit brightly enough to give a camel a headache. If you forgot your sunglasses, there was a rack of freebies at the door. Set into the walls were terrariums where diamondback rattlers coiled in the sand, black neck cobras dangled from dead branches and brown scorpions basked on ceramic rocks. The hemlock was in bloom; clusters of small, white flowers opened like umbrellas. Upright stems of monkshood were interplanted with death cap mushrooms in wine casks cut in half. Curare vines climbed the pergola over the alcohol bar.

I counted maybe fifty customers in the main room, which was probably a good crowd for a Wednesday night. I had no idea yet how many might be lurking in the specialty shops that opened off this space, where a nice girl might arrange for a guaranteed-safe session of sexual asphyxia either by hanging or drowning, or else get her cerebrum toasted by various brain lightning generators. I was hoping Kate was out in the open with the relatively sane folks. I didn't really want to poke around in the shops, but I would if I had to. I thought I owed it to Rashmi Jones.

I strolled around, pretending to look at various animals and plants, carrying a tumbler filled with a little Johnnie Walker Black Label and a lot of water. I knew Kate would be disguised but if I could narrow the field of marks down to three or four, I might actually snoop her. Of course, she might be on the other side of town, but this was my only play. My guess was that she'd switch styles, so I wasn't necessarily looking for a tommy. Her hair wouldn't be brunette, and her skin would probably be darker, and contacts could give her cat's eyes or zebra eyes or American flags, if she wanted. But even with padding and lifts she couldn't change her body type enough to fool a good scan. And I had her data from the Christer medical files loaded into my sidekick.

Father Elaine had tried Kate's call, but she wouldn't pick up. That made perfect sense since just about anyone could put their hands on software that could replicate voices. There were bots that could sing enough like Velma Stone to fool her own mother. Kate and Gratiana would have agreed on a safe word. Our problem was that Gratiana had taken it with her to hell, or wherever the devil had consigned her.

The first mark my sidekick picked out was a redhead in silk pajamas and lime green bunny slippers. A scan matched her to Kate's numbers to within 5%. I bumped into her just enough to plant the snoop, a sticky homing device the size of a baby tooth.

"Scuse me, sorry." I said. "S-So sorry." I slopped some of my drink onto the floor.

She gave me a glare that would have withered a cactus and I noodled off. As soon as I was out of her sight, I hit the button on my sidekick to which I'd assigned Kate's call. When Kate picked up, the snoop would know if the call had come from me and signal my sidekick that I had found her. The redhead wasn't Kate. Neither was the bald jane in distressed leather.

The problem with trying to locate her this way was that if I kept calling her, she'd get suspicious and lose the sidekick.

I lingered by a pufferfish aquarium. Next to it was a safe, and in front of that a tootsie fiddled with the combination lock. I scanned her and got a match to within 2%. She was wearing a spangle wig and a stretch lace dress with a ruffle front. When she opened the door of the safe, I saw that it was made of clear luxar. She reached in, then slammed the door and then trotted off as if she were late for the last train of the night.

I peeked through the door of the safe. Inside was a stack of squat blue inhalers like the one Rashmi had used to kill herself. On the wall above the safe, the management of The Poison Society had spray-painted a mock graffiti. 21L 4R 11L. There was no time to plant a snoop. I pressed the call button as I tailed her.

With a strangled cry, the tootsie yanked a sidekick from her clutch purse, dropped it to the floor and stamped on it. She was wearing Donya Durand ice and taupe flat slingbacks.

As I moved toward her, Kate Vermeil saw me and ducked into one of the shops. She dodged past fifty-five gallon drums of carbon tetrachloride and dimethyl sulfate and burst through the rear door of the shop into an alley. I saw her fumbling with the cap of the inhaler. I hurled myself at her and caught at her legs. Her right shoe came off in my hand, but I grabbed her left ankle and she went down. She still had the inhaler and was trying to bring it to her mouth. I leapt on top of her and wrenched it away.

“Do you really want to kill yourself?” I aimed the inhaler at her face and screamed at her. “Do you, Kate? Do you?” The air in the alley was thick with despair and I was choking on it. “Come on, Kate. Let’s do it!”

“No.” Her head thrashed back and forth. “No, please. Stop.”

Her terror fed mine. “Then what the hell are you doing with this thing?” I was shaking so badly that when I tried to pitch the inhaler into the dumpster, it hit the pavement only six feet away. I had come so close to screwing up. I climbed off her and rolled on my back and soaked myself in the night sky. When I screwed up, people died. “Cyanide is awful bad for the baby,” I said.

“How do you know about my baby?” Her face was rigid with fear. “Who are you?”

I could breathe again, although I wasn’t sure I wanted to. “Fay Hardaway.” I gasped. “I’m a PI; I left you a message this morning. Najma Jones hired me to find her daughter.”

“Rashmi is dead.”

“I know,” I said. “So is Gratiana.” I sat up and looked at her. “Father Elaine will be glad to see you.”

Kate’s eyes were wide, but I don’t think she was seeing the alley. “Gratiana said the devils would come after me.” She was still seeing the business end of the inhaler. “She said that if I didn’t hear from her by tomorrow then we had lost everything and I should ... do it. You know, to protect the church. And just now my sidekick picked up three times in ten minutes only there was nobody there and so I knew it was time.”

“That was me, Kate. Sorry.” I retrieved the Donya Durand slingback I’d stripped off her foot and gave it back to her. “Tell me where you got this?”

“It was Rashmi’s. We bought them together at Grayles. Actually I picked them out. That was before ... I loved her, you know, but she was crazy. I can see that now, although it’s kind of too late. I mean, she was okay when she was taking her meds, but she would stop every so often. She called it taking a vacation from herself. Only it was no vacation for anyone else, especially not for me. She decided to go off on the day we got married and didn’t tell me and all of a

sudden after the ceremony we got into this huge fight about the baby and who loved who more and she started throwing things at me — these shoes — and then ran out of the church barefoot. I don't think she ever really understood about ... you know, what we were trying to do. I mean, I've talked to the Bride of God herself ... but Rashmi." Kate rubbed her eye and her hand came away wet.

I sat her up and put my arm around her. "That's all right. Not really your fault. I think poor Rashmi must have been hanging by a thread. We all are. The whole human race, or what's left of it."

We sat there for a moment.

"I saw her mom this morning," I said. "She said to tell you she was sorry."

Kate sniffed. "Sorry? What for?"

I shrugged.

"I know she didn't have much use for me," said Kate. "At least that's what Rashmi always said. But as far as I'm concerned the woman was a saint to put up with Rashmi and her mood swings and all the acting out. She was always there for her. And the thing is, Rashmi hated her for it."

I got to my knees, then to my feet. I helped Kate up. The alley was dark, but that wasn't really the problem. Even in the light of day, I hadn't seen anything.

8

I had no trouble finding space at the bike rack in front of Ronald Reagan Elementary. The building seemed to be drowsing in the heavy morning air, its brick wings enfolding the empty playground. A janitor bot was vacuuming the swimming pool, another was plucking spent blossoms from the clematis fence. The bots were headache yellow; the letters RRE in puffy orange slanted across their torsos. The gardening bot informed me that school wouldn't start for an hour. That was fine with me. This was just a courtesy call, part of the total service commitment I made to all the clients whom I had failed. I asked if I could see Najma Jones and he said he doubted that any of the teachers were in quite this early but he walked me to the office. He paged her; I signed the visitors' log. When her voice crackled over the intercom, I told the bot that I knew the way to her classroom.

I paused at the open door. Rashmi's mom had her back to me. She was wearing a sleeveless navy dress with cream-colored dupatta scarf draped over her shoulders. She passed down a row of empty desks, perching origami animals at the center of each. There were three kinds of elephants, ducks and ducklings, a blue giraffe, a pink cat that might have been a lion.

"Please come in, Ms. Hardaway," she said without turning around. She had teacher radar; she could see behind her back and around a corner.

"I stopped by your house." I slouched into the room like a kid who had lost her civics homework. "I thought I might catch you before you left for school." I leaned against a desk in the front row and picked up the purple crocodile on it. "You fold these yourself?"

"I couldn't sleep last night," she said, "so finally I gave up and went for a walk. I ended up here. I like coming to school early, especially when no one else is around. There is so much time." She had one origami swan left over which she set on her own desk. "Staying after is different. If you're always the last one out at night, you're admitting that you haven't got anything to rush home to. It's pathetic, actually." She settled behind her desk and began opening windows on her desktop. "I've been teaching the girls to fold the ducks. They seem to like it. It's a challenging grade, the fifth. They come to me as bright and happy children and I am supposed to teach them fractions and pack them off to middle school. I

shudder to think what happens to them there.”

“How old are they?”

“Ten when they started. Most of them have turned eleven already. They graduate next week.” She peered at the files she had opened. “Some of them.”

“I take it on faith that I was eleven once,” I said, “but I just don’t remember.”

“Your generation grew up in unhappy times.” Her face glowed in the phosphors. “You haven’t had a daughter yet, have you, Ms. Hardaway?”

“No.”

We contemplated my childlessness for a moment.

“Did Rashmi like origami?” I didn’t mean anything by it. I just didn’t want to listen to the silence anymore.

“Rashmi?” She frowned, as if her daughter were a not-very-interesting kid she had taught years ago. “No. Rashmi was a difficult child.”

“I found Kate Vermeil last night,” I said. “I told her what you said, that you were sorry. She wanted to know what for.”

“What for?”

“She said that Rashmi was crazy. And that she hated you for having her.”

“She never hated me,” said Najma quickly. “Yes, Rashmi was a sad girl. Anxious. What is this about, Ms. Hardaway?”

“I think you were at the Comfort Inn that night. If you want to talk about that, I would like to hear what you have to say. If not, I’ll leave now.”

She stared at me for a moment, her expression unreadable. “You know, I actually wanted to have many children.” She got up from the desk, crossed the room and shut the door as if it were made of handblown glass. “When the seeding first began, I went down to City Hall and actually volunteered. That just wasn’t done. Most women were horrified to find themselves pregnant. I talked to a bot, who

took my name and address and then told me to go home and wait. If I wanted more children after my first, I was certainly encouraged to make a request. It felt like I was joining one of those mail order music clubs.” She smiled and tugged at her dupatta. “But when Rashmi was born, everything changed. Sometimes she was such a needy baby, fussing to be picked up, but then she would lie in her crib for hours, listless and withdrawn. She started anti-depressants when she was five and they helped. And the Department of Youth Services issued me a full-time bot helper when I started teaching. But Rashmi was always a handful. And since I was all by myself, I didn’t feel like I had enough to give to another child.”

“You never married?” I asked. “Found a partner?”

“Married who?” Her voice rose sharply. “Another woman?” Her cheeks colored. “No. I wasn’t interested in that.”

Najma returned to her desk but did not sit down. “The girls will be coming soon.” She leaned towards me, fists on the desktop. “What is it that you want to hear, Ms. Hardaway?”

“You found Rashmi before I did. How?”

“She called me. She said that she had had a fight with her girlfriend who was involved in some secret experiment that she couldn’t tell me about and they were splitting up and everything was shit, the world was shit. She was off her meds, crying, not making a whole lot of sense. But that was nothing new. She always called me when she broke up with someone. I’m her mother.”

“And when you got there?”

“She was sitting on the bed.” Najma eyes focused on something I couldn’t see. “She put the inhaler to her mouth when I opened the door.” Najma was looking into Room 103 of the Comfort Inn. “And I thought to myself, what does this poor girl want? Does she want me to witness her death or stop it? I tried to talk to her, you know. She seemed to listen. But when I asked her to put the inhaler down, she wouldn’t. I moved toward her, slowly. Slowly. I told her that she didn’t have to do anything. That we could just go home. And then I was this close.” She reached a hand across the desk. “And I couldn’t help myself. I tried to swat it out of her mouth. Either she pressed the button or I set it off.” She sat down abruptly and put her head in her hands. “She didn’t get the full dose. It

took forever before it was over. She was in agony.”

“I think she’d made up her mind, Ms. Jones.” I was only trying to comfort her. “She wrote the note.”

“I wrote the note.” She glared at me. “I did.”

There was nothing I could say. All the words in all the languages that had ever been spoken wouldn’t come close to expressing this mother’s grief. I thought the weight of it must surely crush her.

Through the open windows, I heard the snort of the first bus pulling into the turnaround in front of the school. Najma Jones glanced out at it, gathered herself and smiled. “Do you know what Rashmi means in Sanskrit?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Ray of sunlight,” she said. “The girls are here, Ms. Hardaway.” She picked up the origami on her desk. “We have to be ready for them.” She held it out to me. “Would you like a swan?”

By the time I came through the door of the school, the turnaround was filled with busses. Girls poured off them and swirled onto the playground: giggling girls, whispering girls, skipping girls, girls holding hands. And in the warm June sun, I could almost believe they were happy girls.

They paid no attention to me.

I tried Sharifa’s call. “Hello?” Her voice was husky with sleep.

“Sorry I didn’t make it home last night, sweetheart, ” I said. “Just wanted to let you know that I’m on my way.”