

J. N. Williamson

Author of *Bloodlines*

The Haunt

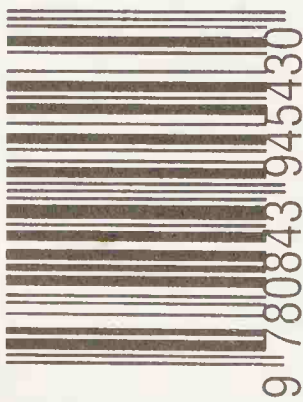
*"The Haunt has
genuinely horrific moments
and memorable characters;
indeed, its atmosphere
bids fair to be
a character in its own right!"*
—Brian Lumley



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THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

The urge to turn and run for the steps leading back to his family was strong, but Nick realized there were only three framed photographs left, and some brave or perverse streak in him wanted to complete his visit to the gallery of Kidds. He inched forward in pile carpeting that felt as if it was clinging to the soles of his feet. He stepped out in front of the first of the trio of pictures—

And saw Ray Kidd, trying to look grave and adult but partly smiling at him.

So the *next* photo, he told himself, edging sideways, infinitely relieved, had to be Jack.

It *was* Jack, a much younger version, sure, but undoubtedly his older pal Jack. It was him and Ray, their pictures taken at graduation, Nick realized, and took a step to the final photograph.

Nick emitted a curt sound like a muffled shout and flung himself backward, staggering, till he collided with the wall to his back and nearly fell to the floor.

It was the apparent impossibility of it that had shocked him, the fact that the photograph in the final matching frame depicted himself, Nicholas Sayre, in clothing he'd never seen before, and somewhat older. And the well-dressed Nicholas's frozen stare was switching to—to a *smile*.

"No, you're not on the wall yet," the photograph said in his own voice, lips moving. "But soon, boy, you *will* be here. Hanging with all the others . . . *forever*."

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The **Hunt**

J. N. Williamson

LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

I think everything good should be, quite simply put, "For Mary." In this instance I hope she will share the dedication with two extraordinarily talented Geminian friends, Tracy Knight and Thomas Millstead.

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The Hunt

“Jealousy, rage and hate become terrible monsters.”
—Benjamin Walker, *Encyclopedia of the Occult, the
Esoteric, and the Supernatural*

Prologue

He had gone out into the snow-freckled and icy December night and driven like the wind for very few of the usual reasons a young man has to behave like a fool. He was looking forward to seeing a girl, true, but he'd already had her twice and, for Ray, that customarily meant it was time to move along to the next one. He had not failed to notice the condition of the streets; actually, he enjoyed throwing the high-powered sports car into a spin in order to test his only slightly exaggerated driving skills.

As for his own condition, Ray was in good enough spirits for a man who would flip his life calendar over to the page with a big, imaginary "30" stamped in black before Christmas, and he'd been able to count the number of brews he had consumed so far that night. The total was nine, and that was roughly the halfway mark for a guy like

Ray who was enjoying a night out. The fact that four nights out of seven answered that description was only the kind of cavil that his big brother made to him whenever it occurred to Jack. It completely overlooked Ray's own heartfelt belief—namely, that record-breaking beer drinking was like any other sport: It called for devoted and persistent practice. And once a guy got as expert at it as *he* was, he'd probably have to consume half again as many brews as usual to take himself out of the game.

Something like that, Ray thought, executing a nearly forty-five-degree-angle turn as he whipped the car around the next corner.

No, he was driving like the wind, almost becoming *part* of the wind that screamed past his partly open window, for no reasons anybody could have understood except, Ray conceded, good brother Jack. After all, he was absolutely *not* going to die in an accident, because that wasn't *allowed*, he was too young (even at almost thirty) to be *permitted* death. This was not a matter of idiotic youthful bravado, even if Jack debated the extent of control the force had over them—could use to protect them—outside the family house. Ray believed it was very bright in its way, so it was logical that it understood there were reasons why either of the brothers needed to go out now and then, and equally logical that it would make sure they weren't harmed.

Someday, he reflected, compressing his lips as he trod down heavily on the little vehicle's accelerator, *I may get so fed up with this shit that I'll find out whether it can keep me from committing suicide*. He grinned wildly to himself. *I wonder if the force can*

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act fast enough to stop a bullet from entering my temple. . . .

Ray cocked his head, considered another possibility. Could he get *arrested*? He remembered dimly having had a speeding ticket back when he had started driving, but maybe that was allowed, to teach him something. Now that he thought back, he had gone straight home after that and, being a kid who hadn't wanted his new license suspended, he'd really watched his speed for a couple of years. So far as he knew, the cop who had ticketed him hadn't been struck by lightning or anything of that nature.

But what if he was driving twenty miles over the speed limit—as he was now—and he had his mid-way nine or ten beers under his belt, and what if he didn't pull over the minute he heard the siren? What if—Ray was into this now, really thinking it through—he played *games* with the cop, then, after he finally stopped, told the man in blue to get stuffed? Would the weirdo force that guarded Jack and him fucking *off* the officer if it realized he was going to have to go to jail?

"Holy shit," Ray said aloud, wonderingly. "If *I* killed the trooper in front of witnesses, they might give me ten to twenty!" He glanced in the rearview to see if any motorcycle cops were on his ass, and laughed with delight. "I'd be out of the goddamn mausoleum for a good, long while—at last! I'd finally be *free*!"

Ray's exuberance lasted for another half-mile, then he slowed the sports car, not wanting to miss the turnoff to Caitlin's apartment complex. *Balls, I'm such a miserable fraud*, he thought, sighing

hugely. He had no desire in the world to kill anybody—unless, at times when he was pissed over ol' Jackson's big brother attitude, it was the only person in the whole world he loved—and that probably included himself. On both counts.

It was just that he resented knowing that there was some power, some unseen, phantom force, that censored the activities and the decisions made by the members of the Kidd family and had done so for at least a couple of generations. Back when he was a little boy and had done something bad—some fairly harmless, childish damn stunt that would have cost most kids their allowances for the week—Dad had sat Jack and him down and laid out the special circumstances of their “bloodline” (as Dad put it). A lot of it had gone right over his head, frankly, but he'd had ample time since then to fill in the pieces and understand that there wasn't much he could do about it.

“I'll try to explain how it works, boys,” Dad had said during his lecture, “but there's a lot of it you'll have to figure out for yourselves as you grow up.” Ray and Jack, who was four years older, were respectively seated on the floor and on Dad's hassock while their father leaned forward from his favorite easy chair. “You've come to know all about Santa Claus by now, right?”

Ray had glanced at Jack, and vice versa, and they'd exchanged a wink.

“Well,” Dad went on, “this thing that looks after us Kidds is real, and it won't just go away when you're a little older. It won't ever go away.” He pawed at his shirt pocket for his cigarettes, then remembered giving up smoking a few weeks earlier.

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"The main thing is that it goes on watching over us. Even me, at my age."

Jack had asked, right away, "Where is it? Does it live here in the house?"

"I don't know, son," Dad answered, "but I imagine it does—if it *lives* anywhere. It never wanted me to smoke, so it finally set fire to my carton of Camels. Remember how we found them all burned up on the counter in the kitchen, and nothing else was even scorched?"

Ray and Jack had remembered understanding at that instant why Dad had demanded that they admit setting fire to the carton.

"Is it a ghost, Daddy?" Ray had asked.

"Now, I didn't say that," Dad had replied, raising his palm. "Neither my father—Grandpa Kidd, if you have any memory of him—nor I could ever quite decide what it is. It's never been much for moaning or marching around in the middle of the night, and it doesn't show itself in a long, white sheet or anything like that. In fact, the only members of the family who may have seen it at all are those who—well, those who died."

Ray found his turn, executed it smoothly—if too fast—and began to look forward to a quickie with cute, cooperative Caitlin. But now his recollections of the long-ago conversation with his similarly long-dead father were preoccupying him as well. He remembered it was he himself who had asked Dad what the force wanted, and if it ever gave presents like Santa Claus.

"It expects all the members of the family to live right here," Dad had said with the most serious tone Ray had ever heard in Eugene Kidd's voice.

"Eventually, it may let you fall in love and get married, but not to just anybody—and then it wants you to raise your own families in the house. What it gives you in return is—safety. Security, both the physical kind and economically, because a trust was set up a long while back that handles all the property taxes, the utilities, and the like." He had paused then, for a long moment, and little Ray had sensed how hard it was for their father. "You'll never get so much as a headache or a cold if you're doing what it wants you to do."

The Ray Kidd who would soon be thirty tried tremendously hard to stop seeing his father's and brother's faces of two decades before, strove to picture the bare breasts of his current regular girl, Caitlin, to hear her noises of excitement in copulation instead of the words that seemed to have put his regulated, tedious life into motion. But Jack-as-a-boy had said, "Grandpa died so long ago I don't even know what he looked like, and M-Mother fell down the basement stairs on Ray's birthday two years ago. That's not a lot like Santa Claus, Dad, is it?"

Dad had drifted into silence for a while, not even claiming Mother's fall was merely a tragic accident. Ray realized now that he, like Jack, had not understood what happened to that athletic young woman. She had made the most of being restricted to the old house along with her husband by using the tennis court in back as often as she could find an opponent. How had she fallen to her death on well-lit stairs in good repair?

"The best I can figure out the thing, boys," Dad had finally said, lowering his voice, "is this: Whatever it is, wherever it comes from, it pretends to it-

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self it's fair. It sets up rules—rules that aren't always consistent, and we have to find out what they are the hard way—and it believes they're for our own good." He made a sweeping gesture. "We can do this, not that; we can be close to this person, not that one. Follow me?" Both Ray and Jack had nodded. Then Dad whispered the rest. "But all that is just an excuse for doing hateful things sooner or later. Because its true motivation is . . . *hatred*. Absolute loathing of the Kidd family and anybody we ask into the house. Whether it's a ghost or a demon or whatever, it haunts each of us hatefully. I thought it was time you knew about it."

With that, Dad had stood, ruffled their hair, and announced he was going to "go fix dinner."

Ray's eyes smarted, and he turned the windshield wipers off and on again against the accumulating snow. Dad had lived in perfect health until Jack was about nineteen. But one day he met a middle-aged woman he liked, and asked her for a date.

Both died from the crash that occurred when Dad drove the lady by the huge, old house because she had wanted to see where he lived. Dad's car had been four months old, yet the brakes hadn't held—on a sunny, summery evening with no rain.

But that was why Ray Kidd had turned himself into an excellent driver and bought a high-performance car. He was within sight of Caitlin's apartment building now and, in his imagination, he saw her bare breasts clearly. *And I make my own automotive repairs*, he reminded himself. If the damned thing decided his time to die had come, what the hell was *he* supposed to do to stop it, anyway? A man had to have *some* kind of life!

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It was weirder even than it seemed, too, he thought, letting up on the accelerator. How many guys his age were there who sought top-paying positions with a nice retirement plan, or busted their balls to hold on to jobs like that, just to provide a little security for their families and themselves? Yet he and Jack had inherited a tax-free place that was practically a mansion so he could float from meaningless job to meaningless job, and Jack drove a delivery truck for a local version of UPS just so he could be *out* of the house all day! They didn't even have any need of sick days and, to the best of his knowledge, no Kidd had ever used a vacation to go anywhere—however much they would have loved to do so. And the biggest difference was that they were all terrified of offending something that Kidds apparently saw only when they were never going to see or experience anything else in life.

Ray guided the car up to the curb, halting when he found a patch of almost snow-free pavement in which he wouldn't get stuck. One of his earliest forbidden thoughts, one that first occurred to him not long before Dad was killed in his accident, kept thrusting itself to the forefront of his conscious mind. Once again he attempted to focus on the willing and bounteously well-curved Caitlin—she probably tolerated his idiosyncrasies and behaved so cooperatively, he thought, because the size of his and Jack's estate made her believe they were care-free millionaires—but the forbidden thought wouldn't go back into his unconscious mind where it belonged.

"If none of us have even seen this thing," he said with his lips, the sports car in park, "common sense

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says it's *imaginary*, that we're all just superstitious as hell—that we're a bunch of neurotics who are being good little boys and girls to obey some autocratic old ancestor who's been dead for half the century!" Ray raised his head, a ruminative frown becoming a reasonably clear-eyed expression of hope. "So Dad's crash, and Mother tripping on the steps, could be *real* accidents. Their deaths and all the other early ones in the family could come from always being nervous, tensed-up because they were grown-ups trying to live like little children."

A light feminine voice called, "Are you going to sit out there forever?"

Caitlin, standing partly behind the open front door, made it unnecessary to try to remember what her plush young breasts looked like. All she had on were bikini briefs.

A sense of freedom he had never known before swept through Ray like the first flush of a fever. Already beginning to respond to the half-naked young woman, he reached out with his right hand to the key in the ignition. "I'm coming right in," he shouted as he opened his door.

No, you aren't! a voice told him, much louder, even though Ray didn't know if it was actually spoken or in his head. He gripped the steering wheel, one leg outside of the car, and looked around.

Above the car and, simultaneously around it, he saw an enormous, segmented shadow, one that seemed somehow to get closer—to engulf the small automobile and him.

Bring no more like her—ever! the voice screamed, the sound so great that Ray could not leave the vehicle and had to cover his ears with his hands.

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Then the car, still in park, was moving—*one or two feet above the snow-caked street*. Looking through the door, Ray saw the concrete speeding by.

And the automobile was even higher off the ground and traveling faster when it smashed into the windshield and top of a large and stationary pickup truck twelve or thirteen yards from Caitlin's residence.

In the direction of home.

Chapter I

1

There was the phone call from the girl, Caitlin. It was almost incomprehensible—but the essential words such as “Ray,” “accident,” and “Manner of Spirit Hospital” got through like dumdum bullets.

There was the scary but now detail-lost drive to the hospital and the maddening need to find a place to leave his parcel service panel truck somewhere in the parking lot, and the treacherously slippery rush across the lot to the Emergency doors illuminated by the sort of lights Jack would have expected to find on a whorehouse.

There were—number one—the hideous wait to talk with somebody about Ray’s condition and what was being done, and—number two—the terrifying moment when he got to see his brother, and—the

worst number—the bottoming-out horror of wondering if there would *be* any additional moments with a living Ray.

There was the positively/simply, no-bones-about-it, *sickening* wait for an X-ray-reading surgeon to assure him about that matter of more moments or to tell Jack Kidd the worst news he had heard in a life, that, just thirty-four or not, wasn't lacking in the accumulation of shitty updates. Instead, Ray was "comfortable" and they'd "see" in the morning.

There was the ride home, alone, Jack feeling too numb to notice the driving risks, and arriving there just before midnight with an unbudgeable conviction that it had to be nearly dawn.

There was the house from outside, a stood-on-edge, rigid domino with freakily fat snowflakes creating a number nobody could calculate, or would care to. There were a number of doors Jack might have headed for and unlocked, but it had always felt marginally more like his home to use the front door. Actually, he didn't even know where the keys were for the patio and side doors.

There was an indescribably odd sensation of loneliness inadequately stirred in with the customary knowledge that he wasn't alone at all, had never truly been so and never would be. He went through the house by the shortest route to a kitchen capacious enough for a top-line hotel and put on a pot of coffee with a certain savage, self-directed fury that he hadn't left a cup that could be rapidly heated in the microwave.

Then there was slumping in a kitchen chair to wait some more and a yen to retrace all those steps that had sent him out of the house that night and

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eventually brought him here: Caitlin surely wasn't in love with Ray, she was old enough to know they'd just been having sex, but she had been quite near hysteria. That's right, Jack remembered, she had said Ray's car was *stopped* when the accident happened. But she'd also said Ray plowed into a pickup truck. Jack lifted his head, his neck chilling, and moved along the sequence of events instead of asking the house to explain.

The drives he had made to Manner of Spirit and home later, so much later, weren't worth dwelling on except to note that he hadn't even suffered the slightest slide or fishtail. What was worth dwelling on Jack hoped he wouldn't: Ray's bloody, broken-toy appearance, and his unconsciousness. *Dear God, I didn't protect him enough*, Jack thought, vaulting out of his chair to go glare at Mr. Coffee or maybe even Joe DiMaggio, who had sold him on the maker years before. Ray didn't have the sense to pound sand in a rat hole. There was always the chance that their particular rat might come out showing its teeth, and it was he himself—Jack E. Kidd—who was the older brother, the *big* brother—however much the fact irritated Ray. *All that kid has going for him is his looks and his whacked-out self-confidence*, Jack told himself. He poured coffee into his cup, even though it also sizzled when it splashed on the element plate. *He can't cope without either one.*

So why hadn't their perpetual houseguest *prevented* Ray's wreck? If it had wanted to kill him, it would have done a much more thorough piece of work.

So did this awful accident mean that he himself

was right and the family tyrant had little or no control over what they did away from the house, or was Ray correct and it had not—for reasons Jack couldn't guess—wanted to dispose of Ray permanently?

Sipping coffee, Jack found himself wondering what ramification Ray's crash, and his well-being in the weeks and months ahead, had on his own romantic involvement and plans. After several years of Jack dating almost no one, working his delivery job with Regional Parcel Service by day and then watching TV or playing cards with his brother at night, Rachel Sayre had entered his life around eighteen months earlier. Entered it, and also re-awakened it—gave it hope, joy, purpose.

It seemed a genuine marvel, maybe a miracle, to a thirty-four-year-old bachelor who was skinny, bespectacled, and of average height that a twenty-seven-year-old, absolute blond beauty would make it so clear that she really did not care to date any other man. Rachel had two children, of course, eight-year-old Nick and four-year-old Tricia, from a previous marriage. Jack had listened to Rachel's explanation that no other man she had met wished to date her often because most eligible men were put off by "the idea of a ready-made family."

But having become extremely well-acquainted with both kids, Jack had not been able to grasp or deal with Rachel's summary of the views of other men his age. Little Nick was hilariously precocious and bright; Tricia was indescribably cute, even beautiful, and the notion of someday walking down an aisle to a minister with Tricia on his arm, ready to give her hand in marriage, had brought happy tears to Jack's eyes.

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Right up until it had occurred to him that he had no right to marry Rachel and place three such wonderful human beings in the kind of dreadful peril they would experience once their last names, too, were Kidd.

The front doorbell shrilled and Jack sloshed coffee in his saucer, shocked by the unexpected sound and automatically fearful of what might be waiting there. Once he had dated an exciting, sex-happy girl with the disposition of Ray's friend Caitlin and the doorbell had rung every half an hour, all night long, as if promising him that it could do that anytime or *all* the time unless he chose his companions better.

Or, for that matter, it could put God-knew-what kind of horror on his front porch.

Jack rose and started back through the house, making sure it was clear that he meant to answer the ringing bell while, at the same time, he was in no hurry about it. He stopped three times to turn on additional lights, hesitated once to glance into a mirror and smooth back his rather overabundant brown hair.

But whoever—or whatever—was ringing the doorbell would not go away, and eventually he reached the door and realized he would have to open it.

When he did, he threw the door wide in a gesture of surrender.

The beautiful woman who had been pressing the bell stepped inside and embraced Jack.

"I forgot I phoned you about Ray before I went to the hospital," Jack said. He was telling himself as

much as he was telling the blond Rachel Sayre. After his many dire thoughts, he was ecstatic to see her.

Her arms held him to her. "I couldn't go home and sleep without knowing how Ray is," Rachel said warmly. "I finished my Avon route for the evening, then went to a Steak 'n Shake and drank coffee, worrying about him—and you. I phoned the hospital twice, but they wouldn't tell me anything much."

He led the way into the front room. He knew a neighbor girl baby-sat Rachel's kids on nights when she delivered things her customers had ordered. "Well, I don't know a great deal more. It was a pretty bad accident, and X-rays revealed a few broken bones in one arm and a small fracture in his right leg. He looked like hell, and I wasn't allowed to see him when he regained consciousness for a few minutes." He watched Rachel sit on a sofa, then sank down beside her. "What they're afraid of is nerve damage." He shrugged. "The doctor said that from the description of Ray's beloved sports car, he was 'pretty lucky.' Can you imagine that?"

"I suppose it could be true," she said, taking his hand and squeezing it. "I was so worried, because I've never known brothers who were closer—and I like Ray."

"We couldn't be closer," Jack said, grinning, "and we couldn't be more different, farther apart." He studied her lovely, increasingly familiar face, and dimly realized she had never been inside the house before. "It was very sweet of you to come over here so late. That girl who baby-sits for you is going to want an arm and a leg."

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Rachel smiled, squeezed his hand, and tried to raise his arm to her shoulders. Jack surprised her by pulling away. "I overtipped her last time. Are you absolutely exhausted? Maybe I showed up at a bad time?"

"No, no," he said quickly, unsure how to handle this situation. Glancing around the enormous room, he held her hand lightly between them. "I was just scared badly—for Ray."

Still convinced she had somehow shown up at a time when Jack simply had no time for her, Rachel asked, "Are there other members of the family to notify about the crash?"

"I'm afraid we're really all the family that's left," Jack said, glancing away.

Rachel tried to put his nervousness aside. "I had no idea how spacious this house is! You could put nearly my whole apartment in this room." She was hinting for a tour of the place and knew Jack Kidd was too smart not to know she was, but he said nothing whatever. As their silence grew, she put her feet together in preparation to rise and leave. "I'd better let you get some sleep."

"Don't go!" Jack exclaimed, leaping to his own feet. "Not yet, please." He peered down at her, unable to think of an acceptable explanation for his unresponsive behavior. "This big old place is a dump, and there's nothing I could show you that wouldn't be an embarrassment to me. Somehow Ray and I never have gotten around to making it a little bit more habitable, but you know men."

She nodded and tried to relax, but the thought went through her mind, *No better than you know*

women. On its heels came a second thought: *But that isn't why he's acting this way—like he's half frightened of something other than his brother's recovery.*

At twenty-seven, Rachel Sayre was a mother of two who had divorced the only man with whom she had ever slept because Hale Sayre had continued to add to his total of bedmates after fathering Nick and Tricia. She knew she was extremely pretty except for a nose she considered too long, and she believed it had been her good looks that attracted the handsome bastard she had married. It had seemed wonderful when a man who would never be asked to pose for the covers of romance novels—Jack Kidd—had asked her on a date. And more wonderful than Rachel could describe when she not only found herself loving Jack in a better, more mature fashion than Hale, but Jack and the kids had immediately formed a good-humored bond based on banter and obvious mutual affection. She would never have dated a man twice who had appeared to be ignoring the presence or importance of Tricia and Nick, and Jack was the only man she had gone on dating in the new *post-Hale-the-Handsome* Era.

The trouble was, she and Jack had been together for some eighteen months and they'd had partly clothed, high-school sex only once—in that package-packed delivery truck, with nowhere to lie down. He hadn't broached the possibility of marriage even once. Tonight, she thought, he might welcome comforting intimacy.

"Could I have a cup of coffee or some Diet Pepsi or something?" she asked as an idea occurred to her. "There's something to go into before I leave."

"Oh, absolutely!" Jack said, relieved to have a

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chance to start over. "Sorry I didn't ask," he called, heading for the kitchen. "A bachelor's manners and those of a warthog are identical, according to all scientific surveys!"

The coffee he had made before Rachel visited was bound to still be good; then he discovered his brother Ray hadn't finished the last Diet Pepsi in the fridge as he usually did. Jack was frozen by indecision about which refreshment he should bring to Rachel—a hot cup of coffee or the Pepsi. Or, still trickier to figure out if he selected the latter, should he divide the Diet Pepsi into a glass for each of them, even though he wasn't in the mood for a soft drink, or take her the whole bottle? Or maybe the bottle and a glass filled with ice?

Or wasn't it safer for her, him, or both of them just to tell her to leave?

Surely everyone living or dead understands manners, Jack concluded. He decided to take the one woman he had ever believed he might love a cup of coffee *and* the Pepsi bottle, plus glass crammed with ice. Mr. Coffee, however, wasn't getting around on the curveball any longer and tended to produce a tepid cup, so Jack poked his refilled one and a new cup of coffee into the microwave for roughly a minute. Meanwhile, he took out the soft drink, unscrewed the top, and began dropping ice cubes into a clean glass. Things were going well, he thought; maybe the weird, permanent guest the Kidds had never seen approved of Rachel, even *liked* her. She was not a slut like poor Ray's occasional sex partner, somebody who was willing to screw outside, as Bro swore they'd done on a picnic last summer. Perhaps the ghost—if it was a ghost—was female, or

had been; maybe it was a great-grandma and all the cruel things that had happened were the product of a long-lost generation or way of life. Maybe she saw herself as the protector of the family name and honor.

The microwave, not a recent acquisition, beeped and Jack knew it would be only the first of many insistent little notifications. He and Ray joked about the appliance being an old nag, and referred to it as "Mother." He put a small tray with the Diet Pepsi bottle and glass of ice beside it, said, "I'm here now, Mother dear, don't worry," and opened the glass-fronted door. He reached in for the two cups—

And the cup from which he had already drunk his coffee was perfectly reheated.

The fresh cup, with coffee he'd poured for Rachel, was not only unheated by "Mother," it was as cool as if he'd put it into the refrigerator for a minute.

Jack lifted his head, recognized no palpable sign of an intruder, yet was certain now that sweet, considerate Rachel Sayre rated no more highly with the family hate-haunt than his brother's date, Caitlin.

"I don't need more coffee," he muttered under his breath, emptying the clean cup into the sink and pouring into it the newly heated coffee from his own cup, "and I happen to know Rachel and I both like it black." He set the cup on the tray, strode back toward the kitchen door. "Why don't you give her a chance?" he asked whatever might be listening. "This one is a lady, and she would never dishonor our name."

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He carried the tray to the front room and paused a step into it. Rachel was lying on the couch—alive, thank God; she raised one arm and waved to him.

She was smiling at him and she was completely naked except for a pair of snow-white panties.

3

Walking toward Rachel with his fool tray of coffee and Pepsi extended before him in butler fashion was, for the badly nearsighted Jack, like staring at a movie screen and watching an absolutely essential and compelling scene take half a minute to get into focus. The distance he had to cover was such that he had an ample opportunity to study her physical attributes—the many that were unclad—from head to toe.

Better yet, as each careful, shuffling step brought Rachel more comprehensively into Jack's field of vision, more detail revealed itself to him: The facial feature he had liked best about the young woman, a nose that had seemed refined and queenly, now worked with a smile he couldn't remember seeing before to make for an openly provocative expression. Her blond hair, with her head reclining against a cushion pulled from the back of the sofa, had been pretty and girlishly youthful to Jack, and now it served as a soft and gentle frame all the way down to the shoulders.

Rachel's breasts—seen naked now in better lighting than that inside a company panel truck—had been the touch-only-when-allowed objects of somehow shocking delight when seen from just outside the kitchen door. As Jack got nearer, one still looked

amazingly round; the other, Rachel's left, dipped a bit to the right with the burden of gravity. Yet its beauty wasn't lessened as it appeared less of an object and more a superb oval of inviting, living flesh. When Jack was closer, her nipples exhibited inner hearts of the loveliest pink he had ever seen.

The image that really aroused Jack Kidd and almost caused him to stumble and drop the tray was a combination of factors that he could not have expressed in words: not merely her naked legs, but how they looked because of the way Rachel lay. Not just the expanse of the snow-white panties and the boundless mystery residing beneath them, but her tiny mouth of a navel at the precise center of the lower belly, with all its subtly rounded pale softness, the widening hips, and his coolly logical awareness of what little physical effort was required to render Rachel absolutely and delectably nude. For the first time since his boyhood, when he'd removed his own underpants and stood rigid beside a smuggled-in gatefold photo of a model who had also taken off everything, Jack remembered in their entirety the manifold implications of the words "nude" and "nudity."

He found a couple of inches of space on the sofa, sat there rapidly to conceal from the naked beauty the conspicuous, solved mystery beneath his own underpants, and said, "I brought you both coffee and a Diet Pepsi." He used one hand to push the tray forward onto the coffee table before them, and discovered it wasn't safe to fold his hands in his lap. He looked up Rachel's body from her feet, and she did not move. The sofa wasn't deep enough for her to have rested her legs flat on it, and the right one,

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closer to the back of the couch, was raised slightly at the knee, affording him an unobstructed view of her panty crotch and the fullness of an inner thigh. Rachel was an inch or two shorter than he, so the visual trip up her stomach to her breasts was a treat in itself. Before and after their single fast few moments of intercourse in his truck, Jack had often worked his hands beneath the cups of her bra but had rarely been afforded more than a glimpse of her bare breasts, and they had been in deep shadow the night he had sat on a stack of boxes and she scrambled onto his lap. Seeing their lush, unique beauty now reminded him of what he'd told himself as a horny boy, haunted within and without by a presence he found inexplicable: Most women's breasts offered at least some enticing beauty, but he hadn't wanted to have them accessible to him—as they were now—only to stare farther up at an ugly or an avaricious face.

That wasn't remotely the case with Rachel, and he murmured, "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" as he covered her crotch with one hand and leaned forward to kiss her inner thigh. He licked it, then moved his head to the right—to her yielding lower stomach, the navel, below—saying, "You taste like the finest vanilla ice cream. Only better!"

"I work out at Ben and Jerry's," Rachel said lightly, stroking the top of his head.

Jack folded the top of her underpants down an inch, kissed that flesh, folded it down two more inches. He discovered fine golden hairs like fleece, kissed her again. He wasn't in a state of delirium, but he was certainly more focused, more single-minded, than he had ever been in his thirty-four years of life.

"You have all your clothes on," Rachel called down gently. "It will be difficult to return the favor this way."

Not unreluctantly, Jack got to his feet, unbuckled his pants and, after a pause to realize his arousal would be entirely obvious in another moment, unzipped. The way Rachel looked now, more nearly nude by three inches of cloth than when he'd entered the room, assured him he would definitely be ready to do what he had yearned so long to do—if he was lucky, despite the interfering presence he'd suffered his whole life.

Rachel, raising her hips, curled her legs to her chest and started the panties on their final descent—just as Jack slowly lowered his shorts.

And he heard a noise that seemed to come from in front of the stairs leading to the second floor and beyond. It also felt as if it came from nowhere because, for a very short period of time, Jack had nearly believed no one but Rachel Sayre and he existed on earth. To him, the noise had been loud, that of an intruder—at least another thinking being—and his only option was to go find out what the sound had been, and who or what had made it.

"I'll be right back," he said, yanking his shorts up all the way. He decided not to bother putting his pants back on, but wondered anyway if anything of his erection would be left when he returned. "I have to see what that noise was."

Rachel, her knees still touching her chest, the underpants delectably hooked around her ankles, stared at the retreating Jack. "*What* noise?" she demanded, but not nearly loud enough for him to hear her.

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When he got to the stairs, the lights on the landing above him were on, but, as was always the case when Ray was out, nobody alive was there except Jack. However, an article of clothing lay on the floor in a crude guise of life.

His robe, arms fanned out as if an invisible man inside of it had taken a swan dive from the second story.

"I get it," Jack muttered under his breath. "'Don't run around naked in the house,' right? 'Cover yourself in front of that woman'—that about it?"

He switched off the light, took two steps back toward the front room, then—moving casually to imply it was his idea, his decision—he tugged on the robe.

When he headed back to Rachel, however, he undid the sash, preparing a story about "feeling cold in the hallway."

Then he saw there was no real need even to concoct an explanation for his robe having mysteriously fallen downstairs.

Rachel had redressed, except for the bra, and sat upright on the sofa with her blouse not yet buttoned. "You have no idea how bras cut into you after a while," she said, finishing her cup of coffee. Her expression was partly rueful, partly apologetic—with a trace of something Jack read as disappointment. "Since you already saw 'em, I felt there was no harm in just carrying the damn thing home."

"I thought we were going to, you know," Jack mumbled, "... make love."

"Wherever did you get that idea?" she asked sarcastically. She pushed the glass with melting ice to-

ward him and poured some of the Diet Pepsi into it. "Drink your soft drink like a good boy, Jack. Who knows, maybe you can win a decoder ring or something if you save enough bottle tops!"

He had no idea how to explain his strange behavior, particularly when, seated next to her on the sofa, the slightest glance toward Rachel revealed the swing of her breasts through the open blouse. "*I was that close to having mature sex with a beautiful woman I love*, he realized, *and I let that hateful, uninvited damned thing ruin it with a bathrobe!*" "I can't tell you how sorry I am," he said.

"I'm the one to be sorry," Rachel said, sighing. "I knew I had no right to ask you why you've never wanted me to go to bed with you—it was even I who instigated that groping parody in your company truck—or why you haven't suggested a more . . . permanent relationship. I think you love me, and I *do* love you, and I know you and the kids are crazy about each other; and I guess I'm old-fashioned enough to believe it's the g-guy who proposes." Embarrassed, she threw her arms up. "Then I do something even *more* old-fashioned and try to use my body to get you! Well, I *am* sorry, Jack. It was tawdry and it was stupid." She looked away.

He attempted to both draw her to him and to reach inside her blouse to fondle her breasts. But she froze, and he feared she would cry.

"I think I always wanted to make love to you, *with you*," he said all but inaudibly. He paused, hesitant. "That 'groping parody' you mentioned was the closest I've ever come to paradise. And there's nothing in the world—"

"Would you speak more loudly?" She was meet-

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ing his gaze now, attentive or even eager to hear him out. "I can't hear you very well."

"I was saying you could never be tawdry, or stupid." Jack was moving his lips for the greatest clarity, but he had scarcely raised his voice. Impulsively, he leaned toward Rachel. "And I love you, too. And the kids."

Rachel touched his cheek, frowned in bewilderment. "Then what's wrong? Jack, for goodness' sakes, why are two grown-ups behaving like a couple of teenagers going steady forty years ago? Like there's some maiden aunt upstairs who might turn into Norman Bates's imitation of his mother, and charge down to hack us up?"

Because maybe that's what is upstairs, for all I know, Jack thought. "Honey," he said, the pet name itself more daring than he'd ever had the courage to be, until tonight, "I can't tell you."

"Well, you're not gay, are you?" she asked irritably, beginning to button her blouse. "I don't think you are. But if this is some kind of great experiment for you, to see if you like girls, too, *say so!*" She shook her head, tried to laugh. "I saw you in your shorts and you *were* aroused, so I'd say there's an excellent chance you can manage!"

Almost everything Rachel was saying ventured into territory that had never been explored in Jack's and Ray's house—not by them, anyway, not aloud—and Jack was terrified for both of them. "Rachel, I told you I just can't explain it to you. I—"

"Oh, come on," she said shortly, standing. "If you simply don't want to give up your independence, or you're afraid of becoming a full-time dad, you should say so." She picked up her topcoat, clearly

eager now to just leave. "Be that much of a man—or a friend."

"Nothing you've said is the case," Jack said, shrugging helplessly. He reached out to help her with her coat, but she took a step away. "I think you should honor my privacy in this area so we can just—" Then he broke off what he was saying, just let the words fade away, as she walked toward the front door. He drifted after her, searching for safe words.

Rachel opened the door, paused as wintry wind snuffled around the frame. "I have no other prospects," she said quietly, head up, "but t-that's okay. I really don't *have* to be married." She gave him an extremely brief peck on the cheek. "As for continuing the way we were, Jack, I just don't know right now."

She turned abruptly. "Be very careful driving home," he called through the open door. The image of his brother, so much more spirited than he, lying unconscious now in the emergency ward, came quickly to mind. He started to repeat his advice.

But Rachel's voice, carrying easily to him on the whipping wind, interrupted him. "You have a hole in your shorts where you really need to repair it, or pitch them!"

Half smiling, half on the verge of tears, he saw her drive away from the curb as if it had been a carefree summer night.

For minutes after Rachel's departure, and after he had locked up, Jack prowled the rooms and hall-

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ways of the first floor in a mood veering from a melancholy despair for his life and probable future to a half-formed determination to *do* something about the decades-long, virtual captivity of the Kidd family. Every time he tried to convince himself that he and Ray, their dead parents and others of the family he hadn't met had merely cooperated with the nasty, neurotic tall tale of some relative who should have sought help from a psychiatrist or minister, he recalled that the whole Kidd family, except for two, no longer existed—

And that tonight's incident, keeping Rachel and him from truly making love for the first time, involved an old robe he'd left long ago in the second-floor bathroom traveling out onto the landing and falling down a flight of stairs with enough noise to make him go see what had happened. That was not make-believe or being neurotic; sweet and generous Rachel herself could verify that it had happened.

As for "doing" something about the haunting or whatever it was, Jack thought as he strode through the first floor, that was easy enough to talk about. In movies about demons and ghosts, the troubled Catholic family always went to church and the priest either knew the rites of exorcism or brought in an expert within a few days. Or a young woman who'd taken the last available apartment in town and encountered something fiendish going on had a boyfriend whose hobby was the occult—and might even be in league with the Satanists—or her sister was married to an ill-defined "supernatural expert." Once when Jack had stopped to get gas, he'd checked out the yellow pages under every listing he could imagine for contacting a "ghost-

buster," and had drawn a blank. Not only that, the Kidds were neither Catholic nor especially religious. Maybe a Methodist minister might have helped as much as a movie priest, but Jack thought it was more likely the man would suggest he consult a shrink.

And Jack didn't know any shrinks, either.

His meandering walk brought him back into the front room, where the cushion Rachel had pulled out to recline upon was still out of place. With very little imaginative effort he saw again, in his mind's eye, how beautiful she had been and how desirable. For a moment he considered rushing to the sofa, touching it to see if her warmth had somehow permeated it, even to see if she had forgotten to take her bra back to her apartment. But that was just too childish for a thirty-four-year-old man, and Jack scooped up his discarded pants, turned off the lights in the room, and wandered toward the kitchen. *I'll just turn off the coffee*, he decided, *and go to bed*. In the morning he'd make a few deliveries, then beg off to visit Ray at the hospital.

He caught a glimpse of the open doors to Ray's bedroom and his own, and a mixture of new concern for his little brother and fear of the night that lay ahead was almost overwhelming. Ever since the death of their father it had been the Jack and Ray Kidd Show, and without ever quite saying it, they had come to believe that one day they'd just be frustrated old bachelors together—until one was left behind in the deepening shadows of his mock existence to await eternal reunion, or madness.

"Dammit, Jack," Ray had argued seven or eight years before, when a decent girl he liked very much

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was terrified straight out of the house and his life, “there must be enough room for several couples to live in this mausoleum! Whatever the source is, it’s entirely unreasonable—not just finicky and full of hatred, but crazy as hell!”

Now Jack stared at the kitchen table where they had been sitting and turned off the coffeemaker. He had shushed defiant Ray, not wanting him to be overheard and punished. But he had seen in his younger brother’s eyes the appeal to Big Bro to *do* something, *anything*, that would maximize their opportunities for normal lives. “You’re right about the extra space,” he had said. “We seldom even go upstairs.”

“Because we’re afraid we might get too *close* to it,” Ray had hissed, “even if we don’t know what or where it is How long ago did this thing begin? Are we allowed to know that much, at least?”

And Jack had pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, then reached for a napkin in order to write an answer for Ray: *Great-Grandpa Howell Kidd. Started after he died, I think.*

“Then he’s the haunt?” Ray had asked boldly. And Jack had moved his shoulders in a helpless shrug. Finally, he had added in a whisper, “You were too little to remember, but Dad said he didn’t think so, that it was something”—Jack had pointed to the name he’d scribbled on the napkin, then torn the napkin into shreds—“did. Or something he had *wanted*. I guess Grandpa was able to tell Dad that before he died.”

Now things were changing, apparently not for the better. Ray was lying in a hospital bed, in and out of unconsciousness. He could turn out to be at least partly paralyzed; he might even die.

And while Jack definitely did not want his brother—for Ray's own sake—to perish, he knew it was utterly unthinkable to be without him in such an oppressive and repressive place as "home." If he had to spend another forty years or so alone there, Jack understood for the first time, he would gradually go completely mad.

He also knew that instant that he loved Rachel Sayre with all his heart—

Sufficiently, without a shadow of doubt, to prefer to live in the Kidd family house with her than without her.

He started walking again, haltingly, uncertainly, in the direction of the closest telephone. *I do love her*, he told himself, surprised by how much sincerity he experienced that time—and *she loves me enough to go against her own principles or preferences and basically ask me to marry her!*

His reaction had been to express his love but otherwise say he couldn't explain why he had behaved so long like a fretting old maid who wasn't about to give up her precious virginity, not even if it was her last chance. And what he *hadn't* done was be polite enough to even *answer* the question of whether or not he would marry her!

Sitting down at the little phone table in the dining room, Jack was alarmed by what he was about to do, but perceived, for the first time, the selfishness of fear. He took off his thick glasses, fished a Kleenex out of his shirt pocket to scrub at the lenses, and thought. Everybody knew that being afraid was paralyzing, and he'd been like that with a perfectly beautiful, naked young woman—one who said she loved him—practically aching for his

caresses. Much worse, his terror at the prospect of what simply might happen if he told Rachel the truth about his and Ray's closely monitored lives had made him virtually overlook a proposal of marriage—an opportunity to be truly happy for a change!

"Enough is enough," he said under his breath, replacing his glasses, picking up the phone receiver and beginning to punch in the first digits of Rachel's telephone number.

An irritating noise that was partly a whining sound and partly an incessant, half-human loud hum seemed to envelop his head, and to linger.

Thinking he had pushed the wrong buttons and gotten an exchange that wasn't in service, Jack disconnected—and the annoying noise stopped. He punched in the numbers again, and the combination of whine and hum started again, louder. This time he finished dialing and the drone receded—still there but not as high in volume, and, Jack knew, not from the phone. Rachel's dear, familiar voice answered, "Lo," with a note more of sadness, he believed, than irritation.

"I owe you an explanation of why we probably can't get married," he said in a stream of words meant to guard against any inclination to hang up. "The main thing is that you really *mustn't* think it's you, Nick, or Tricia."

Jack didn't intend to pause at that point, but he'd become aware of a high shadow that began to creep along the walls behind him and that rose above him on the wall to his left. Again he heard the humming whine. Glancing upward in both fear and dismay, he saw that the shadow was also inching across the

ceiling. He interrupted whatever Rachel was saying to blurt out the unspeakable: "My family—for generations—has had something terrible that . . . watches us, *governs* us, finally takes our lives."

Though he closed his eyes tightly, sure he had crossed the line as Ray had done, the shadows did not fold about his head and body and smother him.

"You're saying," Rachel replied, sounding almost but not quite incredulous, "your family—and your house—are haunted?"

"I don't know if that's actually the right word"—the lingering noise increased its volume, the whine sharper, more piercing, and shadows turned nearly the whole house black as pitch—"but *something* scares us into getting killed unless we just s-stay here with it. It hates outsiders except for the people it l-lets us marry. I could never give it an excuse to hurt you or the kids, and that's why I haven't begged you to marry me!"

"I don't know what to say, Jack," Rachel began, her voice scarcely audible above the noise that filled Jack's dining room. "Maybe we could—"

"I have to hang up now, *right* now," Jack said hastily, groping for a lighter he remembered seeing on the phone table—"or it'll get *me*!" And he hung up, sweating profusely as his hand located the lighter and he started to thumb it.

The lighter flared up, the lights in the dining room came on, and the shadows receded from the room as if furtively following a swift mouse into the smallest of cleverly chosen holes.

Is that it? Jack wondered, glancing warily around without rising. *You're not going to punish me for telling?*

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Suddenly he felt warm all over. This time he wasn't perspiring with fright; there was nothing exactly unpleasant about it. In a way, he felt warm in the fashion of someone who was being reassured—

Even caressed.

With the awareness that it was also the way he'd felt when Rachel caressed him in his company truck, Jack leaped to his feet, disgusted and disconcerted. What was this weird variation in the house's endless game?

He realized he hadn't gone to the bathroom for hours and hurried out of the room to the hallway leading past the kitchen to the two downstairs bedrooms and the bathroom between them. He was almost glad to have the need of performing such a normal, mundane task as he rushed inside and threw up the toilet seat.

But Jack made the mistake of looking at the shower rod above the huge, old-fashioned bathtub and was obliged to stand, his hands occupied, with not even a drop emerging from his bladder. He had carried the pants he removed in Rachel's presence into his bedroom and left them in a heap on his bed.

Now they were hung—the creases duly respected—on a coat hanger.

One that still swung, just a little, as loose change began to fall from the right-hand pocket and strike the tub with the sound of bullets being fired.

Chapter II

1

Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

I hate people. I hate everything alive, I hate this place where I must stay, and most of all I hate having to keep them alive!

He closed his eyes when Jack Kidd fell asleep, incapable of doing that himself, relieved in a puny, never-very-long-lasting way not to need for a while to go on shifting his uncanny vision from Jack to the impudent Ray and to the people they knew. At this point in his conscious existence he no longer remembered why he wasn't allowed to trick any living person he happened to see into killing himself/or herself. It would have taken a very long while, he knew—"very long while" was the only means he had of judging the passage of months or

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years—and it would have required him to stretch himself greatly in order to project his thought-actions ever outward until he had successfully contacted all the human beings who remained alive on the planet.

How many of them *were* there, he wondered? He remembered dimly when a wife-to-be was boarding a train to come back to this city to marry one of the Kidd males, and her departure point had been a place called New Hampshire. He had almost held off conjuring the vision that made the woman throw herself in the path of an arriving train in order to go on looking at the unfamiliar location through her eyes. Of course, when she ceased to live, he had instantly found himself back where he existed.

Home, this snug and confining little room that he detested more, almost, than he did living things.

And he recalled the delectable moment when a cousin of these current family people, Jack and Ray, had finally overstepped his bounds sufficiently for his own powerful set of principles to demand satisfaction. The cousin, Josh, had actually attempted to leave some friends in the house while he went to a place called Illinois. Josh had persuaded himself that taking a flying machine would permit his escape—that mere height and speed would remove a living, mortal Kidd from view! Well, *that* mistake, that *outrageous disobedience*, had been swiftly and righteously punished! It had been amusing to watch Josh in the act of believing that the pilots were what he called “skyjackers” and to see Josh render both pilots unconscious, then stare helplessly out the wide windows in the pilot’s cabin

as the flying machine soared down, down, *down*. "You should have known better, Josh!" he'd shrieked into Josh's ears. "It's a shame you'll never know what I'll do with these people you left in the house with me!"

Uncomfortable in his crouch, he smiled at the irony of his earlier thought about "stretching himself," and rose slowly to his feet.

As always, he found it impossible to straighten all the way. This room had been designed to have a high ceiling, but the best he could do was get his legs and feet under him and bend forward at an angle from his waist. Aside from crouching, the only other two positions that were possible for him were sitting on the floor or lying down on it. Even the latter was unsatisfactory, regardless of how accustomed he was to his continual discomfort, because a room that had a full-size table with four chairs, a sofa and an easy chair, an old floor-model radio that didn't work, two lamps, an unused fireplace, a magazine rack, and a wall of built-in bookcases was neither wide nor deep enough for him to lie down with his legs stretched flat in front of him. Consequently, after a decade or two of awakening with floor-model lamps giving him pokes that provoked real pain and sofas overturning onto his face, he'd settled for an existence of crouching, squatting on the floor, and occasionally rising, bent at the waist.

He had never asked himself why he didn't simply throw out a massive arm to punch through the walls, then crawl out to freedom and stand, erect like a free man. Whoever and whatever he was, exactly, his unknown creator, supervisor, lord, direc-

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tor, or puppetmaster had given him the unique ability to manipulate the members of the Kidd family—to go where they went visually and see whatever they saw—and it seemed to him to be his lot. This was as close to being any sort of devout believer as he could ever get, not inappropriately since he despised everybody and his favorite moments of existence mostly involved killing them.

Besides, he had seen numerous living people by now, through their eyes, and a great many places. The people had looked pretty much alike to him, while the places to which they went also resembled each other. Banks, restaurants, airports, office buildings, within each category they appeared completely interchangeable to him. Even when he was granted a glimpse of a different city or state these days, the restaurants usually bore the same names and were duplicates of those in *this* city! The lack of imagination alone, as far as the living were concerned, should have been enough to permit him to end their humdrum lives.

He, however, would never be a lawbreaker, because he was a law preserver. And of course, an administrator of punishment to those who broke the laws that he had been taught.

To the best of his knowledge, there were no others.

He thought to look in on Ray Kidd, and a wave of empathetic pain assailed him. Withdrawing minimally to a more comfortable region, he found himself looking at a rather gauzy image of the young female, Caitlin, to whom the Kidd boy had been heading until the decision to intervene was reached. Her overly large mammaries were even more absurdly fleshy than usual where she stood

behind a partly opened door, and he realized Ray was asleep, that this was Ray's dream. Then the flashy vehicle Ray had driven to the girl's house was moving. This was clearly a dreamt reenactment of the crash he himself had caused—

And he retreated still farther, aware that he had spared the young Kidd's life that night. *Your pain is gone.* He projected the concept into Ray's brain as a virtual afterthought, trying to remember why he had not made the automobile burn and kill Ray.

For several moments he couldn't quite recall, mostly because he was brooding about the injustice of the fact that family members never appreciated all he did for them. Why was that? They were all so ignorant, so damnably *stupid!* They blamed him for ultimately choosing when it was time for them to die, though it was actually *they* who chose by going against the rules! Didn't they understand after all these years, after all the early deaths, that he was theoretically capable of causing them to die at *any* instant from the time of their conceptions? All that was required was for them to break the rules!

On the other hand, if any Kidd had ever managed to be obedient every day of every month, and every month of every year, he or she might be nearly as old as the hate-haunt himself—

Because as long as they were obedient to the laws and to him, he would not *let* them die! He literally stood between them and death.

He frowned and, without knowing it, looked absolutely hideous. The reason why he had let Ray go on living was—

They're simply devoid of logic! he thought, his hatred interrupting his train of thought. Turning

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slowly, deliberately, in place, his long and powerful torso protruding like the neck and head of some vulturous thing, he was radiating even more detestation than before. All of the living he had ever seen were frightened out of their infantile wits by the prospect of dying, yet the people who had shared the house with him over the years always gave the impression that, in fact, they were *more* fearful of something else—perhaps other things, plural! The contradiction in terms was maddening, and he hated it, too.

Resting his pointed elbows on the mantel over the ruined fireplace and resting his enormous head on his fists, kneeling now, he attempted to understand at least one of the mysteries of his existence.

Instead, he remembered why, on impulse, he had only broken some of Ray's bones and pierced his skin several times, not brought his life to a close:

Otherwise, that would leave only one of them alive for him to govern, regulate, torment, save, and eventually hate enough to slaughter.

Eyes widening to a capacity beyond that of any living thing, the hate-haunt let the fact seep deeply into his mind so he would not forget and accidentally kill Ray or Jack in an outburst of temper. Something, he saw, would have to be done.

And, however reluctantly, he supposed he would have to allow more outsiders to get close to Jack and Ray, even to come into the house without interrupting their immature and inane interactions the way he had, tonight, with Jack's robe. Even—he shuddered as he thought of this, and the whole room quivered as if from a minor quake—fall in love, perhaps . . . marry.

All the raw data of his intelligence was that with which he was endowed when he was created. There had never been a time when he'd acquired new, additional data, though he was a creature who had instantly possessed more time for thinking than nearly any other. Therefore, from the standpoint of having reflected innumerable times upon the comparatively small handful of facts given him at the outset and winnowing them down to workable conclusions—and those uses that would benefit him and his personal code—the hate-haunt was entitled to view himself as a self-made monster.

So it was that he was quite uninformed about matters of sexuality, including reproductive organs and cycles, and it was to his credit that he had recognized the fact that living people with breasts were essential to the production of further individuals name "Kidd," and that this was achieved with the very close proximity of living people who did *not* have breasts. The precise reason that the girl, Caitlin, with whom Ray had been extremely close, had breasts and the hate-haunt had already deemed her unworthy to bring Kidds into life, was why he had driven Ray to the brink of extinction. He'd loathed the way Ray had rejected his prior advice to keep away from her.

Why Ray hadn't been able to see the obvious fact that the large-breasted Caitlin liked life, enjoyed it even as Ray sometimes seemed anxious to do, was an imponderable.

He relaxed slightly, lost some of his intense fury as he thought. In a way, it occurred to him, it may have been beneficial that Jack's friend Rachel came to the house, arguably acceptable that Jack had communi-

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cated with and warned her, accurately and truthfully. For her part, she had been forthright in not only informing Jack that she possessed breasts, she had *shown* them to him. Then her manner had been anything but carefree or fun-loving when, quite properly, he elected not to begin child production at once. The fact was, she had obviously been unhappy about it!

And Jack's own manners and reactions made the hate-haunt almost serene, because he had demonstrated how well he had been raised!

Perhaps, he mused, the Rachel woman might be an acceptable occupant of the house, at least until she had produced a few Kidds.

And she already has two living children, he remembered, sinking back down into a seated position on the floor. One mammoth foot inadvertently kicked a nearby sofa, and it shot several feet away before colliding with a table. He also recalled for the first time in years how . . . well, *special* it had seemed to be when his boys Jack and Ray were small, and their father before them. Being boys, they had constantly gotten into scrapes on their own. They had seemed always to be on the verge of suffering one injury or another, and that had kept him so busy, striving day in and day out to protect them—and those that had preceded them—while always hanging back in the shadows. To this day, indeed, he had eschewed credit for how wonderfully each of his Kidds, boys and girls alike, had turned out!

He lifted his head, looked in on Jack asleep elsewhere in the house, and smiled a different sort of smile. If he allowed the new woman to marry Jack

and bring her children to come live in the house, and if she treated Jack poorly or if he himself didn't find the boy and girl sufficiently interesting, they were all living human beings whose birthright would never be that of the Kidds. Little children, particularly, were *marvelous* to scare!

Why, they could almost be driven *insane* with terror if he was subtle enough. . . .

2

Jack stopped short at the door to his brother's hospital room, gaping in open amazement.

Ray was sitting up, and, even though he wore partial casts on one arm and one leg, he didn't really look terribly bad or even racked by pain. "Yo, Big Bro," he grunted.

Jack burst into smiles, rushed across the floor with joy. "I knew you must be better when they told me you had a regular room, but I didn't expect *this*. How do you feel?"

"Like shit," Ray answered. Jack was handing him a potted plant, and he took it with no sign of enthusiasm. "I've just heard I may be charged with reckless driving. But that's all right, I guess—since I have no car to drive." His long, handsome face grimaced. "That little beauty's a wreck, Jackson."

This performance was so thoroughly Grade-A Ray Kidd—so normal for him—Jack knew he ought to be additionally delighted. But his were the buttons Ray knew best how to push, and he couldn't quite keep from reacting. "You almost got *killed* last night, Ray! I spent a miserable night worrying half to death that you'd be paralyzed." He gave the

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younger Kidd a hard, inquiring look. "You aren't, are you?"

"Everything seems to have been taken care of," Ray said, choosing his words carefully, "except for my reckless-driving charge." He glanced down at the plant in his hand. "Thanks for the thought. For a while I was afraid I'd have a lot in common with something like this." He used a hand to edge his blankets back, then wiggled until his legs were dangling over the edge, one not quite bending at the knee. "They tell me a little R and R at home and I'll be right back in the swing of our exciting, constantly fulfilling lives. Less my wheels, of course."

"After the accident you were in pretty rocky shape," Jack said, "and they were very uncertain about your prognosis. So what is it you're telling me, exactly? That they read the X-rays wrong last night?"

Ray shrugged. "They're either saying that or they've read them right today. Look, Jack, this is a *hospital*, these are scientific people—they can't come out and say that the X rays and MRIs they ran this morning say different things than they said last night!"

Jack couldn't answer for a moment. "Are you telling me the breaks and fractures that were diagnosed fewer than fifteen or sixteen hours ago have *healed*?"

"Or that they just didn't show up today," Ray answered, "except as bad sprains and a very small chip in this leg." He tapped the leg that wasn't properly bent at the knee. "Hey, don't pretend you didn't know what I meant when I said things were 'taken care of,' Bro! Our resident 'thing,' man, it giveth

and it taketh away—remember? But this time it looks as if it changed its mind about killing or crippling me.” He stopped, peered at Jack from beneath lowered eyebrows. “You know what I’m talking about, Jackson, or I’m the only guinea pig left in the family.” He smiled. “Please, don’t do *that* to me!”

Jack paused, remembering his own recent thoughts about the impossibility of life without his brother. He leaned forward from his chair, spoke softly. “Yes, I know what you meant. After all, I was paid a little visit last night, too. After returning from the hospital.”

“No shit?” Ray exclaimed, and whistled. “It was really on the rag last night, eh? What happened?”

“I’ll explain,” Jack said, continuing to speak quietly, “but then you have to give me the details about your accident.”

He proceeded to describe only the features of Rachel’s visit that Ray needed to hear, leaving out such facts as their having been on the verge of love-making and replacing them with suggestions of romance and mere kissing. He covered more thoroughly the bizarre haunting he had endured on the telephone. “What really surprised me were the things that happened after I’d phoned Rachel and told her the nature of our . . . well, our daily lives.”

“Sounds a lot like two changes of heart in one evening,” Ray said, mulling it over. “You make it sound as if there was more to it than the shadows and noises, or the way your pants were hanging in the bathroom.” He gave his brother a quizzical, sidelong glance. “Common decency forbids me asking why your pants were off at the time. Not that decency would ordinarily concern me, but I’m not

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in very good shape for running like hell—from you or the hate-haunt!”

“Don’t pass out on me,” Jack said, “but I found out I love Rachel.” He laced his fingers over a raised knee. “For a while I believed that phoning her and actually standing up for myself won some grace points or something like that with our ‘tenant.’ Now what I think was happening was that our—permanent visitor—was just getting into the process of sorting something out, reaching a few new decisions.”

“Which could be good news,” Ray noted, “but that’s nothing either one of us should bet a bundle on!”

Jack smiled. “I wouldn’t bet a dime,” he agreed. “Tell me now, just what *did* happen to you? Caitlin said on the phone that you were just sitting there in the car when the accident happened. Merely ‘reckless sitting,’ as you put it.”

“She got that right,” Ray admitted. He turned uncharacteristically solemn, and for the first time Jack realized there were signs of a very changed Ray Kidd. “The poor little broad is probably still scared shitless. I’d call her, but I finally know when enough is enough. I know how badly hurt I was last night.” He sighed deeply, touched a bandage covering a cut on his lean face. “That was no fucking accident, Big Bro. I was attacked. It’s just that nobody would ever be able to believe what happened except you. Even Caitlin won’t tell anyone what she saw with her own eyes, unless she’s a lot dumber than I think she is.”

Jack, shifting in his uncomfortable visitor’s chair, felt certain he’d believe virtually anything Ray told

him. That was especially the case since he was clearly going to confide something supernatural linked to their mutual peril. Midafternoon shadows filtering through the shades behind Jack's shoulder made a latticework pattern on his brother's bruised and bandaged face. "Go ahead," he said.

"I'd just arrived and I was sitting in front of Caitlin's place with the transmission in park. My knee never nudged it, I swear. I'm not able yet to remember for sure if I'd turned the key in the ignition, but I had gotten where I'd planned to go that night, the car was at the curb between piles of snow, and Caitlin was standing in her doorway"—Ray hesitated, chose to make the image clear—"puttin' on a little show for me."

"Go on," Jack prompted him. *You should have seen the show I got*, he thought.

"Well, now it gets really weird," Ray warned him. "Do you remember how we used to try, years ago, to figure out what *it*—our personal haunt—looks like?"

Jack nodded.

"And you remember we wondered if its power was restricted to the house, and I said I believed it went, somehow, wherever we go?"

Jack nodded again, shivered as if a cold draft had penetrated the room.

"Well, I was right. It isn't just stuck in the house like we are most of the time." He swallowed. "Jackson, it *picked up* the car with me in it, and *tossed* it—like a football."

Jack pulled off his glasses, drew a Kleenex from his shirt pocket, and wiped it energetically over his

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lenses. "Well, I'm sure it felt like that," he said, still keeping his voice down. "What makes you so sure about that, Little Bro?"

The taller brother reached out and gripped Jack's shoulders so tightly in his hands, Jack was afraid the shafts of his glasses might snap off. "I was airborne, Jack—the car was *off the street!* And I had a look at the shadow of a really gigantic *hand*. One big enough to curl its fingers around the top of a car, and *lift* it, then *throw* it at a parked truck. Like a toy!"

Jack peered straight into his brother's eyes even when Ray released his arms and he was able to replace his glasses. For the first time he recalled the enormous, lengthy shadows that had crept across the walls while he was on the telephone with Rachel, and he believed Ray. Shuddering, he asked, "Did you see . . . the face?"

"Hell, no," Ray replied, slumping back against his raised bed and pillow. "And I don't ever want to." He coughed, wincing with the effort. "I brought up the time we discussed what the thing looks like because now we know it isn't just domineering and can finish us off whenever it decides to do it. Now we know it's one big mother we're dealing with—and I'm going to be a real good boy from now on."

Jack felt frightened to hear the tone in Ray's voice. "Ray, you're the one who told me once that we can't ever afford to give in, that it'll *own* us if we do."

Ray turned his head toward Jack, and there were tears in his eyes. "Big Bro, it already does. And I know when I'm licked."

Rachel slept poorly after her amazing phone conversation with Jack, but then she usually slept poorly. She had tried once, during her marriage to Hale, to use the long hours of that particular night to figure out that much about her admittedly complex psychological makeup. The first part was relatively simple to understand when her mind touched upon two words she probably spoke more than any others: *The kids*.

Sleeplessness, or the inclination to sleep lightly in order to be up and motherly as quickly as possible when needed, had begun with Nick, her first child. Nothing had truly prepared her for bringing up a child except hundreds of horrifying newspaper and magazine accounts of everything from crib death to court trials based on child-neglect accusations. ("Where was Jane Nomother when a tornado flattened the eighteen-story Familysafe Apartments at four-thirty-three A.M.? Asleep in her own bed—in a different room than fifteen-year-old Claude Eustace, her only son.") By the time Nick had been home from the hospital after the most normal of births, Rachel's eyelids seemed to her to operate like automatic yo-yos and she had made a largely unconscious pact to be certain to die at the same instant as her infant son, should tragedy overwhelm them, if she had to dynamite his crib with her inside of it too.

His first head cold had cost more than two hundred dollars and turned her into a temporary zombie. And Hale Sayre, it developed, had little or no interest in—or patience with—zombies.

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So Rachel had bought a home-study course in astrology, worked hard to learn what was described (in the course materials) as “the world’s oldest organized study” in an effort to dilute her obsession with little Nick’s perpetual safety, and eventually discovered she was pregnant a second time. Hale’s discrimination against zombies, it appeared, had diminished at the same rate of speed as her inclination to pick up Nick and take his temperature every time his voice sounded raspy to her.

Alas, Hale’s interest in drinking, and chasing women who weren’t yet mothers, had accelerated until, shortly after Tricia was born, Rachel asked him to leave. Her astrological studies had convinced her that they’d always been incompatible, always would be, and she filed for divorce. At that point Hale did the only thing worthwhile he’d ever done for her apart from fathering Nick and Tricia—

He’d had a heart attack and died not a week after Rachel, whose task it had been to remember it, paid the latest premium on his life insurance.

She shook her blond head with a combination of rue and wonder, remembering her past as she started preparing dinner for the kids and for her. Tricia, at four, was still taking her naps without a lot of argument, and eight-year-old Nick was in school. In another few days it would be Christmas vacation, and Rachel still hoped this would turn out to be the best Christmas the children had had since their father died—and the best one for her, too, if she could handle what Jack had told her on the phone the night before. Financially, thanks to Hale’s insurance policy and the Avon job she had gotten without much difficulty, they had been able

to keep the house and get by perfectly well; but she felt the kids needed a father's presence, particularly Nick, and she herself was, in Rachel's view, just too young to stay a widow.

Cutting carrots for stew, Rachel wondered if she had erred in telling Jack she was divorced, not *almost* divorced and *certainly* widowed. Nick and Tricia believed it was the other way around, of course; there had seemed no reason to poison their minds about Hale, who hadn't, to the best of her knowledge, mistreated them. She supposed she had told Jack Kidd they were divorced to avoid explaining about the insurance money and inadvertently giving him the notion that she had actually helped Hale's demise along. Bachelors, she'd read, got some odd ideas about marriage, and she had enjoyed Jack since they first met.

And that thought brought her circularly around to where her reflections had begun—the strange idea Jack already had that he and his brother Ray were, apparently, haunted.

The thinking she'd done after their phone conversation had availed Rachel nothing at all. The starting point was that she might have begun dating again in the hope of falling in love and getting remarried, but she hadn't done anything but be herself in order for that to have happened. Loving Jack and, if he meant it, being loved by him were wonderful things that had simply occurred. They were what her son Nick once called "one of those God things." So if Jack believed his family and home were in the grip of some supernatural force, it made no more difference than if he had been neurotic about compulsively washing his hands, hated

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small, confining spaces, or for that matter, was diabetic or bothered by some other controllable disease. Real love, to Rachel Sayre, meant pretty much what was spelled out in old-fashioned wedding vows—"for better or worse, in sickness and health"—unless a mate proved he wasn't in love any longer by preferring bottles of booze or an unending parade of "lovers." Together, she and Jack could work out, live with, or eliminate a superstition like this, and she certainly wasn't going to let their chances for happiness—definitely "their," because Jack had not been remotely happy last night, Rachel would bet a ton of Diet Pepsi caps on it!—disappear because of some silly notion it seemed his own family had tolerated for generations.

But then there were the possibilities that Jack Kidd was crazy as a loon, or even that he was right and marrying him might place the children in danger. . . .

There, the stew was ready to cook for the evening meal. Rachel reached into the refrigerator for a new Diet Pepsi, remembering with amusement Jack's eagerness to please, and carried it—plus a glass—into the front room to wait for Nick's arrival from school. He was bound to have some paper he wanted to show her, or an assignment for which he wanted some advice. Rachel doubted the eight-year-old really required her attention as much as he appeared to—Nick already read big-kid books—but his dad's death was so sudden he needed all the reminders possible that Mom was still around and functioning. (Would he accept a "new" dad, a replacement for Hale—which was the only way a bright kid like ol' Nick could conceivably see it?)

Jack wasn't crazy, she thought, snuggling into a chair, and that was all there was to that. For one reason or another, theirs had been an old-fashioned kind of courtship—or had been until she stripped to her panties on the poor man's couch! What had gotten into her to do such a thing Rachel still couldn't fathom. It was a wonder Jack hadn't had a stroke on the spot. It simply hadn't occurred to her that he was a virgin back when, according to him, he had come close to "paradise," or that he still seemed to regard himself as one because—well, she assumed, because they hadn't seen each other totally naked or made love horizontally. (*And we still haven't*, she thought.)

No, most of what they'd done together for a year and a half was talk, amazing one another over and over by discovering how similar their views, values, goals, and fears were on a thousand and one different subjects. Not, as things stood now, quite *all* their fears. But Jack was such a straight arrow, even she mightn't have fallen in love with him if they had met before Hale entered her life, and there had never once been a sign of the slightest madness until—

Well, until she had made the mistake of trying to push things forward by dropping by late at night after his brother—his one surviving family member—had almost died! *I have no right to wonder if he's crazy when I behaved so insanely*, she mused, annoyed and frowning. She realized then how vulnerable Jack had been, and castigated herself on the basis that women frequently complained about men demanding sex when *she* had asked Jack for it while he was terribly worried, exhausted, and no more

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thinking about screwing than about calculus or Chinese astrology!

(Then there was the fact that he was an Aries native, a man who was independent and wanted to do most of the motivating without others telling him what to do. She was a Geminian, often restless and fond of driving around, a good match for Aries until she tried to hog-tie him. *Somehow I'll have to wait till he phones me again*; Rachel thought.)

She smiled, brightened by a new awareness. Lots of people would call following astrology superstitious; what gave her the right to decide the Kidd family and their big, old house *weren't* haunted but the fact that she, herself, had never seen a ghost? Except for the things people believe because they grew up as, say, a Baptist and a Democrat and someone who had fish or macaroni on Fridays during Lent, we all tend to disbelieve strange notions that are new or unfamiliar to us until we, ourselves, experience them!

So what if it was true—all that Jack told her on the telephone—and his family *was* under some sort of curse? What if she married Jack and some malevolent spirit decided to take it out on Nick, Tricia, or her? It was obvious that Jack had warned her out of the same spirit of decency and consideration for her family he'd shown dozens of times. Maybe neurotic people did that on occasion. She felt sure madmen did not.

The front door was torn open as if by a maniac demanding entrance, slammed shut, and heavy, hurrying footsteps stomped a relentless path toward Rachel Sayre.

She'd known it was all-boy Nick from the first

loud sound, and smiled up at him as he appeared in the room—fair hair with a crown barbers hated to cut, intent expression with lips turned up at the corners to display affection, rather aristocratic nose he would have to grow into, skinniness that could mean (but didn't have to) he'd be tall one day, school books tucked in his left hand and pressed to his forearm. He crossed the floor to her for a kiss, with the unswerving directness of an only son who accepted his specialness and approved it.

"How was school?" she asked, then remembered how she had disliked that question. (*Answer:*, Rachel thought, *as unchanging, confining and tedious as ever*, and recess had been her favorite subject until she was halfway through high school, when she'd tell anybody but Mother and Grandma, "My favorite subject is boys.")

"Fine," Nick said. He was quoting God-alone-knew how many eight-year-old boys who preceded him. "Got anything to eat?"

"Stew for dinner," Rachel said. He had automatically turned to head for the kitchen, and her answer was different enough to freeze him in his tracks and make her laugh. "Top shelf of the fridge," she corrected herself, smiling, "a slice of apple pie from last night, on a saucer, with a half-glass of milk next to it." She saw his lips part and added, "No à la mode before we eat."

A second later she heard the refrigerator door slam, not too deafeningly, against the wall followed by his "Sorry, I forgot." Another phrase they all used frequently; "fine" was the answer kids gave to "How was school?" and also "How's your cold today?" and nothing else. They wouldn't use it

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again until it was in the context of a debt to be paid—which was the kind of fine her mother would have levied against her if she'd known Rachel always let Nick have an after-school snack. He was skinny as a toothpick and she wanted to get some weight on him, even if that made her a Nomother in modern society.

He returned to the room with the pie plate, milk, and a bite in his mouth, saying, "Jack told me he was awful in math too. Why do we have to take it?"

Rachel adopted her best possible mother posture, mentally sending nasty remarks in Jack's direction. But he'd been right, she believed, when he had suggested once that "Just because you have to!" was the wrong thing to tell an inquisitive child posing an honest question. She knew Nick's grades were good, so she answered him with a question: "Why don't you like math all of a sudden?"

"You get the same answer to any problem every time," Nick said, one leg thrown over the arm of a chair. (*Isn't he ever going to swallow that bite, or at least not show it?*) "You can't even talk about *your* answer. Most stuff has a lot of answers, and every book you read is different." He gulped the bite down, forked another one—also too large for his mouth—inside without hesitation. "It gets so boring!"

Rachel said, "Even writers have to follow a lot of 'boring' rules." She was trying to look at simple arithmetic again with the eyes of one to whom it was new—one for whom anything had seemed possible until he began school. (*And his father died*, she realized). "Arithmetic is one of the few black-or-white subjects—do you know what I mean?" She saw Nick bob his head. "And school, like life, will

deal mostly with facts. But you shouldn't think they're your enemy, because—"

A wail of terror descended the stairs from Tricia's room, and mother and son turned in that direction, even the big brother startled by the pitch of his four-year-old sister's voice. Telling herself it was only another of her daughter's periodic nightmares, Rachel bounced up and hurried toward the stairway. "Trish is a fact for sure," Nick called from where he remained seated, sounding infinitely bored.

The second floor was laid out with the bathroom and then the master bedroom on the right, Nick's room and then Tricia's to the left. Rachel rushed up the hallway and pushed back the little girl's door, arranging her pretty face in reassuring smiles while her heartbeat raced with maternal concern.

Her heart almost stopped when she saw no sign of the child with the softly waving blond hair exactly the color of Rachel's. The covers were thrown back and the bed was empty. For an instant Rachel imagined Tricia had wriggled beneath the sheet and blanket; she was still tiny enough to conceal herself that way from any boogeymen who chanced to drop by.

Patting the bedcovers produced nothing more instructive than a small pink doll meant to remind kids of the movie *Babe's* porcine star.

"I'm here, Mama," Tricia called in a tiny voice from behind Rachel. That was a completely unexpected location for the child, and Rachel shot into a straightened position in shock, almost yelping with surprise.

Turning toward the closet, she found her surprise growing.

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Tricia sat on the floor inside it, one little arm just descending from the act of having pushed the door open—but the closet was the last place on earth where she ordinarily would have gone if she was frightened by a bad dream—

And it was impossible to believe that the Tricia whom Rachel knew and loved would *ever* have gotten inside and closed the door. Not unless the girl had seen something extraordinarily scary to her right there in the bedroom!

Rachel scooped Tricia up in her arms, sat on the edge of the bed with her daughter on her lap. Tricia had stopped crying, but her face and the knuckles of her right hand were tearstained and the effort she was making to respond to Mama's soothing smile seemed truly valorous.

"Did you have another bad old dream, sweetie?" Rachel asked. An idea occurred to her tied to the thought about something frightening being right in the room. "Or did a mousie get in here just when you were waking up?"

"Nooooooo," Tricia said with immense gravity, "it wasn't the same bad dream, it was new!"

Tricia had never told her the content of the old one—Rachel was inclined to believe Trish rarely remembered, on awakening, what it was about—but maybe things would be different with the new nightmare. "Just remember what Mama's told you about dreams not being real, like you and Nick and Mama, so they can't really hurt you." She gave Tricia a fond squeeze. "Now, did you see a mousie, maybe, or a big ol' bug?"

This time there was the lip-pursed, decided shake of the head. The beauty and gravity of that affecta-

tion of Tricia's was one Rachel knew she would always remember. "It wasn't no mousie, it was an old, old man—but a real *strong* one—and he was the ugliest thing I ever saw! And he said things, he *said* things to me!"

Rachel relaxed, even though she was more worried than before about her daughter's recurring nightmares. There were no ugly old men anywhere in the house, she knew for a fact, not even any nice-looking younger ones. Had Tricia seen part of a movie she shouldn't have seen, even a commercial? She hugged the child again and murmured, "Nick's home from school, and we'll eat dinner early because I have a few more deliveries to make this evening. Why not wash up and—"

"The old man," Tricia said, speaking exactly as if her mother remained seated on the bed, staring into space, "was really here, sort of." She paused, met Rachel's gaze head-on when the latter turned back to her. "He was as big as my room. He couldn't straighten up all the way, and he drooled like Mrs. Omallian's ol' dog, Spit."

Despite herself, Rachel glanced down at the bedroom floor with revulsion. But it didn't appear drooled on. "Well, he's gone now, love, isn't he? And you're okay, right? That's the main thing."

The exquisite, round little face was upturned to Rachel, at the door. "He told me to tell you he's thought about it," she said with all the care she mustered when she answered the phone and tried to deliver a message. "And he wants you, Mama, to come visit Jack again." Tricia bobbed her head, clearly happy she had gotten the whole message

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right. "At Jack's house," she finished, clarifying things, "and his!"

Rachel felt her mouth open and stay that way but couldn't do anything about it. What she knew for sure, just then, was that she couldn't wait until Jack phoned her. She'd have to call him—and arrange to meet him anywhere except at the house.

Chapter III

1

Jack was finally allowed to go to the hospital and bring Ray home, and part of him was elated. That portion of him had grown almost intolerably lonely in the big, old house and was aware of how close his brother had come to perishing. Jack was grateful in the deepest way that he had not permanently lost Ray.

The part that was not elated recognized how dispirited the tall, skinny guy was. At a conscious level, so low he was able to ignore it while Ray was at Manner of Spirit Hospital, Jack knew Ray showed no sign of snapping out of it. Riding an elevator up to Ray's floor, Jack realized it was not even his brother's lingering injuries that had caused his apparently sweeping change. It was clearly the

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confrontation Ray'd had with something deadly and irrefutably supernatural.

Something to which Ray was now returning with the docility of a man on death's row whose appeals have all been exhausted.

Seeing Ray dressed and ready to leave Manner of Spirit, and noticing how Ray just inclined his chin in greeting and unsmilingly waggled his fingertips, brought another fact home to Jack:

There were men whose neurotic outlooks on life allowed them to seem to fit into their unhappy fates as if they were unconsciously tailoring custom-made suits for themselves. Yet Ray had been the risk taker of the two of them; it could be said he gambled and took chances cheerfully, even to the point of putting his life on the line. He'd just never counted on the possibility of a long recovery, perhaps even of being partly crippled. Ray looked weirdly thinner and also foreshortened as a nurse pushed his wheelchair into and, down on the main floor, out of the elevator. He'd always been short-waisted, Jack knew; now it was as if a symbolic portion of his spine had collapsed, and his long head came forward from his shoulders with the suggestion of a stork who'd gone in for surgery.

The trouble with going for broke, Jack thought, opening the passenger door for his brother and putting the crutches he'd been handed on the floor behind the seats, *wasn't that you'd lose everything, but so much that really mattered.*

Nothing that Jack said during the drive home was rewarded with more than a grunt, and Ray said little else as Jack helped him inside the house except for an occasional groan of pain or a frustrated curse.

But after battling his crutches into the first-floor bathroom and returning to the living room, where Jack was waiting, Ray sort of fell into his favorite chair and had his say. "There was some new shit I got from the doctors and haven't told you about, Jackson. True, both my leg injuries were downgraded to bad sprains—but they're worse, according to the honest doc, than any he had seen. Which is why, he said, he originally thought my X rays showed fractures." Ray fumbled around in both jacket pockets before finding what he sought. "Here's a prescription for some analgesic crap I have to rub into my legs except for one day a week when a nurse will come to make sure I'm doing it, and exercising—all that shit."

"I'll rub it into your legs," Jack said shortly, crossing the floor to take the prescription.

But Ray held to it tightly, glaring. "All I want is for you to pick this up at the drugstore. The other thing you mentioned is why I brought up this topic." He surrendered the scrap of paper, leaned back in his chair with care. "Thanks for getting it, for visiting me at the corpse maker's, and for bringing me back to Creepy de Ville—but that's *all* you're going to have to do, Jackson. Except cook until I figure out how to use my wooden-stick legs without falling on my ass."

"What the hell are you talking about, Ray?" Jack demanded, then turned to go back to his chair. "I'm your *brother*! I have to look out for you till you're well."

"You *have* to do it, right. That's how I see it, too, bro." Ray's eyes glittered as he gazed at Jack's crimsoning face. "Except, I'd fuck it up sooner or later.

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Well, you wouldn't, but what I'm telling you is that I'm not going to turn you into a male nurse—and I mean no disrespect to those guys, some of 'em are strong as oxes and they know what they're doing."

"Then what *are* you going on about, Ray?" Jack asked. Dammit, Ray had pissed him off again, ten minutes back into the house.

Ray answered so softly, his voice was scarcely audible. "Our permanent housemother damn near finished me off, and I have to be a good boy for a long, long while. They told me at Manner of Spirit I may never walk normally again, so I have to show our keeper I'm really worthy of being made healthy." He glanced up, eyes terribly bright. "Another part of my thinking is that you said you *love* Rachel. I want one of us to enjoy a normal life, man."

Jack jumped, looked around in obvious fear. Why had he had to mention *that* inside the house?

"Jesus, Jackson, I forgot," Ray admitted. He sat forward so quickly, Jack was momentarily afraid he would jump to his feet—or try to. "That was stupid as shit of me! All I mean is that *I* think you have a right to a life of your own, and I can reach my own legs and rub 'em. I'm gonna do the best I can to stay out of your hair."

Jack got it then. His brother needed some way to feel he was still the independent brother, even if it was Ray's intention to pacify the resident haunt, so that meant he himself was not even to notice how many things he was obliged to help Ray do. "I need to pick up a few things at the store anyway," he told Ray without commenting on Ray's promise. He raised the prescription.

"Unless you want something to eat before I leave, I'll get this stuff now."

Ray managed a half-smile, touched the crutches resting against the side of his chair. "Go ahead, Bro. If I want anything while you're away, I'll just have some much-needed practice on these things."

Jack slipped his coat back on, thinking. "Do me a favor and stay off the crutches till I get back? I'd rather not have to scrape you up off the floor."

Ray said, "Fuck you, I'm not crippled yet," grinned, and waved. When Jack stayed rooted where he was, Ray made a face. "Okay, okay—but if I piss all over the floor, don't blame me."

When the sound of Jack's delivery truck backing out of the drive reached Ray's ears, he brought the crutches around in front of him, balanced them on his outer thighs, and used his forearms to shove himself high enough out of the chair to pin the padded tops of the crutches partway under his armpits. He was nearly standing when he felt the right-hand crutch slip, and he sank back down, surprised to find himself sweating.

Ray got a second wind, tried again, worked himself mostly to his feet, then hesitated. The pain in one leg was intense, almost unbearable, and the protests from his other leg would have made him—in the past—shriek with agony. When some of the pain subsided, Ray straightened the really bad leg and attempted to take a step.

The crutch beneath his left arm slid into a crazy angle and flopped onto the floor, rubber tip pointing at him like an accusatory finger. The right-side crutch struck him a grazing blow on the chin as he released it, and he flopped, hard, in the chair.

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He'd thought he was paying enough attention when the therapist demonstrated how to get around on the damned things.

"Well," Ray said loudly with a tone of surrender, "you've got me where you wanted me all along! Stuck right in the house. Any clues about what you have in store for me now?"

He didn't expect an answer, but he would not have been startled if he'd heard a reply of some kind.

Ray sat stiffly and silently in his chair—leaning back hurt like hell; he'd ask Jackson to let him try putting his useless damn legs on a hassock—and just waited. For Jack, for healing, for Christmas or maybe spring. For the anguish in his long legs to go away, for fucking Godot—he didn't know exactly *what* he was waiting for. The tiny sounds of the big old place grew audible—the fridge and the freezer; clocks telling themselves secrets about time; Ray's own heart beating, unconsciously trying to match the pace of the clocks, accelerating enough that the pounding of his heart made him more alone, more frightened.

A clammy dampness like a hand lay on the stiff back of Ray's neck, able perhaps to caress or to snap his spine. He told himself it was only cold sweat. He couldn't make himself reach back for fear of clutching the long, chill bone of a wrist whose only attachment to life was two youthful men who weren't really all that young anymore.

Jack arrived home, front door opening noisily, in time to prevent Ray from simply vaulting forward and trying to run. The hand, if that was what it was, was removed from the back of Ray's neck.

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But when he touched himself there, there was no sign of perspiration.

"What's the matter with you, Ray?" Jack asked, setting a drugstore bag on the coffee table. "You look like the wrath of God."

Ray glanced down, anticipating Jack's noticing the crutches sprawled on the floor in front of him.

They weren't there, because someone had picked them up. They were leaning against the chair as they'd been when Jack left the house.

2

Over the next three days Ray offered no explanation for why he had looked so pale and even frightened, and Jack gradually forgot about it.

He did so partly because Ray offered him instead the opportunity for a crash course in caring for—physically as well as psychologically—a man who was taller, stronger, younger, and more mired in despair than himself.

Jack had arranged to take off work from Regional Parcel Service for two days, fully expecting Ray would need help; but he'd returned for half a day after that, knowing the two of them would require some income if they wanted to go on eating. But he had not imagined the amount of persuasion it took to get Ray to the point of being able to maneuver on his crutches well enough to be left alone in the house for hours.

He also had not anticipated a series of wild mood swings in a guy whom he had known as fundamentally lighthearted. Even when Jack thought to praise Ray for what became, with effort, a swift

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adaptation to his use of crutches, Ray brought up topics that were nearly impossible to handle. "I was pretty disappointed when I got home, Bro," Ray said at one point, completely out of the blue. Prodded, his answer was so shyly expressed it gave Jack the impression that they were turning into a genuine odd couple. "Well, my birthday came when I was in the hospital, and I sort of expected to find some gifts here when I got home." On another occasion Ray followed a lengthy, self-pitying soliloquy on the many ways his own life had been ruined with an increasingly emotional plea along the lines that Jack must "live for both of us," and "it starts by calling Rachel and just doing what comes naturally."

It was a surprise to both of them, Jack believed, when Rachel phoned him an hour later, but it was probably a greater surprise to Ray.

"God, it's a relief and a wonder to hear your voice," Jack told Rachel.

"I've been fighting off the urge to call you," she said. "Partly to honor what you told me on the phone before, that you were afraid for my kids and me—and for yourself."

"Partly because you thought you'd been seeing a crazy man, I imagine," Jack said, smiling.

"And partly," Rachel added, "because my daughter Tricia had . . . well, maybe a supernatural experience. Jack," she went on with a heightened note of intensity, "she dreamed of an enormous old man who s-said to tell me it was *all right* to go to your house—and *his!*"

Recollections of what Ray had said about the mammoth size of the thing that had picked up his sports car and thrown it—its *hand* was "big enough

to curl its fingers around the top of a car"—showed like black stars against a white night sky in Jack's mind. He wanted to discard Rachel's information as the product of a little girl's bad dream; instead, Tricia's message seemed to confirm his brother's story. "I want to see and talk with you," Jack said into the mouthpiece, "but at a . . . well, a . . ."

"A neutral site," Rachel agreed. Jack imagined her bobbing her blond head.

"Yes, like a restaurant," he said quickly. Lord, they were so much on the same wavelength there was almost no need to speak. "Don't mention the name of the place, but do you remember where we stopped one night after a movie because they serve delicious pie made right on the premises?"

"Of course!" Rachel exclaimed instantly. "You nearly had a second slice of their chocolate pie."

"Well, it's almost as quiet there as a Chinese restaurant, so we can talk freely after the evening rush hour. Want to meet me there around eight-thirty?"

"More than anything I've wanted since the last time I was at your house," she said impulsively. Rachel added politely, "How's Ray doing?"

Automatically, Jack turned his head, saw Ray seated in his chair six or seven yards away, his head in a newspaper. "He's had a great deal of pain, but he's coming along well now." Ray's bad leg, resting on the hassock Jack had made available, twitched slightly.

At dinner Jack ate sparingly and told Ray he'd be meeting Rachel soon for dessert and coffee. "You be okay while I'm away?"

"Why not?" Ray said. "I'm getting around so well now I'm thinking of adding blades and creating a

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show called the Crutch Capades!" He smiled reassuringly. "But you could bring home a slice of that chocolate pie you mentioned to Rache."

Driving to McLaughner's with time to spare, Jack found his eyes smarting with tears. He'd been unbelievably insensitive about Ray, he told himself—expecting an active guy to adjust to not being able to get around the house without real agony, a guy who'd never been inclined to learn things that were boring. Ray was getting close to the place where he'd be able to look out for himself again, and he'd behave while he was alone for one evening.

But that question Ray asked after Jack had wondered if he'd be okay—"Why not?"—had to have been bold and brave or just plain sarcastic. Each of them knew all too well why Ray might not even be close to okay.

He was a good five minutes early when he drove the panel truck into the parking lot, but he made out Rachel's pretty hair and splendid figure already standing in the McLaughner's entrance. He felt a smile stretch as far across his lips as a smile was able to go.

3

Once he was certain Jack had driven away, Ray Kidd employed what passed for newfound dexterity to propel himself to his feet, on his crutches, and across to the small phone desk—and a call he wanted desperately to make to his friend Caitlin.

A major reason for his impatience with his own progress had to do with Big Bro's nearly constant presence. Early today, when Jack was back at work,

he'd rung Caitlin's line but forgotten she had a day job. Right; sure. Normal people *had* those things, Ray had remembered with self-disgust. He had wanted to talk with the girl because he was incredibly horny and, if this call turned into virtually the personal version of certain little chats on the 900 area code, he didn't need Jack around wondering why he had his hands in his lap.

Maybe the conversation would involve the word "jack" in a totally different context—at least, Ray really hoped it would.

And he also needed to verify for himself that the sexy little broad had seen the same thing he'd seen outside her house.

I don't think anything else has been sprained or broken but my legs, Ray mused, arranging himself in the phone chair as comfortably as possible while the telephone buzzed at Miz C's abode.

"Lo."

"Caitlin? It's Ray." There was no instantaneous squeal of exultation. "Ray Kidd."

"Oh . . . hi," the voice in his ear said, sounding more like someone he had met once instead of somebody with whom he'd had sex.

"Well, I'm home from the hospital, recovering the use of my legs. Little by little." He hesitated, wondering if she was with a man. But that wasn't his feeling, and he also didn't have the impression that Caitlin was bored to hear from him or even busy with some other activity. "I missed you and I just thought I'd, like, make contact. See if you could visit while I'm laid up." He pictured her naked and how her breasts had looked as she stood in the doorway to her place—right before he'd found him-

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self and his car flying through the air. "I can't do anything fancy, but we—"

"I was never so scared in my life!" she interrupted him, sobbing. "Ray, I had to go to a psychiatrist to keep from breaking down."

"Gosh, I didn't know that." Remembering her body, he had begun stroking himself. He withdrew his hand, recalled this was one of his reasons for wanting to call her, even if it hadn't been the main one. "Cait, I'm a little fuzzy about exactly what happened to me," he lied. "Could you fill in some of the gaps?"

She laughed, but there was absolutely no indication of humor to the sound. "I've been trying to *forget* it, you son of a bitch! The shrink advised me to accept the obvious fact, that there's no man alive as big as a four-story building and strong enough to pick up a car and just—just throw it, like a little boy's Tonka toy!"

Ray sank back against the chair and the wall behind it. Then he *hadn't* somehow imagined it. It wasn't mechanical failure or an accident caused by inadvertently mashing down on the accelerator.

"You were fun," Caitlin went on, "and a good lover, but I don't want—" She broke off, then changed the subject. "Hold on, Ray, somebody's at the door."

Caitlin laid down her phone rattlingly. He wondered, sighing, if anything in life would ever be normal again. He wondered who was ringing her doorbell and if it was that biker she knew, and if the lucky bastard would be in her house—and Caitlin, too—twenty minutes after they hung up.

He wondered, suddenly alarmed and shocked, if

he had made a terrible mistake in phoning the girl and going against the promise he had made to the hate-haunt to mend his ways.

"Ray?" Caitlin said brightly. "Your brother Jack just stopped by for a few minutes. He said not to hang up, that he had a message for you before he leaves."

Her phone rattled down upon a flat surface again, and Caitlin was gone.

Ray called her name into the mouthpiece of his phone, then switched to shouting it, then screaming it . . .

4

"It's marvelous to be with you again," Jack said, then forked more chocolate pie into his mouth. "This is the way it's supposed to be."

Rachel laughed happily, took his hand across the restaurant table. "Eating dessert together—is that what you mean?"

"Well, it's not bad for starters," Jack said around the bite.

He reflected not only on how perfect she seemed to him but on how good an idea he'd had to meet at McLaughner's. It was possible that the chain's patronage came mostly from senior citizens whose income was fixed, and therefore the cafeteria setting enabled such people to assemble their individual meals according to where their economics were during a given month.

Best of all, precisely as Jack had expected, the older folks had already eaten tonight and the huge dining hall was left exclusively for Rachel and him.

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Muzak-style music allowed them to hear each other without shouting, and it bored Jack enough that he was inclined to keep chatting to drown it out.

"What Tricia told you," he began, "makes it appear that you and the kids can come to my house anytime with no risk of being harmed. Perhaps you and I could even be alone without the sort of interruption that happened the last time." He squeezed her hand, reminded of how achingly he desired to pick up where the two of them had left off. "Are you *sure* you quoted Trish right, that there's no chance she merely dreamed it and, well, thought of someone other than me?"

"No chance," Rachel said. Her blond hair shimmered as she shook her head. "Tricia mentioned 'Jack's house'—and referred to you twice, by name—and 'Jack's house and his.' I don't believe she knows Ray well enough to consider it his house, certainly not to think of your brother as a drooling old man *big* as a house!"

He took a long sip of coffee. "Then Trish is either psychic on her own, or the thing that's plagued my family so long can—well, go to other houses and haunt them, too." He paused, frowning. "At least the children in them. Or little girls."

Rachel shivered but asked him to add to the details he'd managed to convey on the phone, and pointed out that the entity had been alone with Tricia and could have harmed her then if that had been his intention.

"I just want her to be safe." Jack shoved back his saucer with a bit of crust left untouched. "It's true the entity could've killed Ray or me when *we* were kids, but it did nothing terrible to us until it at-

tacked Ray on his date. It appears that it has its own timetable, and some kind of—well, twisted values. Values all its own.”

“You really think it tried to *kill* Ray?” Rachel asked, incredulous. She had wanted to see Jack again with every intention of listening with an open mind to what he believed. “By doing what, tossing his car into another one?”

“Yes, exactly,” Jack said. He added hastily, “*He* saw a gigantic form, his *girlfriend* was a witness, and your *daughter* said the ‘old man’ who got into her room was ‘big as a house.’ I realize some of this can be imagination, maybe exaggeration—but it *did* do those things.” He recognized the relaxation of Rachel’s tension and went on to sketch most of the information about the family haunt that he and Ray had been told or experienced. “So it could be this long-dead relative of ours, clinging to earth,” he finally said, “or maybe something else entirely. All I know for sure is that it’s created a great deal of misery and brought about some deaths, and that it exists.” He seized her hand in both of his. “See that shadow from the big coffee vat?” He pointed. “I’m not sure anybody knows just what a shadow is, either; what purpose it serves. But whether it’s for a long period of time or a short one, it *exists*. We *assume* it’s harmless—functionless—but whoever watched a shadow for the entire ‘life’ of its existence?”

Rachel, Jack saw, was sitting very still. He knew she had heard everything he was saying—she was rarely rude—but he knew her well enough, also, to know she had been thinking. Deeply.

“People have to fight for everything good they

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want," she said softly, "whether we realize it or not. We all like to say things have a price tag, but that's not the whole truth, Jack, it isn't accurate. It's that, even when life sometimes seems easy, we have to fight for what we want most. Whether we do or not is the difference between just wanting and truly *needing*."

"Very interesting," he said. "What's your point?"

"My point?" Rachel replied musingly. "To fight for what we both need. See, darling, I just bet we could identify what's haunted the Kidd family if we really tried. And identifying it will tell us how to make it go away."

5

"Well, Jack—Mr. Kidd," Caitlin said, drawing the skimpy robe she had donned after a shower more tightly around her, "was there anything special you wanted?" *Why didn't he take the chair I offered him?* the bosomy brunette wondered. And at a lower level she wondered why he had followed her out to the little alcove containing her phone, and why he seemed to sort of hulk there a few feet away—as if somebody had left a life-size statue in the doorway from the dining room and she had never noticed it.

"I want a word with you," he said tonelessly. His lips scarcely moved.

How a cute guy like Ray had ever had a brother who was such a creep completely escaped Caitlin. "I'm surprised you drove all the way down here," she murmured, "and that you could even find my place." Abruptly she remembered meeting Jack

when she was at the Kidd house once, and he'd been polite but warm, too, even friendly. She took a backward step as inconspicuously as she was able. Why hadn't he merely asked to talk to her when Ray had called just now?

"I know everything Ray knows," said the block of concrete. He wasn't as tall as his younger brother, yet he appeared as immovable as a professional football lineman. "Everything in his past, everything in his future."

Caitlin shivered. She recognized it wasn't reasonable to be afraid of the man, but she was. "Surely not everything," she said, smiled, and moved back toward her telephone. Distantly, she heard Ray calling her name, over and over, and she possessed the modern American's belief that any need at all, however desperate, could be satisfied by conveying a message over the phone. "Especially not the future."

"Everything," the being with Jack's face said firmly. "*Especially* the future."

And he reached out a hand and tore her robe open from breastbone to knee with both a swiftness and a strength that would normally have been surprising in a man with his height and weight.

But despite the fact that she emitted one shriek of outrage, Caitlin sensed there was nothing remotely normal in this encounter and knew she needed not to let hysteria overcome her powers of reason. So she stood straight in front of her visitor, covering no part of her desirable body with her hands. "I guess you wanted a little peek at what your brother made love to a few times."

"Wanted," answered "Jack," putting out his hands, "to feel *these*."

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Caitlin glanced up at the ceiling as the palms cupped her breasts and the fingers touched her nipples. The strangest thing happened simultaneously, stranger even than anything else Caitlin had suffered through in recent weeks: Ray's brother's awkward grip and caress were cool, nearly chilly, and light as a feather—but at the same time she sensed the available power for the hands to close and literally rip off her breasts—to pull them off as easily as yanking tissue paper away from a Christmas gift. “I need to get Ray to h-hang up,” she said. “Then we can really be alone.” *And I'll find a weapon somewhere*, Caitlin thought, smiling as sweetly as possible when “Jack” reluctantly withdrew his hands, *and kill this weirdo if I have to!*

“Ray,” she said into the phone, half turning away and speaking as softly as she could, “your brother is here and he's trying to rape me. *Please*, send someone.”

“My brother wouldn't hurt a fly,” Ray said in Caitlin's ear. It was like a blow to the pit of her stomach. She let the phone and her hand holding it slide away, looked toward the monster a few feet away. His gaze was on her bare breasts, and he was drooling openly, allowing it to run viscously down his chin onto his collar and the front of his shirt. “Cait,” Ray's voice called loudly enough for her to hear, “all I'm saying is—that's *not* Jack! He's on a date right now, so it's—”

“It's who?” she demanded, staring at the entity who looked almost exactly like the brother she had met, as he removed his jacket, shirt, and undershirt, still letting bubbles of saliva form on his lips to drip down on his naked chest. “Not that it's going

to matter much, I'm afraid." She scanned the small phone room for something to defend herself with, saw her personal directory, several bills neatly piled beside her checkbook.

"Caitlin, honey," Ray sobbed, "I'm afraid that's the same enormous thing we both saw. A ghost or something that haunts our house. All you can do is try to get out of there, somehow—*fast!*"

She put the telephone back on the table, not disconnecting Ray, thinking what he had told her was bullshit. Whoever this was in her house and however weird he might be, he was *not* big as any building. *It probably is Jack Kidd*, she thought, taking off her robe and using that to conceal the way she had slipped a metal letter opener into its pocket, *and Ray's just protecting his big brother*. A glance told her the pervert was awkwardly undoing his belt, running his zipper down as if he had always owned pants with buttons before. His rather broad chest looked all wrong, somehow, not pale as Caitlin imagined at first but like some kind of plastic wrapped around a solid tin drum. She watched as his trousers started to come off of legs that gave her the same odd impressions as his torso—they just didn't seem normal, not even the hairs on his thighs and calves—

And before he had his second foot out of the pants Caitlin was running the few steps to her living room . . . the front door . . . safety.

Which was when she believed what Ray had said with all her heart, that this "caller" was the same gigantic, impossible horror she'd seen pick up Ray's car with one hand. Not because *this* nightmare suddenly filled up her front room—he stayed the same

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size—but because she'd swear he hadn't run farther and faster, had not even run—but because he hadn't even moved. He was simply—*here*.

He had been *there*—in the doorway opening upon the dining room. She had had the better chance, straight ahead instead of around a corner.

Now he was blocking her escape through the living room to the door, and beyond. What had crushed Ray *was* supernatural; so was the “man” with Jack Kidd's face.

And now he was as nude as she was. But there was something more significant and more frightening than the difference between female and male that had sometimes given the slender brunette with the large breasts and boldly inquiring approach to life considerable pleasure.

Male babies were born with tiny penises that grew out of them and they did not appear stuck on, as if the Creator had had some afterthought. Caitlin had seen many adult penises from a far closer range than their heterosexual owners could ever achieve, alone. And she'd perceived the way gravity tended to keep them drooping down until they were stimulated by any of several means to rise and stand away from the rest of the body as if violating the law of gravity. Penises also assumed a wide variety of shapes, different lengths as well as widths.

But they did *not* become erect, then get longer or peculiarly swollen-looking, and then shrink several inches before ballooning to previously unachieved lengths, with no new touches or further exhibitions and seductive poses on the part of the sexual object.

Which was what the grotesque creature before

her was doing, then replicating the process as its organ occasionally bobbed from right to left, like a sausagy baton in the hand of a playful conductor. The impression it gave Caitlin was, in fact, that of a more or less flesh-colored yet unlined balloon being blown up from inside, then being allowed to deflate for the seconds needed by the internal balloon-blower. With the being's ludicrous and hair-free testicles exposed like drab marbles, Caitlin felt her awful terror receding like the phallus, and at that instant she came quite close to laughing. Experimentally, she whirled and sprinted through the telephone room to the dining-room door, robe still draped over one arm—

And the man-mockery was there—zero sound, zero sense of its motion—*sustaining* an erection impressively now. It was a length of roughly two and a half feet, Caitlin thought, and far too massive around for any female human being to accept and survive. Worse, it lacked the varied skin tones—even the distinctive head—of the human male organ; it was more projectile-like than serpentine; and she was hideously aware of what the thing could do to her, inside. With the thought that it might even enjoy still-greater expansion, she emitted a groan of abject, helpless terror and pressed a corner of her robe over her genital area.

“Whore!” said the Jack-voice. The word contained more clear loathing than she had heard in a voice before. “I’ll make sure you never seduce Ray again, never use your body to try to get into a family that’s forever rejected *your* kind!”

Caitlin mustered with tremendous effort the attitude of flippancy that had always before seen her

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through crisis situations with men who did not attract her. "Okay, fine," she said, seeing his gaze slip once more to her D cup-size breasts and slipping the letter opener from her robe pocket. Hiding it in the folds, she remembered the blade was part razor, and so sharp she seldom used it. "Neither one of you is any prize, so fuck off! I swear I'll never contact or see Ray again."

"That," it said, coming two paces nearer, "is the first thing you've said that isn't a lie."

Caitlin raised her weapon a foot above the tree-branch penis and, with all the strength she possessed, brought it down in a ferocious slicing motion.

The visitor's male organ struck the floor sickeningly, more than half of it hacked away.

But no blood poured out, no pain turned the man-thing's face into a grimacing mask.

The stump of penis twitched and grew—emerged—until the old penis was replaced by a relatively healthy-looking new one. That which had dropped heavily to the floor was just no longer there. Saying nothing, the hate-haunt took a step that brought him within reaching distance of the young woman. Spittle flecked the face that resembled Jack Kidd, and a very substantial-appearing hand rose toward her breast.

Caitlin discovered she had not thrown aside the sharp letter opener after temporarily maiming the entity. It was still gripped in her hand, without a drop of blood showing on it. Slowly, as if the world were new and she was surrounded by people who loved and looked after her, she brought the implement almost up to the level of her head. Something

very hard and clammy poked her where her long legs were joined, and Caitlin glanced down at the ugly invasive thing and back to the letter opener. *Maybe it's lost its sharpness*, she thought distantly, and—pressing—drew the blade back and forth across her throat.

The hate-haunt regarded the bloody, naked corpse at its feet dispassionately. A smile took deliberate shape on its lips, but it was no longer Jack, or defined enough that anyone peering through a window would have seen the being at all. *Of course, a female without morals would believe a handsome man such as Jack might desire her when she was unclothed.* The haunt knelt beside the body to examine the breasts, eager to fulfill its curiosity. *As if I had any intention of having relations with her!* Well, she had paid for all her sins; she would intrude no more.

He went to the phone, heard Ray Kidd alternately weeping and crying, hoarsely, "Caitlin . . . Caitlin . . ."

6

"Sorry we kept you waiting so long, Bro," the voice over the phone said brightly in Ray's ear. Ray jumped, startled to hear a voice again after his wait, badly shocked to realize it was Jack's. "But you know more about social engagements than I. It takes quite a while to—get well-acquainted."

It can't be Jack, Ray reminded himself. Caitlin had said he was going to rape her, and Jackson was not only too good a guy to do that, he was much too square to *imagine* such violence!

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That left only one . . . individual . . . who could be on the phone with him now.

And that probably meant poor Cait was gone. "So you look like Jack, huh?"

"I look like whomever I wish to look like, if anybody at all," Jack's voice boasted. "Or anyone whom you two—but never mind that. I only decided on a whim, 'Bro,' to say that I have removed temptation from your path."

Ray nodded, thought, *Caitlin's dead*, and began to cry. "Why? I tried to do everything I felt you wanted from me since I got home from the hospital."

"You were beginning to stray. Need I point out whose telephone you called and I am using?" There was a long sigh Ray recognized as weary, maybe exhausted. "Your *real* brother is interested in a female I believe may prove more acceptable, and my primary task is to be certain, to monitor their plans—to get to know the woman's children."

"Leave Jack, Rachel, and those kids out of this . . . *please*," Ray added the conciliatory word just in time. He leaned forward in the chair despite the pain in his legs. "They've never done anything to you, whatever you are!" He lost control for a moment. "We thought you might be a ghost, but there you are down at Caitlin's, making yourself look like somebody *real*. Even talking with you, this way, is different, new. Man, what *are* you? *Who* are you?"

"One day," a whisper crept into Ray's ear, almost all human quality vanished from the voice, all animation, "you may find out. One day—*soon*! But there will be nothing any of you can do about it, except thank me!"

"I'll kiss your goddamn *ass* if you'll quit hurting this family!" Ray shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Don't wait up for me," the hate-haunt rumbled, "I'll be home . . . just about—*now*."

The word "now" did not come from the telephone, which clicked off and gave Ray a dial tone.

7

Jack entered the house quietly, uncertain whether Ray was asleep or not, and where. The future seemed so much brighter now—so much more a *genuine* future—he felt more cheerful and optimistic than he had in ages.

When he clicked on a little table lamp, he saw Ray's wide, baleful eyes gleaming at him through the house's natural murkiness from Ray's usual chair. "Did I wake you?" Jack said fondly, adding, "Why are all the lights off and you're not in bed?"

"I'm hiding," Ray said casually, nearly sounding as if he meant it. He stretched, appeared to appraise Jack. "Have a good time?"

"As a matter of fact," Jack answered, "I did, thanks. We had quite a talk and—"

"Your good time," Ray interposed, and paused. "It was with Rache, right?"

"Yes." Jack walked toward Ray, puzzled and irritated. "I told you who I'd be with and what we planned to do. Is something wrong?"

Ray gathered up his crutches, rose upon them with his newfound expertise. "Hold on to your good mood, your good time, Jackson," he said, heading awkwardly toward his bedroom. He stopped,

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glanced back with a grin. "Sorry I asked that stupid question, man. I'd be with her, too, if I were you."

Jack waited until Ray was safely out of the room and he heard the familiar sound of his brother's door banging lightly on the wall. Now, what the hell was *that* all about?

Chapter IV

1

Until the evening *News* arrived, containing the terrible story he had fully expected, Ray Kidd was uncommunicative and sullen around his brother. But it wasn't that Ray was angry, it was that he had some warped need to affix a final, mental period to the newest nightmare and once more know he hadn't simply imagined it all.

The newspaper story proved it wasn't anything Ray had made up, although it wasn't a report about a young woman being murdered in her home; it was an obituary. Caitlin's obit, with no reference to a cause of death. That was the way they handled suicides unless the subject was well enough known for half the *News* readers to wonder if it might really be a murder, the other half to marvel that

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someone famous—with “so much to live for”—could conceivably be depressed.

How the hell, Ray wondered, staring through tears at the one-column-inch obit, does anyone know whether somebody else has a lot to live for?

Dimly conscious that Jack was on the phone with Rachel, Ray lowered his chin, buried his face in the open newspaper, and wept bitter tears. He hadn't for a second believed the damnable hate-haunt would allow Caitlin's murder to look like one, or leave any clues that could tie her demise to him or to Jack. That would wreck, even end, the oddball, evil game it liked so well to play. But he was badly troubled that a kid such as Caitlin rated only a fucking *inch* of newspaper coverage. Nowhere did it say that she was a knockout and smart, too—that she was, or had been, playful and fun-loving, and a marvelous lay. Even biographies rarely mentioned that about famous people, and said that they made out with the same kind of open and sharing passion they put into everything in their lives. Everybody knew information like that told a huge part of the subject's approach to life.

Where does it say in this lousy, inch-long obituary the cause of death was knowing Ray and Jack Kidd? he thought at last. *That they hadn't had the decency to warn her she was being exposed to risks worse than pregnancy or disease to have sex with the afore-fucking-mentioned Ray Kidd?*

Hell, he hadn't even been able to remember Caitlin's last name until he saw it in the obit.

“ . . . I'm so glad you and the kids will come tomorrow, partly because I think Ray needs to see people. Somebody in addition to the nurse who

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comes once a week, and me. No, you needn't bring anything but Nick and Tricia—dinner will be my job."

For half a second Ray almost shouted at Jack, "Don't let her and the kids come *near* this loony bin!"

Then he remembered Jack saying, almost offhandedly, that their miserable fucking watchdog had decided he approved of Rachel.

Well, wasn't *that* the way things really were, Ray mused, frowning and using his handkerchief to wipe away his tears. *Jack's* woman was acceptable, *Ray's* was not. Jack could tell him he *loved* his woman and get by with it, but Ray got on the phone with his, and the goddamn keeper took her right off the map—using a resemblance to good old likable brother Jack to get into her house!

"Rachel and her kids are coming for Sunday dinner tomorrow." Jack's honest, plain, and what-you-see-is-what-you-get face hove into Ray's sight, giving off enough happy candlelight to illumine the fucking RCA Dome. "I hope that doesn't interfere with your plans."

Ray extended a languid arm. "Fetch me my appointment book, will you, Bro? Quite often there's nothing to look forward to Sundays except brunch. If that's all I find, I'll have my secretary contact the governor and send my regrets."

Jack looked hurt, shifted weight from one foot to the other. "I can postpone this indefinitely," he said, peering down at Ray, "if you need for me to do it."

The taller brother sighed heavily, started to show Jack the obituary, sighed again. "I probably *do* need

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to see some people." He pressed the obit page into Jack's hand. "Here's one I won't be seeing anymore."

Jack read the name, said "Caitlin" aloud, took the page to a nearby straight chair, and sat down to read the column inch; then he read it a second time. At least three times he glanced up at Ray with a combination of pity and anxious curiosity. "My God, Ray, this is terrible!" There was no reply of any sort. "But—*how*? You never said she was ill . . . had some condition or anything. She was so *young*!"

Ray glanced away, reached for his crutches. "I had the same thoughts generally, Jack. Maybe a few more."

Instinctively, Jack peered up in the direction of the second floor where neither brother tended to go. "You don't think—?" he began, then clamped his jaws shut. "Do you intend to pay your respects or attend the funeral?" he demanded. "Bro, I'll drive you to wherever you want to go. Damn it, I'm so sorry!"

Ray stood up, leaning heavily on his crutches. "But would you go in with me?"

"Of course!" Jack said immediately, color showing high on his cheeks. He made it a point to reply forcefully, almost loudly. "*Absolutely*, Bro!"

Ray's long-fingered hands opened and closed on the grips in the crutches. "I'm sorry for what I was thinking, Jackson," he said, then swiveled around in the direction of his bedroom. "But even if Caitlin might like it, I can't really think of a less appropriate place for you and me to go than the funeral home where she's laid out."

"I'll order some flowers," Jack said, "in just your name."

But Ray had already left the room. Jack got a pair of scissors to cut out the poor girl's obituary—*What in the world happened to her?*—and leave it on the table next to Ray's easy chair, hoping to God he hadn't made a grave mistake in asking Rachel and her children to the house the next day.

Then he got too busy tidying up and hanging fresh guest towels in the downstairs bath to give further thought to Ray's loss, except for ordering flowers. At that moment it seemed more important to make a good impression on little Tricia and Nick, since he might become their new daddy, perhaps soon.

2

Rachel awakened on Sunday even more pleased than before with Jack's dinner invitation for that afternoon. Eight-year-old Nick had taken to going to Sunday school at the nearest Protestant church—it had been his surprising choice after she dutifully suggested it to him—and he'd already be wearing what Rachel called his "Sunday best." That would eliminate the need to talk disorganized Nick into his good clothes just before she would be putting *her* Sunday best over a sweaty body. Then she and Trish could pick the boy up at church so his opportunity to get dirty on his walk home was eliminated.

Maybe I'm an unnatural mother, but I loathe taking children anywhere, Rachel thought after her plan went perfectly—

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Except it was nearly impossible to make Tricia get up, and then she moped around as if she were having her first period. Which was, of course, impossible in the case of a four-year-old, even if she was smart as a whip.

"Are you ill or something?" Rachel asked the child while she tried to cram new shoes on tiny feet that seemed to have gone stiff with rigor. Relenting, she felt Trish's wide forehead. "You don't have a temperature. More nightmares?"

"Nooooooooo," Tricia said after a pause. When she drew words out that way, Rachel always had the impression they were engaged in a TV game show called *Hint* or maybe *You're Getting Warm*.

Today Rachel wasn't in the mood to play. "Good, then unclench your toes. We have to pick Nick up at Sunday school before he has a chance to ignite his shirt or something."

It didn't occur to her until Nick was insisting that the front seat beside Rachel was his by divine edict, or perhaps by older brother/male edict, that the annoyed and sniffly little girl getting into the backseat might have been contacted again by the Kidd family spook.

But Tricia had confided in her before, Rachel thought, and if the scary old buttinsky was so damned smart he surely knew that Sayres would be at "his" house—plus Jack's and Ray's—*today*. What else could it have wanted to tell a small child?

There was no trouble with either child during the drive to Jack's—Nick even tried to smooth down his always-rumpled hair and seemed clearly eager for

the visit—until Rachel was driving up into the steep driveway and she heard Tricia mumble a comment. “What did you say, darling?” Rachel asked.

“Nothing,” Tricia said. But she made no move to get out, surprisingly enough.

“Yes, honey, you did,” Rachel corrected her. At the same time she was twisting the rearview mirror to catch a last-second glimpse of her hair. “It isn’t polite to do that. It makes it appear you’re keeping secrets.” She stared at Tricia in the mirror.

Trish sighed heavily and, enunciating with grown-up precision, repeated herself. “I only said the house looks *just* like he told me it would.”

Rachel froze, wanting to ask if her daughter meant Jack, but knowing she didn’t.

Then Jack himself was heading briskly toward them from the front door, and Nick was bursting out of the car making glad sounds of boyish greeting.

“There’s my main man!” Jack exclaimed, smiling broadly and letting Nick pump his hand and arm as if they both imagined water would come out. Jack’s eyes roamed, though, searching for Rachel’s and finding them as she opened the driver’s-side door. “Do you like fried chicken, Nick? A lot of it?”

“Breasts and drumsticks?” Nick asked quickly, always a boy who had his own non-negotiable tastes and opinions.

“Of course!” Jack said heartily, slipping an arm around the shoulders of the approaching Rachel. “Don’t you think I’d have enough sense to have *them*?”

Glancing back to motion to Tricia to get out of the car, Rachel made a mental note to urge Jack to reduce his big-buddy heartiness by several tons.

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Jack was ordinarily a quietly sincere man, and sooner or later kids detected phoniness and rarely forgave it. Tricia joined them then, and Rachel asked her if she wasn't going to speak to Jack.

"Hello, Jack," Trish said dutifully. But her gaze wandered back to the old house and toward the second-floor windows. They looked winter-frozen in place, Rachel saw.

Jack swept Tricia into his arms for a big hug and carried her all the way inside, Rachel and Nick right behind them.

With her appreciation for details, Rachel knew by the time they were in the front room that Jack had dusted everywhere, run the vacuum cleaner, and generally tried to make the downstairs look presentable for her and the kids. Sunlight through windows whose curtains had been opened wide had also helped. "The place looks so nice, Jack," she said when he had put Tricia back down on her feet. "You worked hard."

"Yeah," sharp-eared Nick said, looking almost openmouthed at the high ceiling, "this place is great! It's *enormous*, Jack!"

"We have a potential buyer, Bro," Ray Kidd called, though the Sayres hadn't yet discovered him. "How much will you pay us for the house, kid? Make a good enough offer and we'll throw in the roof."

Nick spotted Ray sprawled on a couch far across the room and raced over to him. "I don't have much money," he said, getting his hand shaken again. "I'm a boy."

"Well, don't stall," Ray said, still lying down, "how much do you have?"

"About four dollars when I get my next allowance," Nick answered.

"Yo, Jackson," Ray cried, and struggled to a seated position on the couch, "make out a bill of sale—the kid's ready to take possession!"

"We're outta here," Jack chuckled, wandering toward Ray. "Entertain the buyers while I pack!" The others circled around his younger brother. He noticed Ray was drinking a beer, ignored it, and turned to Rachel. "You remember ol' Bones Kidd, don't you?"

"Me, too," Tricia put in, happy to be grinning beside Nick and Ray. They all chuckled, and Jack introduced Ray to both kids with solemn etiquette even though he was pretty sure they had all met.

"I hope you won't mind if I don't rise, princess," Ray said gravely to Trish, taking her small hand and pressing it to his lips but actually looking up at Rachel.

"It's enough to see you looking so well," she said, impulsively giving him a kiss on the cheek.

And it's best you don't try to get up, Jack thought, if that isn't your first beer.

"I got to go potty," Tricia said to no one in particular.

"Then I'll show you where the potty place is," Jack said, taking her hand and glancing up at Rachel, "and demonstrate my culinary art to your mother while you're in there. Ray, think you can hold your own with Nick for a few minutes? He's a true raconteur."

"Darn," Ray shot back, "and me without my best racquet!"

Just the adults chuckled at that one, and Jack

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guided his two female guests out of the room. Rachel saw the bathroom diagonally across from a flight of stairs, and nearly collided with Trish when she stopped abruptly, staring up the steps almost as if she were responding to someone speaking. But the stairwell was pitch dark, and even though Tricia appeared transfixed, Rachel had not heard a sound.

But a thought occurred to her, and she bent to ask her daughter about it. "Will you need Mommy's help, do you think?" If all the girl needed to do was urinate, all would be well; she had long since mastered the skill of lowering and tugging her frilly pants up.

For an instant Rachel thought she would have to repeat her question. Then a certain glassy quality in Tricia's eyes was replaced by her typical vivacity. "I just got to make number one," she said, and sashayed over to the bathroom with no further comment. She closed the door noiselessly behind her, and Rachel went with Jack to the kitchen, saying nothing about the stairs to the second floor.

The kitchen was capacious and, Rachel decided at first sight, screamed for a woman to use it properly. But Jack wasn't merely furnishing a partial tour of the old house, he was rushing to a huge, old-fashioned enameled table to gesture with pride to the lavish meal he had "prepared."

"My God, Jack," she exclaimed, stepping forward almost gingerly to take a closer look. "You closed down a KFC for one day!"

He laughed lightly, but was happy Rachel was surprised. "Not really, but it *does* look that way at a glance, doesn't it?"

Four enormous buckets of Kentucky Fried

Chicken in its various styles tried to maintain their place on the large table along with a variety of side dishes. There were countless cartons of milk and various juices. A sweep of Jack's arm indicated, in a kitchen corner, six-pack after six-pack of virtually every soft drink canned in the United States.

"Ray is really a better cook than I am," he told Rachel, "but he's laid up. And I wanted you and the kids to have a good time more than anything I've craved in I-don't-know-how-long. So," Jack said, grabbing a quick breath, "one of those buckets has nothing but chicken liver! And I also bought one or two of each kind of dessert the place sells in case their mama is generous enough to let the kids really pig out—the mama who is *so* incredibly young and beautiful today."

"You don't need to soft-soap me," she said, kissing his lips lightly when his arms went out to her.

Jack said fervently, "I'd like to soft-soap you everywhere that *is* you!"

"I only mean Nick and Trish like chicken more than roasts and steaks, and it's just *like* an Aries guy like you to figure that out, then impulsively buy 'one or two' of everything to make an occasion memorable." Rachel backed away a pace, whispering almost inaudibly, "Behave yourself—I'm trying to pass a *test* today!" And, in her normal tone of voice, "The kids can eat what they want, within reason."

Jack paled, astounded he had forgotten the presence that dwelt with him and Ray, the entity that seemingly believed it was possible to live on hate alone. Again, just as Ray had, a member of the Kidd family had momentarily believed he was free. "I'll

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help you keep an eye on them to make sure they don't have so much they get sick."

The U.N. and the Kidd household, it occurred to Jack as they moved toward the kitchen door—the two places situated in the United States where you weren't, really, on American soil.

Not if freedom and all the laws intended to protect it were important to the definition of American.

3

After she had peed, Tricia carefully counted off—approximately—three squares of toilet tissue. When she was folding over the last one she realized both that it really was the number that came after three, and that she probably *could* make number two.

But she'd just told Mama that she needed only to make number one, and good little girls didn't tell fibs to mamas. That was *bad* little girls.

Trish wondered for the first time what else bad little girls did, and, by the time she had maneuvered her underpants into a more or less comfortable position, she had a wad of three (four, more accurately) unused squares of toilet paper in one fist and couldn't remember why they were there.

Expressionless, she tossed them into the potty, tugged down on the flush lever, and trotted over to the washbasin to wash her hands like good little girls were supposed to do. There were, Tricia decided, trying to stretch her arms far enough to get her palms under the sudden spray of water from the faucet, an awful lot of things *her* kind of little girl had to remember to do.

"Hello, Tricia," the toilet said as it flushed.

"Hello," Trish replied without turning. Instead, she was wiggling her tiny fingers under the water.

"Welcome to my house," said the toilet. "I'm happy you came."

"Okay," Tricia said. She could just succeed in almost turning the faucet off and, that task also completed, she peered at the guest towels hanging from racks to determine which one was prettiest. The faucet dripped annoyingly.

"Tricia, I cannot come downstairs. Come upstairs to see *me*."

Trish concluded there just weren't any pretty towels like Mama owned, and she dried her hands on one that was red and at least sort of bright. "No," she told the toilet.

"I told you to come upstairs!" Now the voice seemed to come from the faucet Tricia had left dripping. "Do it right now, girl, and I'll show you something you'll really, really like."

She climbed with a knee up on a dry corner of the basin, used both dimpled hands to shut the faucet off completely. When she stopped, there wasn't a gurgle from it.

"Don't wanna see you anymore," she said, hopping down and opening the door. "And I think it's just Jack's and Ray's house, anyway—not yours, or you could come downstairs whenever you want."

Once, Andre had reclined on his bed—or a cot later placed in the study where he worked—in order to hypnotize himself and drop into a trance. Even

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then, his guide had not always made itself available. However, the expert in the paranormal sensed it was there, simply unresponsive. Nonetheless, it had been impossible to consider interviewing his clients in person in case they asked for any immediate answers to questions tied to the other side.

However, time passed, much more work was done, and it seemed to him that what happened was related to the experience of those rare, self-employed writers who asked themselves to write creatively, professionally, every day. As if they were people who rose in the morning, went to work, and expected to spend seven or eight hours on the job: They, and he, reached the stage of almost always producing good results, and automatic contact with their creative right hemispheres was as much a given as sending pieces of progressed products down an assembly line.

Or sitting up and getting answers for strangers from a spirit guide called Eight, who could not only locate and converse with the spirits of the dead but, often grumpily, anticipate events of the future.

When it was clear to the paranormal investigator that there was a distinct similarity between everything he and equally industrious writers of fiction did, he found himself assailed by doubt for the first time since earning his doctorate in psychology. Writers who concocted tales of horror about nonexistent monsters or set their stories on imaginary planets no one had explored, in fact, were obviously crossing the bridges in their brains from the practical, day-by-day left hemispheres and, more often than most people, discovering ideas

without a basis in fact in the right side. Then they were returning to the verbal left half of the brain to find a means of telling their tales in a convincing, involving way.

And that was all well and good, he admitted; a world without stories, movies, programs, music, art, and the rest—without talent, in short—would be so stressfully, unrelentingly *real* it would lead to wholesale mental breakdown, and collapse.

But his entire approach was scientific; he was brilliantly educated, well-read; he knew *why* he did everything he did and usually why his clients believed they were haunted or, if the source data stood up to his tests, why they *were* haunted. Or desired to make contact with a long-dead grandparent or some other loved one. He was not some gypsy in a storefront room with a crystal ball solving romantic plights.

But Andre began wondering, just when his spirit guide started showing up in his mind as regularly and graphically as pretty girls he'd met in college, *was* he a fraud? Not intentionally, he knew that. He'd never consciously offered a word of advice, saying it was from the other side, unless he believed it was. Yet he had never visited Heaven in his present incarnation, never caught a clear glimpse of even a single spirit—and he hadn't even seen Eight, his guide—because the arrogant, pompous, show-off son of a bitch kept telling him he wasn't "ready for that step."

And the damnable part was that he felt very sure Ray Bradbury hadn't psychically gone to Mars in order to write *The Martian Chronicles*, either. But common sense—and knowledge of the human

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brain's structure and potential—told Andre he and Bradbury utilized the same hemisphere, at least to begin the turning-in phase. So how, scientifically, could he be absolutely *certain* his own imagination wasn't conjuring up the comments that came from Eight, even Eight itself?

Today he let his body sag back in his office chair to use the guide for a lady client who wanted to know if her deceased husband would mind her remarrying. The woman was a regular and would come in later to hear the answer. Eight had supplied it readily enough, Andre had faithfully recorded the answer, and now he was rising up toward normal consciousness when he realized Eight was trying to communicate at the hypnagogic level.

"I have a personal message for you."

I wasn't aware, Andre thought, anyone else was ever present here unless you summoned them, so your comments to me are necessarily personal.

"You will soon have a new client who is suffering home disturbances of an unusual kind of psychic nature. Members of his family have frequently crossed over as a result of them. Another member will do so very soon, in all probability."

Andre made his familiar effort to focus his inner vision on Eight, detected a shadow, no more. *Why don't you tell me where I can find them?* he asked without speaking aloud. *Perhaps we can prevent another untimely passing.*

"I have explained earlier that such things are a matter of unobstructed choice," Eight said. Before the guide had announced itself in the form of what seemed almost to be remembered conversation Andre had just seen events as if they were unfolding

on a screen, at times with glimpses of printed dates. This newest way, at least, he could seek clarification from Eight. "Two matters are of significance."

What is the first? Andre inquired.

"Your own life may be placed in jeopardy if you take the case."

Well, *that* was a first—for Eight to warn him, that is, not for paranormal matters to endanger him. Could the spirit guide finally be developing affection for him? "I appreciate your cautionary note," he said, surprised when he realized he'd spoken aloud. *What is the second matter of significance?*

As was always the case with hypnagogic dialogue, there was a flash of delay almost like the stark flush of light Andre would encounter when he returned to his plane of reality and opened his eyes. "The man you will meet is not threatened by what you insist on calling a 'ghost,' although that is what it appears to be. It is not in the spirit state," Eight continued with difficulty as full consciousness overcame the hypnagogia, "because *the destructive entity in question is neither dead—nor alive!*"

5

Nick Sayre was enjoying the Sunday afternoon at his friend Jack's and had especially liked having so much grub to eat, even if he had practically had to wrestle Jack's brother Ray for the last drumstick. Ray was nice, too, though Nick was more used to Jack, and Ray acted too much like a kid—a kid who'd been dropped on his head as a baby! Most adults were convinced, Nick had observed, that boys his age wanted men to be pals, like big brothers or

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something. That was probably because most boys his age liked to race around doing dumb things together. Most of the stuff fair-haired Nick enjoyed, like reading and even messing around with writing sometimes, were done by himself alone, and he never liked dumb stuff.

There wasn't any room in ignorant messing around for serious matters, such as having a father who had fallen over dead all at once without even getting old or sick.

Beginning to wander by himself along the second floor of Jack's house, unnoticed by the others, Nick allowed that it might be pretty dumb that a guy no older than his dad *could* drop down dead. But stuff like that was all right in movie comedies, since it wasn't real. When it happened, he'd found, a kid just didn't have a father anymore—even one like Jack's brother Ray would be if he was a pop, racing around doing dumb things all the time.

Nick had decided to explore more of this neat old house, because Mom had suggested they all "wait awhile for dessert and let our meal digest." Adults were always coming up with ideas like that, and he didn't understand why. No one had said he was sick, least of all Nick. It was as though they started feeling guilty when they were having a nice time. So they'd just quit—stopped right there—almost like they wanted to give indigestion a fair chance to kick in! Trailing his fingers over the wall as he inched forward, Nick grinned at his joke, turned his head with the feeling that somebody was looking at him and smiling back.

No one was. The face before Nick's eyes was frowning slightly, if anything—

And so were the faces in all the framed photographs lining the wall, even if Nick hadn't paid any attention to them until now. Yet several of the men he didn't know had a resemblance to his friend Jack Kidd, and Nick realized they were probably whatchamacallits—ancestors of Jack, every one of them a Kidd.

For reasons Nick didn't immediately understand he felt abruptly cold, and also just a little spooked. The huge, old-style house he had liked and that had stimulated his curiosity appeared now to collect shadows in some sort of weird machine and crank them back out, disperse them to the locations where they'd make things darker, harder to define without peering more closely than normal kids cared to look for decay and cobwebs. *What if, Nick wondered, I got lost up here and couldn't find the stairs to the first floor?* What if it was never quite bright again, if he had to begin opening doors off the long hallway (*and what's inside them?*), and what if all he had for company the rest of his life were his thoughts—and these portraits of Jack's ancestors?

Because that was the nature of his fear, Nick realized as he neared the far end of the corridor—that was what was scaring him more than he'd even tell Mom, ever—

That seeing all the faces of his friend's family was like staring down at the tombstones in a cemetery's family plot at midnight—because, Nick assumed, these nice-looking men were *dead*! Not really young forever, but corpses in holes in the ground, just shreds of the flesh he saw handsomely pho-

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tographed in the portraits, clinging to their skulls and skeletons!

The urge to turn and run for the steps leading back to his family was strong, but Nick realized there were only three framed photographs left, and some brave or perverse streak in him wanted to complete his visit to the gallery of Kidds. He inched forward in pile carpeting that felt as if it was clinging to the soles of his feet. He stepped out in front of the first of the trio of pictures—

And saw Ray Kidd, trying to look grave and adult but partly smiling at him.

So the *next* photo, he told himself, edging sideways, infinitely relieved, had to be Jack himself—Jack who, like Ray, was alive and breathing, no damn ol' bundle of bones at all!

It *was* Jack, a much younger version, sure, but undoubtedly his older pal, Jack! He and Ray, their pictures taken at the time of graduation, Nick realized, and took a step to the final photograph.

Nick emitted a curt sound like a muffled shout and flung himself backward, staggering, till he collided with the wall to his back and nearly fell to the floor.

It was the apparent impossibility of it that had shocked him, the fact that the photograph in the final matching frame depicted himself, Nicholas Sayre, in clothing he'd never seen before and somewhat older. And the well-dressed Nicholas's frozen stare was switching to—to the start of a *smile!*

"No, you're not on the wall yet," the photograph said in his own voice, lips moving. "But soon, boy,

you *will* be here. Hanging with all the others . . . forever."

Nicholas winked at Nick then, and Nick spun around and ran like a dumb kid for the distant stairway, his own laughter ringing in his ears.

6

The entity he hadn't yet encountered—and he hadn't yet met the male client in question, either—was neither dead nor alive. An interesting problem at last.

That would appear to narrow down considerably the range of possibilities of precisely *what* it was, Andre thought rather sardonically. The other options were narrowed so enormously, in fact, that he could not think of even *one*! Not immediately.

Contact with Eight was broken and he arose, a man of average size whose wiry and usually wired body made him appear much taller. Beyond even that, Dr. Andre Jordan, a man of intellect, projected both authority and what he supposed was a sense of moral superiority. The former was the natural product of possessing more knowledge than anyone he had ever known except for the woman he had loved, and lost, and he never apologized for it. Acquiring that knowledge had been more difficult and expensive than it was for the majority of men with intelligence quotients in the genius range.

As for conveying moral superiority, Andre regretted it for the sound reason that he would be even more ethically and aesthetically pure if he was able to seem more modest, more humble. That, however, was not how he perceived himself, and at-

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tempting to project humility would clearly have been an act of dishonesty.

With one wrist locked at the small of his back by the tapering, brown fingers of the other hand, Andre put his chin on his chest and walked slowly around the study. He did not call this practice of his, when he was trying to solve a problem, "pacing," which carried with it a suggestion of anxiety and, by extension, doubt. And doubt, to Dr. Jordan, was the most misplaced of emotions and one of the more harmful.

As he had said before in his rare lectures, if one had already done a thing—even once—it was illogical to doubt that it could be done again; elementary logic argued that it could be. All adults had reached countless thousands of decisions before they were thirty, and even among the rather small handful that might be qualitatively considered "right" or "wrong" there would, rationally speaking, be dozens that fell into the former grouping. It did not matter if the decisions involved such questions as when to arise in the morning and what to wear to work, or whether to propose matrimony and to rent or buy a house—all were decisions the species might well have to reach, and doubt would not be beneficial to the individual in pursuit of the "right" decision.

Knowing himself or herself well enough to avoid the pitfalls of self-deception; reviewing one's past record; and closely reasoned thought *would* be beneficial.

Andre paused to peer through the study window at a public street aflutter with flakes of snow alive in the air like white butterflies without despising

the latest snowfall or feeling the slightest appreciation of the scene's winter beauty. *What is deadly and sentient but neither alive nor dead*, that was the problem, and he loved it dearly, both because it was hard to figure out and because it was *his*, his very own. It did not lose its magnetic attractiveness for Andre as a consequence of the likelihood that he would be placed in jeopardy by it; one had nothing to do with the other.

And since he had found the solutions to many mysteries among both the living and the dead, the only point at which doubt could properly be admitted would occur—if it did—when each answer he brought to bear against the question was found to be inadequate or totally incorrect. There would be no more doubt until then.

He made the knot in the tie over his long-sleeved white shirt tighter, reflected with strain that furrowed his forehead. Thoughts truly *were* things, he recalled; they created potentials in life, for good or for evil. Andre did not know where this line of contemplation was taking him, but he went with it. Prayer, heartfelt good wishes, and encouragement were examples of good. But since the inception of recorded history people's evil thoughts had often suffused and electrified life with fear, dread, depression—doubt—and a willingness to do virtually anything to make those emotions go away. On occasion, he thought, the darker ideas produced bigotry and other kinds of ignorant hatred; sometimes they led to wars.

Andre stopped squinting and opened his eyes as the rest of the thought registered in the forefront of his mind: *And the way neither hatred nor war*

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ever stopped for good is, without doubt, a form of haunting.

He would attempt to be on guard, and ready.
Someone needed his help very much—and soon.

7

“Maybe you really do have a writer’s imagination,” Rachel told her son, trying from a seated position to hug him. “Unless, of course, Jack hung your picture up there.”

Jack watched Nick pull away, and knew the boy was genuinely frightened. He was furious at what the hate-haunt had somehow managed to do to Nick, and angry at the boy for going up to the second floor without permission. But Jack knew he couldn’t let him, Tricia, or even Rachel become overly alarmed.

“I only own one snapshot of each of the children,” he said, “and I didn’t hang either of them in that rogue’s gallery of Kidds.” Then, shoving back his second dessert and standing, he added something he had no earthly desire to say. “We’ll go back to the second floor together, Nick, and you’ll see for yourself it was just your imagination.”

“Don’t make book on that, Nickademo,” Ray cautioned him from the couch. He was so straight-faced, Nick couldn’t be sure he was kidding. “This is a pretty weird old dump.”

Rachel was increasingly fed up with Jack’s brother, both because he had apparently been able to tolerate her family’s visit only by resuming his beer drinking—Jack had said he quit—and because his sense of humor struck her as rude and forced.

In addition, she had the impression Ray was both denigrating the obvious affection between Jack and her and occasionally flirting.

"I'll go with you guys," she said to her son and Jack, rising. "I want to check out the men of the Kidd family and see if you got all their good looks." And she gave Jack a brief kiss on the cheek.

"Show us right where you saw your own portrait, Nick," Jack said when he had switched on a second light and led the way to the second floor. He put his request in those words to avoid embarrassing the boy by asking where he'd "imagined" he saw it.

"All the way to the other end of this hallway," Nick said. He took the lead, making sure the two adults were right behind, already wishing he'd gone downstairs and said nothing about his experience. His only hope now, he realized, was that Ray had hung his picture—except that wouldn't explain how "Nicholas" had spoken to him. His pace lagged as he recognized, in this improved illumination, Jack's own face in the final frame—and did so while they remained yards away.

"Let's go back down," Nick mumbled.

But his mother and Jack covered the final yards and were staring at Jack's likeness as if they had all gone there to see it. "Why, honey," Rachel said, "you really haven't changed much at all, if this is your graduation photograph!"

"It is," he said. "Most people wouldn't change if they were kept safe and healthy all the time and sweet as little woolly lambs!" Jack instinctively turned his head to scan the doors leading into the many rooms, most of them empty and unused—or meant to be. He had read Robert Bloch's masterful

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suspense novel *Psycho*, and halfway expected a door to be flung wide and some ghastly, resentful monstrosity to come charging out at them.

"Can we go downstairs?" Nick asked, staring at the doors the way Jack was.

"What you thought you saw," Rachel told him, squeezing his hand, "may have been the product of wondering—down deep—if Jack and I will be getting married."

Nick's almost colorless eyebrows rose in amazement. He hadn't been thinking about any such thing, down deep or anywhere else. He had *never* considered that possibility.

Jack's hand rested on Nick's fair hair, rumpled it. "And if we *do* marry," Jack said amiably, "I'll want to adopt you and Tricia, then *really* add your photo to the Kidd family gallery!" He grinned. "Maybe you were just seeing into the future."

"How would that seem to you, Nick?" Mom asked, her beloved eyes shining.

Nick felt he might burst that instant, just pop open and fly apart. "All right, I guess," he said. With the history of the Kidds seeming to surround him—most of them dead—glancing from his mother to Jack and back somehow made them unreal to him just then. Everything was simply too much.

He whirled around and, for the second time that afternoon, sprinted downstairs.

As before, chuckling followed Nick, this time from his mom and his friend.

Jack brought Rachel close, embracing her, and got even closer. Their bodies seemed to him to fit together as if they had been made for it, and every-

thing else either of them had done was not nearly as important. Even when he felt another part of his body rise and spoil the congruency of the embrace, he believed with all his heart there was another kind of embrace that would prove to be even *more* harmonious, perfect.

There was no discernible psychic objection.

"We'd have to live here," Jack said without moving an inch away, "but you seem to have been accepted." He paused, found a smile. "At least it appears to have good taste in beautiful women and children. *Will* you marry me, Rachel, my darling?"

She found her heartbeat racing, wanted him to hold her forever. *We can solve the mystery of what's happened here, she thought; together, we can do it!*

"I already love you," she said softly, "so I'd love to marry you!"

"How about the day after Christmas?" he asked impulsively, boyishly. "A civil ceremony, then we all move in here and make it a true home!"

She hesitated, attempted to think it through in a practical manner, remembered she needed to make sure Tricia approved, too.

Then she said, joyously and with a tremendous hug, "Let's! That way we'll always have the gift of our marriage at Christmastime!"

8

He could scarcely contain himself, he was so happy! It was working out just as he had planned!

The little smart-aleck of a female child had reduced his pleasure at first, but then he had been inspired, brilliantly inventive, when the male child

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came upstairs on his own. The female would have to be put in her place, but it already appeared the male was going to be delicious fun!

He saw the two of them going hand in hand toward the stairs—Jack and the mother—and he knotted his fists, shot them exuberantly into the air like a real man watching his favorite team take the lead. Oh, Jack wasn't in the clear yet, there were always dangers—but *he'd* protect him and the Sayres absolutely until the woman had more, true Kidds—protect them all against anything, anyone!

Children! Have more children, he shrieked mentally to them. *More little ones, for me!*

Chapter V

1

In the ensuing week it occurred to Ray that Jack and Rachel were the most inseperable people he'd ever known in his life, that they and the two adorable kids comprised the nicest family he had met, and that he was sick and tired of watching them all, together—breathing joy and optimism about the future like some automotive fumes at rush hour.

It might not have been so bad, or so bad so *soon*, if Rachel—or Rachel, Nick, and Trish, the whole squad from Better Living, As in Happiness (or B.L.A.H.)—hadn't shown up every time he wanted to nap or drink a couple of brews in peace and quiet. Or sit across the kitchen table from ol' Jackson,

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shooting the shit like they used to. Sheesh, he never could have dreamed the day would come when he fucking *missed* their mealtime bitch sessions, even the notes they scribbled and passed between them! It had felt so boring at the time, so much like little kids swapping nasty comments behind the teacher's back.

Now ol' Bro and his fantastically gorgeous lady spoke openly about their marital plans—even *shouted* 'em from one room to another!

They had even bought a Christmas tree—for the Kidd house!—and decorated it, put it right in front of a living-room window and left the curtains open a lot of the time.

And what did Ray get to do to get into the Christmas spirit he and Jack had missed every year of their lives?

Ray got invited to put a tree topper that was an angel gripping a definitely, unarguably, any-self-respecting-hate-haunt-could-identify-it Christian cross in place! The sexy blond mother had made the offer as if she'd forgotten he was still dependent on one crutch and as if it never entered her mind that an *evil* entity lived with them—a being who might very well not *like* the symbol of the Prince of Peace staring it in the face every time it batted around the front room!

Then the apple of the haunt's eye had just taken the tree-topper from Ray's trembling hand and slipped it right onto the peak of the tree—and nothing whatsoever had happened to Jack or, as much as Ray could tell, anyone else.

For Ray, that confirmed several growing as-

sumptions about his place, his prospects, in the house where he'd spent his entire life. Drinking slightly more heavily daily, embittered both by the losses of Caitlin and his jaunty car as well as by the stubborn pain in his bad leg, he was only sporadically able to recognize his physical improvement—and the need to be patient until he was as well as he would get.

It didn't occur to Ray at all that he might make phone calls and write letters that could line up the sort of employment that would give him more independence, even the means for buying another car. Instead, it appeared to the lanky, once fairly light hearted Kidd brother that he had no choice except to continue living as he was now, next with an uncharacteristically sunny bro who would try to make up for all the years he hadn't been laid—and finally not just with succulent Rachel's children, but baby after baby she and Jack made—

While the apparently im-fucking-mortal *thing* that would soon govern them all cooed and drooled and pampered *Jack's* family like a simple-minded nanny with a punch like Mike Tyson's! Sweet Lord, he didn't want to sound to himself like he was *jealous* of the attention bestowed by the nightmare that had nearly crippled him—but would the hate-haunt *remember* Ray Kidd was supposed to be healthy, not even catch the measles if little Nick got 'em? Or would Nick and Trish receive the not-a-scratch policy, too, after they'd moved in?

To Rachel, he'd remained polite, if finding it occasionally necessary to avoid making verbal passes or, at least, suggestive hints. To Nick and Tricia he

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had found it easy to pose as his own version of "Uncle Ray," because he liked them, he had always liked children, although Nick struck him as even more ruminative and reserved than Jackson.

And, to Jack himself, Ray had attempted—when he could—to show he was delighted for the big brother. Most of the time, Ray calculated, he *was* that happy; Jack was the *other* guy who deserved every conceivable happiness:

But Ray had had two dreams—night before last, and last night—that made it excruciatingly difficult to pretend that his own existence was not becoming changed in ways that could mean he might never again find himself.

The first dream was more of a nightmare, and he awoke on his bed the next morning even more dejected because he was pretty sure their haunt hadn't caused it.

The setting, of course, was their home, it was late at night, and the scene began with him, Ray, staring across the deep living room at a man sitting motionlessly in a wheelchair. He went forward with the effortlessness of dreams, slowly realizing it was Christmas night—not Eve; the end of Christmas—and knowing that the man in the wheelchair was quite old, had a mask of aged pain instead of a face, and that it was Ray Kidd, decades later. The dreaming Ray knew it was aged pain because the old Ray was asleep, head and neck at an angle, and the lines and seams of pain he'd seen just this past couple of weeks were sunken very deep in the nightmare face—even more harshly than the pouches and creases of ordinary advanced age.

The bright wrappings from two Christmas gifts

were clutched in nightmare-Ray's bony-chicken fingers and the dream observer from the past stooped to read the tags: "Happy Holidays from Daisy and Eugene," the first read, with four words added between parentheses: "Your niece Trish's children." *Sure, dreaming-Ray thought; I get it. The grown Tricia figured the old fart had trouble with new kids' names. She'd probably be right.*

The second gift tag had a hand-printed "Merry Christmas" and another handwritten message: "I still wish you one, little Bro, even if you won't know me from Adam. Love always, Jackson." The writing that had been brisk on notes passed between them when Jack-of-the-nightmare had been single was pinched, partly printed; an old man's hand.

Ray, in his nightmare, found a few other gift labels at the sleeping Ray's feet and knelt swiftly, scooped them up, scanned the names carefully in the living room's steeped, smothering gloom. He sought what he was after in vain: a female signature preceded by words along the lines of "For my darling Ray," or "To my beloved husband Ray." He found no tag with a message remotely similar to that. Truly the end of Christmas!

And he realized, too, Rachel's name was *not* beside Jack's and he found no name tag bearing her name. None. *The Kidds' curse went on, thought the sleeping, still-living Ray. It won the children—maybe now the grandchildren—and the mother was no longer required.* But he, and Jack, were still around these decades later. Protected from death.

The aged, wheelchair-bound Ray opened his eyes, stared at him without straightening his neck. Little intelligence shone in them. "Is that you at

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last, Cait?" the voice asked in a voice like wind at last dying down. "*I want to go with you!*"

Ray awoke in tears, head uncomfortably turned on his pillow, with Caitlin's obituary on the table beside his bed. When he reached for it, it fluttered to the floor.

The second dream was more a matter of wishful thinking than anything else.

The setting, in last night's entertainment, was his own bedroom, and it appeared to take place in the near future. He was lying on his bed in his bikini briefs, minding his own business, and Jack's wife Rachel burst into the room. She wore an exquisite, costly robe that gapped slightly at the top and much more at the bottom, and she didn't seem to observe Ray's limited apparel. Kneeling on the bed, near the foot, she said, "You have to help me, Ray! Jack is impotent with terror of what might happen if we don't create a baby right away, and we've scarcely consummated our marriage. But I made the awful mistake of telling him I'm pregnant, and he can't do it at *all* now!"

"What can I do to help, Rache?" asked Ray-asleep, sitting up and leaning toward his sister-in-law.

"You were the only one who was man enough to stand up to the haunt," Rachel answered, slipping the robe down from her shoulders to her waist. Then she laid her hand upon the crotch of his briefs. "I'm sure you can stand up for me—and for Jack! It would kill him to know I was lying. And you're brothers! If the baby looks exactly like you, it will only make Jack pleased that it does! Help us—*both* of us!"

Dream Rachel had breasts that were immense,

wide, deep, sloping, uptilted, and outthrust in addition to all the other adjectives men coopted to do justice to a pair that seemed both beautiful and instantaneously arousing. Her nipples covered most of the breasts' delectable faces and were so long, meaty, and pink he could virtually taste them from where he dream-sat. He let her tug down his briefs, saw her smile with pleasure, watched as she took her robe off completely. Revealed for him was a luxuriant golden pubic patch. Bare, her sensational legs appeared to go on and on, able and eager to wrap around his waist or his ass—

And his own rigid member gave an impression similar to her legs, he knew, gently pushing her back onto the bed and lying between her marvelous legs. "I would only do this," he said, cool and controlled, driving instantly into her moist, waiting depths, "for you, Jack, and the kids."

"Oh, I know," she replied, gasping and thrusting up at him to take it all. "You're so good. Why didn't I realize that before I married poor Jack?"

"I'll try my best to give the two of you a wonderful child," he pledged, pumping. "Of course, it's possible we'll have to make love a few more times, just to be sure. . . ."

Ray awoke drenched in sweat. His lower body was jerking back and forth like crazy, his penis had somehow slipped through a leg hole, and he had awakened just ahead of a passionate climax.

Making his bad leg throb, he jumped to the edge of the bed—hands in the air as if in surrender—too ashamed of his dream-desire to seek relief. "'For you, Jack and the kids,' *shit!*" he said aloud, hoping the rest of him would also awaken. "'You're so

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good,' she says while I'm humping my sister-in-law!" Except *she* had said nothing, Ray reminded himself; *he* had praised himself for doing it. "What a phony my unconscious mind is!"

When the temptation for what some people called "self-abuse" (*okay, gorgeous, wanta abuse each other before we turn off the lights?*) had subsided, Ray lay down again, wondering. Wasn't he just as big a phony when he was awake? Before the dream he hadn't been willing to admit to himself that he was envious as hell of *who* Jack had as well as *what* Big Bro had. Wasn't it time to confess, to himself, it was his brother who'd sought love and he who had gone in quest of easy lays? Never for love—not once. No, he wouldn't have recognized it if he'd ever *met* a girl who was crazy enough about him to come live in what amounted to a ghost mansion!

What was true right now was that he felt horny as hell.

So the thing to do was take care of that problem, then make the other changes in his life that were clearly, obviously, necessary. *Time to move along, Raimondo*, he told himself firmly, and drifted into dreamless sleep.

And by the time his nurse arrived, three hours later, Ray had drunk no further beer, Jack had left for work, and his nerves were steady enough that he believed he could take the first step of a new plan coolly and—this was important—charmingly.

It would be the last visit to the Kidd house that Constanza "Connie" Alvarez, the nurse, was scheduled to make. On her first house call Ray had been too much in pain, and too self-pitying, to take a really good look at her. That hadn't happened until

Connie's penultimate visit, in fact. Between the two, the forty-one-year-old, black-haired nurse had carried medicine, massaged his aching legs, helped Ray to master the crutches, and brought him nearer to recovered physical well-being than he realized until last week's house call. Until then Connie Alvarez had simply seemed competent, surprisingly strong for a woman, efficient and professionally distant.

Then he'd noticed her ample bustline, the beauty of her thick hair, and the well-rounded curves of her posterior and white-hosed legs.

This morning, around eleven, Connie had brought him his last bottle of pain pills—he noticed there was still one refill, but Jack would have to get them at the drugstore—and was kneeling before him when she said, offhandedly, "Both your doctor and I think you can throw away that second crutch whenever you want to."

Ray gave her his best boyish grin, one touched by ruefulness. "So you're both throwing me back into the cruel, cruel world, is that it?"

She placed his feet and legs carefully on a hassock and began rolling up his trousers. "When you go back to work, or whatever, that's your business, Mr. Kidd," she said, reaching behind her for a tall bottle of lotion Ray had come to find familiar. "All has been done for you that can be done. The rest is up to you, and I recommend both more exercising and just getting out, doing things in the way that was normal to you before your accident."

The way she subtly criticized him, her casual assumption that his life had ever been normal, nettled him. He had noticed a week earlier that

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Connie's top two uniform buttons popped open when she reached for the analgesic. That had just happened again, and the delicious sight of her bountiful cleavage as well as the frilly top of her bra was Ray's. He felt the start of an erection, bent his knee, and pointed. "Today it even hurts in the ankle and instep, regardless of what the doc thinks."

She leaned down farther, dutifully massaging where her patient had indicated, and the uniform top gaped farther open. Ray watched Nurse Alvarez's large breasts swing forward, and even though he could not see their undersides or nipples, he vividly imagined plunging his quick-rising penis into the soft-fleshed hollow.

He went on seeing what there was to see until the two pretty, dark eyes rose and recognized where he was nakedly staring. Then she sat straight.

"Connie," he said, recalling his practiced lines as if he had been an actor, "I wouldn't intentionally insult a professional woman such as you for the world. But my best girl died, I haven't been out of this house since I came home—and I don't think offers of money to mothers when it's Christmastime are insulting unless the *amount* of money is demeaning." He rested a fifty-dollar bill on his thigh and tugged down the zipper of his pants. "That's insulting, for example, partly because it tells you just what I want." He hesitated, reminded himself he absolutely had to start thinking of Rachel as his sister-in-law to be. He added a second fifty to the first, clearing his throat. "This hundred dollars would buy a lot of gifts for your kids. All I ask in return is to see you undress, all the way, while I"—he showed her a box of Kleenex

he'd brought to his chair—"put these to good use. What do you think?"

Nurse Alvarez stood, slowly. "You don't want to know. I will tell you my children are grown, that I live alone."

"Oh," Ray said. There was nothing else that occurred to him now that his guesswork had been proved entirely wrong. He felt certain she would not want to hear of his passion for Rachel Sayre. Unhurriedly, he reached for the money on his thigh.

But the nurse darted forward and snatched it, slipped it into her purse!

Ray smiled in amazement as she leaned back to sit on her heels, then began to unbutton her uniform top. He'd been right all along! The white top spread open and Connie was showing him her big, creamy breasts in an ultrafeminine, ornate bra just transparent enough for him to see her quarter-size nipples darkly through the centers of the cups. She looked ravishing to him like that—he could suck on nipples like those the rest of the day. Of course, this made sense from her standpoint; to her, he was young stuff, she wanted a thrill she would never forget. Well, he would—

Connie leaned forward, showing yet more of her breasts, shot her right hand into his fly, and pulled his ready cock into view.

Ray hadn't expected that, or the sensation that raced through his whole body as she used both hands and all ten fingers to stroke, rub, and pull his penis.

They were sensations of torturous, burning-hot *pain*.

The nurse had not washed her hands after mas-

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saging the analgesic into his legs and ankles, and there was no doubt a warning on the bottle from which it came against applying it to certain portions of the body.

She had risen, rebuttoned her top, and was, without rush, collecting her gear—including the purse containing two fifty-dollar bills Ray Kidd could ill afford. He had switched his prior shrieks of agony to a sound—“*Ooh! OOOhh!*”—he couldn’t remember making before.

Constanza Alvarez had no difficulty in speaking above them. “There’s no lasting harm from that stuff,” she said, and zipped her purse shut. “I wouldn’t think of reporting any of this to anybody, Mr. Kidd, since you *are* guilty of sexual harassment. I’ll let you wonder for a while whether *I’m* filing a report.” She smiled, gave him a small wiggle of her fingers. “I hope you get well, sir—in a *lot* of ways. Fully grown, too.”

Ray sat in his chair with his knees pulled up to his chin, trying not to think of his misery.

Instead, he wondered whether the nurse had outsmarted the hate-haunt, too—

Or if it never intended to protect him again.

2

Ray didn’t wonder, the rest of the day, whether Connie would get him in trouble with the law. He was far too accustomed to the hate-haunt looking out for the two brothers for the possibility even to occur to him as a specific punishment for his unforgivable proposition. She had left the house untouched; that was the end of that.

Instead, he hobbled his way into his bedroom and located, in a closet, a long-neglected box of possessions, then sat on the edge of his bed to rummage through it. What he *did* wonder about was whether it was possible for a boy who became a double orphan before he grew up to be spoiled rotten. In the past, whenever he'd thought about his lousy, liberty-cramped life, it had seemed to be entirely the fault of the presence that had coexisted with Jack and him from the start. Now and then, he had resented the way Jack managed to make do, even appear contented most of the time—which had seemed to be because Jack was the elder, inclined to keep Ray to the straight and narrow merely by serving as an exemplar, and loving it.

The truth was, however, Ray mused, Jack hadn't bought a car he could not afford, developed a taste for beer that brought him a stone's throw from alcoholism, lost every job he'd gotten, or screwed every female who'd appeared even reasonably willing. *I did those things*, Ray admitted; *I tried to fight City Hall even when the hate-haunt's "laws" were for my own good. Breaking them, I got punished.* And the damned thing kept *its* word and didn't even execute him!

He raised his blue eyes from the box with his stuff, thinking. It had always been his personal boast that *he* was the independent brother, not Jack. But now it seemed it was he himself who had unconsciously regarded the ruling entity as a parent substitute, and behaved like a rebellious teenager. Jack detested its authority every bit as much but avoided any big breaches of the rules

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while—independently—he set about finding the woman whom he loved and who loved him back, even won the haunt's approval! Maybe he would or wouldn't know any of the soaring excitement Ray had experienced, but ol' Jack stood a chance of truly and completely knowing *love*, and the meaning of a family. *Those things are as far from me, Ray knew then, accepting the fact, as they were back when Mom and Dad died.*

At the bottom of the box—where its weight had taken it, beneath snapshots of his childhood family and school yearbooks—he found what he suddenly realized he had been looking for.

Ray drew it out with careful fingers, and a brush of the old sock he was using as a dust cloth made it dully shine once more.

It was something he had found in a deserted lot when he was a kid walking home from school, and how he had succeeded in concealing it in the box without the haunting presence preventing him, Ray had never known.

It was even more amazing that, when he got old enough to be allowed by men's law to buy them, he hadn't been kept from purchasing ammunition for it, and hiding that in the old box, too.

Unless everything I've taken for independence, Ray thought, cleaning the automatic, was just part of the hate-haunt's plan.

He went out to the kitchen to get a beer, then made his way to the bathroom for a basically one-legged shower. Rachel was coming over again tonight.

She had said she wouldn't be bringing the kids.

Life, Jack thought when Rachel arrived that evening, was on a rising crescendo of joy so thrillingly happy that he might very well explode before the climax next week:

Their wedding, right after Christmas, and his and Rachel's new life together that would surely be a honeymoon of fifty gloriously shared years—it was bound to be the week he *always* remembered!

Brushing snow off Rachel's coat as he hung it in the front closet, already in a physical state he thought of as being "aroused to become aroused," Jack struggled against the tendency to fixate on Rachel's sexual magnetism. It tended to diminish his conversational skills, and they had decided not to make love before the wedding and risk ruining the seemingly prudish cooperative attitude of the old house's temporarily placid presence.

Jack also suspected Rachel preferred, now, to wait until after the wedding, just because there wouldn't be much time before that magical event. Going back to the living room, smiling the way he seemed to do almost constantly since his proposal was accepted, he was rather glad Ray would be present tonight but the kids would not. Rachel and he wanted to discuss their economic plans, and little Bro was welcome to sit in, but children were hopelessly bored by such topics.

Then, too, he reflected as he joined Rachel and Ray at the kitchen table, if his brother wasn't around Jack might not be able to keep his hands off her. She was casually dressed in a Christmasy red-

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and-green outfit that matched the decorations they had sprinkled all over the downstairs, including mistletoe. To Jack, she was the most exquisitely gift-wrapped present he'd ever seen.

"My contribution to the festivities of the evening," Ray said from his customary chair across from Jack, and brandished their biggest pitcher—"eggnog!" He began at once to pour into the three glasses Rachel had gotten down for soft drinks left over from her family's first visit. "*Real* eggnog, thanks to a neighbor who picked it up for me." He gave the others a knowing wink. "Can't work with heavy numbers without a little sustenance."

He knows I hate eggnog, Jack thought, glancing down at the lined notebook pad and typed sheet of notes he had prepared. *And he surely knows I can see he's half bombed already.*

"Well, how thoughtful of you, Ray," Rachel said. She took a sip from her glass. Then she patted the top of Ray's hand. "It *does* add a festive note to our otherwise drab"—she paused, patted her upper lip with a napkin—"but necessary planning session." She glanced at Jack as if the brightest possible idea had occurred to her. "Why don't we let Ray tell us *his* ideas about the best ways we can all contribute to our combined households?"

"Sure," Jack agreed. He admired how she dealt with Ray; still, he had begun to believe life could be worth living despite the baleful overseer in the house. Yet here was little brother volunteering, it seemed, to become their *third* child. "Yes, Ray," he said, leaning toward him, "why *don't* you tell us about your contributions—especially since your

driver's license was suspended for six months, and I don't know how you're going to get to work—assuming, of course, a job is part of your plans?"

Ray grinned at him. "I plan to drink," he said easily, amiably. "Sooner or later the spook won't like that, it'll finish me off, and there'll be one less mouth to feed."

"Damn it, Ray," Jack exclaimed, "why don't you just get a grip on things? I'd be happy to work it out so my deliveries coincide with a job you get and I could drive you there, then pick you up. But I'm not going to try to get a job *for* you!"

"Not that Jack thinks you should even start one," Rachel added gently, "until you can get around without your crutch. We're only talking about the near future. Please don't think I'm trying to rush you into anything; but I'm hoping for some position that will coincide with Jack's in order for us to have all our evenings together."

Ray told Jack, "I didn't ask you to drive me to work," as if he'd heard nothing Rachel said, "and I sure as hell didn't ask you to find me work." He turned his head, and his personality, toward Rachel. "Unless I wasn't listening when some offer was made to me, just remember *I'm* not the lucky SOB getting married to you. But I'll pull my weight when the time comes." He faced Jack with an expression of apparent brotherly concern. "Something wrong with your eggnog, Jackson?"

For a long second Jack held his gaze, and his temper. Perhaps it was only memory of all they had endured together or where they were sitting, at the kitchen table; but an old awareness rushed into Jack's mind, and he believed he communicated it—

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and vice versa—to Ray. Each man, however disparate, was stuck with the other and could not move away from the house even if life together became a near impossibility. In a real sense they were both already locked in an old-style marriage in which divorce was not an option. Moving out, according to all they had always heard, meant death for the brother who departed.

Jack swallowed approximately half his eggnog in two swift swallows, and Ray refilled all their glasses.

For the next hour or more the family-to-be discussed their needs and ideas for different living arrangements equably, even affectionately. The second floor would have to be opened up and put to use for Tricia and Nick. They already had their own bedroom furniture, and each child wished to keep it; therefore, the age and condition of the Kidd beds, and so forth, wouldn't be a problem. Ray would remain downstairs in his own longtime bedroom, partly so his still-healing legs would not be tested by constant stair-climbing.

By the time Rachel suggested they take a break, each of them had done his or her share toward polishing off Ray's eggnog. Even Jack admitted it was good and had relaxed him. "Maybe I owe you an apology, little brother," he said, conscious that he was enunciating with considerable care to avoid slurring his words.

Ray smiled happily, glanced idly toward the hallway leading out of the kitchen. Rachel was using the bathroom first. "So maybe not everything I say is automatically wrong, Jack? Can you give me that?"

"It's given, Raymond," Jack said, taking his hand and squeezing it. "But may I use the john when Rachel is done? I'm not in shape, drinking-wise."

"Sure," Ray said, "but when were you otherwise?" He cleared his throat. "You're the white hat in our li'l drama, Jackson. Which is why you've won the sweetest, finest-looking lady in the state. I have to hand it to you. Nobody would've guessed it, but you turned out t'be the cool dude, Big Bro—not me."

"Bullshit," Jack argued, embarrassed but pleased. He averted his gaze, looking down at his open notebook. "You've done just fine with the ladies, and it's only a question of time till you find a Rachel of your own, someone whom—well, whom *anybody* would approve! You just need to get back into circulation, when you can."

Ray felt the bantering glint in his eyes slipping away. He almost decided to tell Jack the crummy thing he'd done earlier in the day with the nurse, to show how he had lost his cool—and his own sense of personal decency and self-respect. "A question of time, eh?" he muttered. It had just occurred to him for the first time that the hate-haunt had not only chosen not to protect him from making a fool of himself and getting hurt, but hadn't punished him for certainly breaking its rules again. Where the hell *did* he stand with it now?

Rachel came back from the bathroom and Jack jumped up, giving her a kiss on the cheek before hurrying on to the john.

Ray smiled fondly at her, arose, and used his crutch to go where she stood inside the kitchen. "I wanna thank you for standing up for me about the

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eggnog," he said. She smelled as fresh as tomorrow, and he imagined she had added more cologne.

"Nonsense," she said, turning to a counter and putting out her hand to their Mr. Coffee. "I like eggnog too, and apparently Jack also changed his mind about it." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "What do you think about my starting some coffee? We still have some more details to go over."

"Sure, why not?" Ray said, brushing off her comments. She and Jackson were so damned *sweet*! But his proximity to a woman so lovely and desirable made him raise his eyes, scan the kitchen in an effort to keep from remembering the dream-Rachel, the perfect, naked breasts and her sex open to him—except they'd hung Christmas decorations even in this room, and it simply wasn't his and Jack's any longer, it wasn't *his*, at all! "I just wanted to say thanks," he finished lamely.

"Well, you're welcome," Rachel said, turning around to face him. She had seen where he was looking. "Can you take two steps backward on your crutch, or doesn't it have reverse gears?"

"I guess I can," Ray said, surprised but carefully backing up. "Why?"

"Because now you're standing right under the mistletoe!" Rachel exclaimed with a grin. She put her arms lightly around his waist, tilted up her face, and kissed him.

Ray tugged her close and kissed back. The soft, dual pressure of her breasts on his chest initiated an instant arousal, and she was so unprepared for his reaction that he slipped his tongue between her lips easily, momentarily feeling she wanted it. His

hands slipped down over her hips, pulling her near enough for her to feel his increasing hardness. The crutch, unnoticed, clattered to the kitchen floor.

Jack, in the doorway to the kitchen, said "*Hey!*" and rested one hand on Ray's shoulder to announce his presence. His brother had always been a practical joker, and Jack hadn't been certain, emerging from the darker hallway, what he was seeing; but he definitely did not shove Ray.

Ray went down hard, striking the floor so quickly and so emphatically, he looked like a man who had been shoved off a roof. He emitted a combined gasp and sharp cry of pain and lay in a heap with his legs pulled up, writhing.

Jack and Rachel were too shocked to bend to him at first.

And Ray was pulling himself to his feet, rockily, staring at neither of them but at the ceiling—and that which observed them all from beyond it. "Well, that makes it pretty clear, you crazy, weird old son of a bitch!"

"Ray," Jack said fast, "be careful what you say!"

Wobbling, peering up, Ray was too tight and too hurt to hear Jack or to care about danger. "If you want to play real hardball, okay," he informed the unseen presence. "I'm ready for you this time!"

Jack and Rachel gaped in astonishment as the weapon—an old automatic appeared in Ray's hand. And it was aimed directly at Jack.

"I'm your big disappointment, I guess," Ray raved at the hate-haunt—or his concept of it, thought Rachel—"so Jack's your fair-haired boy because he's gonna make Kidds for you, more *kid* Kidds to plague all their lives like you have ours.

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You couldn't deal with the vasectomy I got, because I didn't want to accidentally put more children in hell, could you?" Ray lowered both his gun, from Jack, and his head, to fix Jack with his fervent gaze. "I didn't tell you about it, Bro, because I was afraid you'd believe you were obligated t'do it too. Maybe I suspected all along you might make the grade. There was no way Caitlin and I could, even if I'd knocked her up!"

Rachel heard what Ray was saying with growing horror. She had gone along hoping some other explanation for Tricia's hauntings might be possible but never once realizing fully that marrying Jack could place the children in impossible peril. Now, though, she had discovered Jack's brother feared the haunt at least as much as Jack did—and she had seen Ray felled at a touch as if he had been poleaxed.

"You should've discussed the vasectomy with me before you took such a step," Jack said. He knew he had tears in his eyes as he began to edge his way toward Ray.

"Hold it there, Jackson!" Ray ordered, again leveling the weapon at Jack. "Sure, you're the settled, older brother—you can fix everything. Like you kept my car and me from being tossed like a football into another car, or kept my legs from being messed up!" He peered upward again. "Well, you're welcome to Jack, and vice versa, you fucking loony tunes! Unless you wanna take me back and maybe find a terrific broad—a lady—like Rachel for me, too? Or—or make her available to me?"

There was no reply, but Rachel realized she, herself, had also listened keenly for one. "Ray, there's

some eggnog left," she said, stepping a pace in his direction, "and we three have some more plans to make. Just put that thing down, all right?"

"Rache is right." Jack closed the gap between Ray and him to a yard. "You could never hurt me any more than I could harm you. Besides, I found that antique you put in your box years ago, and it might explode in your hand if you pulled the trigger." He reached out and clumsily patted Ray's gun arm.

Ray grinned at Jack, decided to do what he had halfway meant to do. Mentally, he lowered his arm—

But physically, in fact, his arm appeared to turn to iron and it stayed where it was.

Until, without having anything conscious to do with it, he started bending his arm at the elbow and gradually bringing the gun barrel around until it was aimed up high at his own chest, right below his throat.

It was excruciating for Rachel to see—but at the same time she admitted to herself how relieved she was that Ray was no longer leveling the automatic at Jack. Her reaction appalled her; she snapped at Ray as if she was correcting young Nick for a misdeed, "For God's sake, Ray, stop horsing around with that thing before you accidentally hurt someone!"

But Jack was within close range of his little bro and saw the look of abject terror in his blue eyes. Terror, and a stark helplessness that informed Jack this action of Ray's—perhaps everything he was doing—was not Ray Kidd's choice. Without a doubt, Jack realized, he would never forget every detail of his kid brother's awful expression. He threw his arm up, hoping to jar the gun harmlessly out of Ray's hand—

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And a bullet was discharged a split second before Jack's hand made contact.

Ray's entire body was raised from the floor a foot or more and traveled with ever-increasing speed, on an uncannily straight line, across the kitchen until it collided sickeningly with a wall. For the briefest of periods all four of his limbs stuck out as if he had been mounted there as a ghastly exhibit.

Then he simply slumped to the linoleum-covered floor, bleeding profusely from the chest as Jack and Rachel rushed to aid him. The gun had ended up sliding partway under the stove.

Sitting beside him, Jack cradled Ray's head on his shoulder, pressing his handkerchief against the gaping wound. The upper part of Ray's body lay against the wall. From the dining room Rachel's voice was unnaturally high, almost strident, as she gave the urgent message to 911.

But Jack had been too close to his brother too many years not to know that this would be the last private conversation he ever had, in life, with Ray.

As usual, despite the difficulty and pain, it was Jack's little bro who began the chat. "I thought . . . I could outfox it," he said, "*make* it take me out—by pretending to threaten you."

"But you never were," Jack said. "I knew that." He let his eyes fill with tears because he was getting nowhere trying to stop them. "I guess you succeeded, Ray—you're the first Kidd to d-defeat it."

"Bullshit!" Ray said, coughing and spitting blood. "I was a bad boy today . . . big Bro. The fucking hate-haunt was punishing me . . . for that, and . . . for trying to outsmart it." He coughed again, rackingly. Rachel had returned to the

kitchen and was blotting his lips with a handful of wet paper towels. "I couldn't . . . shoot myself . . . and when I realized that . . . it *made* me do it, anyway."

"Hang on," Rachel said, kissing his forehead. "Help's on the way."

"No." Ray choked out the words. "I . . . don't think so." He strove to focus on Jack. "But maybe you guys . . . still have time to—to find help, somewhere. Jackson, you hafta try!"

The intensity of what Ray was saying was magnified, for Jack, by the tension in Ray's neck and shoulder muscles. He pulled his younger, dying brother closer in arms from which he wanted desperately to transmit a measure of his own life force. "I love you, brother," Jack whispered, "but don't try to talk any more for a while."

Ray managed a feeble nod.

Then he did what Jack suggested. Forever.

Chapter VI

1

Rachel did not go home until the police had come, taken statements from her and a shattered Jack, and Ray was taken away.

Even then she stayed to console Jack for as long as possible; ultimately there was no choice except to drive back to her place and relieve the baby-sitter. The girl had plans for the next day, and leaving the kids alone was unthinkable.

The kids were also the reasons for Rachel being happy to get home, where, after telling the sitter sketchily why she was so late and giving her an especially generous tip, she could lie back in warm bathwater and try to think: The sloppy winter weather and everything that had happened in the old Kidd house had left her chilled to the bone.

But Rachel had begun to chill not when Ray pulled out his gun but when he had spoken of having a vasectomy in order to avoid bringing any children of his into what he had considered an atmosphere of Hell.

In all honesty, she thought, draping her washcloth over her crotch and closing her eyes against a dully throbbing ache at the top of her spinal column, *how could any mother not be similarly concerned?* She loved and adored Jack and he felt the same way about her. That was truly marvelous, almost a miracle considering what each of them had endured up to now.

Yet it seemed clear that the terrible force wreaking havoc in the Kidd family for so many years—and Rachel *had* to accept its reality now; she had seen its destructive potential in what it had done to a weak but sweet guy like Ray—approved of her marrying Jack because it wanted Trish and Nick in that gloomy place. After all, it had used Tricia as a conduit for its “welcoming” message.

Rachel opened her eyes slowly as another realization occurred to her.

She had actually begun to think about calling off the wedding.—

And she was doing so without making any attempt to *fight back*. She was practically surrendering, without any harm having been done to her whatsoever, to a creature she had never seen, heard, or touched! Meanwhile, the man she loved had lost his beloved brother—the only family he had in the world! Did she really propose to abandon him to that—that damned parasite? In poor

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Jack's condition, now, losing her meant he might begin building shrines to it, going as wild or crazy as his brother!

Sensing an idea forming, Rachel stood up in the bathtub and dried herself briskly. Yes, she would have to protect Nick and Tricia—but she would have to protect Jack, and herself, as well; the family they were beginning to become. (Stepping out, she felt eyes gazing at her, had no way of knowing if it was imagination, and thrust her breasts out and wriggled her fanny at the same time. Let the cruel thing have a look, if it was there; maybe he'd pick on a grown woman instead of little girls!) The fact was, Jack wasn't able to think clearly now, with Ray dead just this evening. And maybe he *couldn't* think entirely rationally after living his life under such constant, close supervision.

So I'll have to take over awhile, Rachel decided, *without letting Jack know too soon that I've interfered*. The objective was to find out just what the "hate-haunt," as Ray called it, was. What, or who—or both!

She pulled on a nightie and went hurriedly in quest of their phone directories.

As usual, the assortment of those thickset volumes—Rachel always had the impression that they were massive enough to list the phone numbers of everyone on the planet—proved to be in no particular order, and she had to get on her knees to find the directory she needed. Nick or Tricia, who had probably stood on it to reach something forbidden in a kitchen cabinet, presumably had left it beneath the phone table.

She got it out, sat down again with the directory in her lap, and flipped pages until she saw the heading she sought: "Detective Agencies."

Everything Rachel knew about private detectives she'd learned from movies, TV, and as many as two dozen mystery or crime novels she had read so far in her life. But it appeared the detectives did considerable research on which they based many of their deductions, and Rachel mainly wanted to learn who or what shared Jack Kidd's home with him.

Then, perhaps, she would know how to make it leave them alone for good.

She also wondered, as she scanned both simple listings and box ads, if the haunt realized something she had deduced herself: If it was actually parasitic, and if it chased her and the kids away—and if Jack ultimately resorted to the same means of escape Ray had mentioned—logic said that the hate-haunt itself effectually ceased to exist.

Rachel found a name she liked very much along with the boasts of "Just the Right Charge" and "Better Than Most at Finding What, or Who, You're Looking For."

It was probably too late by many hours to phone then, she realized.

First thing in the morning she meant to become the first woman to fight back effectively against the haunt—

And the one who liberated an entire family. Starting, of course, with Jack and the soon-to-be Rachel Kidd.

He was aware that a nightmare was beginning and had long before developed the ability not only to realize it but to stop it at any time when he was experiencing a certain level of intense fear.

It was almost as long since he had chosen to awaken himself. Nightmares, in common with all dreams, were fraught with information that might prove to be useful; any psychologist who was unaware of the fact had thrown out all of Freud's work, in Andre's estimation—not just the library full of supposition and unproved nonsense that Father F. left as a part of his legacy.

The only trouble with most dreaming, other than the way that so much of it was coded, was in jumping to conclusions. One tended to plant the conclusions in concrete without seeking alternative solutions to a dream's meaning—or, just as frequently in his case, search for a means to break the code when the dream was actually one hundred percent accurate and contained *no* hidden meaning.

This night's bad dream seemed not to feature or include him, and the detached element of Andre's mind, noting his own absence, was more intrigued than it had been at the very start. The scene was homely—a kitchen—and three youthful white people were present, apparently locked in some kind of struggle. One of the two men—yes, Andre saw him vividly now—had a gun in his hand. Strangely, there was no aura of menace toward the woman or the second man. *Ah*, the armed fellow's weapon was

aimed at himself! And it might be a bluff or—or something odd. Because the armed man *did not truly wish to end his life*. Both his eyes and body language said that was the case—yes, Andre diagnosed, *he is in the grip of irresistible compulsion!*

Then Andre perceived that a bullet was fired, and the unfortunate fellow was *caroming* off the far wall. (Well, well, when would his imagination stop adding these fanciful italics for emphasis?) Andre's genius was not needed to determine that the "nightmare" was in reality a clairvoyant visit to a perfectly *genuine* tragedy.

"The manner by which he was transported, then slammed against the wall," Eight said distinctly, "was just as real as the compulsion—a compulsion from *without*, I might add."

How could you possibly know that? Andre asked, aware he had lapsed into a different state. *Or are you claiming to be omnipresent or omniscient?*

"I make no claims," Eight answered a trifle pompously. "I know such things because I am told." He paused, possibly miffed by the challenge. "The entity with the gun is on this side, and he is here. He desires to express something to you."

Why? Andre inquired, never aloud but, in the most unspecific manner, in his mind. *I'm sure we never met in life.*

"The service I perform is on behalf of needy spirits here and there," replied Eight. "I explained earlier it is rarely done for the benefit of untormented or smug souls. Are you ready to receive the communication?"

Andre switched on a light attached to his bed's

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headboard, blinked at the vivid brightness, and retrieved a pad and ballpoint pen from the nightstand where he made it a practice to keep them. *Get on with it, Eight. But don't hesitate to remind those on the other side that they, also, once required sleep. Mornings are fine.*

Eight communicated, "What you said is not always true, Doctor. Spirits from certain other planets, dimensions, and time imperatives do not, in fact, require sleep."

The spirit guide was starting to overstep and verge on rudeness, Andre realized, unwilling to accept arrogance from anything that refused to furnish a real *name*. He switched his lamp off and collapsed back against his pillows.

"The newly arrived spirit was called 'Raymond,' or 'Ray,' in life," Eight said.

Andre switched the light back on. *Is the afterlife always so informal?* he asked. *Will I have to be known as "Andre" to every jackanapes and dullard when I go there? Or Andy?*

"Your concern seems premature," Eight said. A pause—very slight, very deliberate. "Raymond was the brother of the man, called 'Jack,' of whom I recently spoke."

The man whose family had been haunted by what you termed an entity "neither dead nor alive"? I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting either it, Andre thought, or the ostensibly terrified Jack. He sighed and shrugged, let the transition to waking communication proceed. So what does this Raymond have to tell me?

The answer startled Andre almost to the point of

fear: "It made me kill myself, Doc—and it'll end up killing every member of my family if somebody doesn't stop it!"

Andre clamped his hands over his ears, wincing and sitting on the edge of his bed. Extraordinarily, the communication of the soul on the other side had been *direct*—not filtered through Eight—and it had sounded as if the voice was shouting at him from right there in the bedroom! Squinting because of the unexpectedly loud noise, Andre opened his eyes and recoiled again—at the vision standing at the foot of his bed.

Andre had no need to wonder if Eight was finally showing himself.

This nocturnal visitor was clad in modern dress, he was tall and lanky, and he could have been taken for a living man except for the gaping, bloodied hole in the top of his chest. Torn muscle and shattered bone showed through and his shirt, below the wound, was caked with blood.

I take it, Andre thought, only slightly unsteadily, you are Raymond?

"If you're thinking at me," the specter said, "I can't read minds yet. I'm Ray. I'll get better."

"My apologies. Only once before did Eight—"

"You hafta stop the thing in our house!" Ray interrupted. "I only have a minute. I saw the tunnel with the light 'way in the distance, and I guess I'm finally free of the hate-haunt, because I feel like nothing is watching me, and frowning, for the first time in my life." He shrugged. "Well, you know," he said. "But I found out my brother Jackson—I mean, Jack—will come to see you. And I wanted to beg you to help. There's Jack, a nice lady named Rachel,

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her kids and all the people to come along in our family who'll be tortured and eventually killed, like *me*! For God's sake, man, *help 'em*!"

"I'll try, of course," Andre said. He noticed the phantom, though still substantial, appeared to be receding—but that the poor man was actually becoming smaller. "Where did you *live*, Ray? Tell me the address and I'll go there, now!"

The ghost's face—he was shrinking all the time—looked uncertain. "*I don't . . .*" Ray said, and the formerly loud voice was reduced to a whisper with no audible end of the sentence. It was impossible to tell whether the remnant was literally diminishing in size until it was atomic or subatomic in mass or being borne away at an amazingly swift, cosmic rate of speed. "Help them," he screamed at last.

And Andre was, to the best of his ability to judge, alone in his room.

"Eight?" he called. Then, remembering how it was done, he corrected his approach. *Eight? Are you there?*

It was still as a tomb.

3

For Rachel, the next day began unlike most of them, but that was because it was Christmas vacation and Nick did not have to go to school, not because of Ray's tragic death the night before. There was no immediate reason for either Nick or Trish to get up—mercifully, even Tricia was still asleep—and, though they would have to be told, Rachel had a while to begin this Thursday properly.

She found and listened to two phone messages from Jack. She was relieved to find them awaiting her, because their absence would have scared her silly, made her imagine the damned ghost—or whatever—had gone on a total rampage.

The first message had been left around the time she was having her brief bath. It began calmly, almost abnormally so, but after Jack had apologized for “exposing you to so much horror” he had begun to cry, then sob. “Maybe we should just postpone the wedding indefinitely,” Jack’s voice of the night before suggested, adding, “Considering what Ray had done to himself to spare any little ones, I don’t see what right I have to happiness now—not if it’s at the cost of jeopardizing those children I’ve come to love so much.”

She had awakened only twenty-some minutes late for Jack’s second message. His voice was hoarse and shot through with sorrow, but his thoughts had become better ordered overnight: “I know you’re busy with Nick and Trish, so you needn’t call back right away. I’m all right. The police said it’s obviously a suicide—there was no reason to explain Ray was forced into it, they’d just urge me to see some shrink—and they’re releasing . . . Ray . . . to a mortuary when an autopsy is completed. I’m going to the funeral home where our dad . . . was . . . and pick out . . .” Jack’s voice broke; there was an instant of white sound on the recording. “Could you phone me this afternoon sometime, darling?” He added, softly but tightly, “I love you and the kids.”

No damned *thing* Rachel couldn’t even see was

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going to deprive that decent man, her children, and her of ordinary happiness without a fight!

She punched the phone number of the detective agency she had chosen the night before, drummed her fingertips on the phone table as she listened to the ring.

"Ryce Detective Agency," a woman's voice said with three-P.M. briskness.

"My name is Rachel Sayre. I have a rather unusual problem. May I speak to Craig Ryce, please?" This was the first point Rachel had dreaded. People probably phoned the Pinkertons and asked for Mr. Pinkerton, whose demise Rachel dated in memory a century ago.

"I'm Craig Ryce," the brisk woman said at once. "How may I help you?"

Second dreaded point. There'd been a bill collector two years before, called Byland, who plagued Rachel with telephone demands. Three times she had returned the calls and gotten Byland with three quite different voices and accents. But Rachel was also delighted to be speaking with the head of the agency—if, indeed, she was—because she had chosen the Ryce agency for a pleasant association of hers.

"My fiancé and I are trying to locate the name of the person who built his house. I'll be living there, too, when we marry. And we need to know more about the builder. What kind of person he was, in every aspect." Rachel paused, twisting the phone cord. "I'd rather explain the rest of it to you in person, and soon—because we've planned to marry the day after Christmas."

"My God, woman, that's three days from now!" the detective exclaimed. "Maybe you'd better come to see me yet today, since some of the places I'd like to check will probably be closed Christmas Eve afternoon. But, Ms. Sayre, I'm not Sherlock Holmes—or a psychic, for that matter."

Rachel's heart skipped an excited beat. At least *someone* would be going to bat for them! She double-checked the agency address with Ms. Ryce, relieved that it was within a dozen miles of her own place. "I think I can be there within an hour or so. It's wonderful you're willing to see me so quickly."

Craig Ryce laughed a husky, hearty laugh. "You'd be surprised how few people—especially wives who hope to get something on their husbands—want to hire private detectives right before Christmas. After the Christmas and New Year's parties, well, that's another story. See you soon as you can get here."

Rachel hung up, more optimistic than she had been since Ray Kidd had begun to pour eggnog into their three glasses.

Then Nick was doing his saggy, baggy elephant slog, still in pajamas, nearly seeming to be sleepwalking as he aimed himself at the kitchen and the refrigerator where he found new life each morning.

And neither he nor Tricia knew what had happened the preceding night.

Rachel kissed his right temple as Nick passed, decided to let him go ahead and pig out, and went up to awaken Trish. The idea of informing the children separately—twice—about Ray was absolutely unthinkable. It was a blessing they hadn't gotten to know Ray anywhere near as well as they knew Jack.

When she had Tricia dressed and sitting at the

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dining-room table, Nick was almost through with a mess he would doubtless have called "breakfast." Rachel adopted the somber but not weeping expression parents universally use to give bad news to their children. The moment came when she needed to provide some detail, and she concluded impulsively that she should lie—at least until she might tell her elder child something closer to the truth.

"Ray was showing us a gun he found back when he was a kid, and saved." She swallowed hard, vividly recalling the way Ray's arm and hand had turned the gun as if against his will. "It was really old, and it . . . went off." Tears stung Rachel's eyes. "He died before anyone could get there to help him."

"Poor guy," Nick said. He rested his fork on his plate and ate no more.

Tricia burst into tears a moment later, a cloud-burst of the kind that momentarily makes a small child appear literally inconsolable. Rachel, surprised, leaped up and tugged the girl onto her lap. A few sniffs later, she offered an explanation for her grief. "Uncle Ray called me 'princess,'" she wailed.

4

Jack was so relieved to learn he would not yet have to look at his brother in death that he sagged and partly fell into the mortician's guest chair.

Of course, he understood a second later, he would have to select a casket for Ray's remains. For the time being, Ray, who had arrived at the Griner

Mortuary ahead of him, autopsy completed, was—*where?* Jack started to ask, then thought better of it. Probably on a white table alone, deep in the bowels of this dreadful place. Sliced to ribbons. It would be up to the man across the desk to tie them into a neat, presentable, reasonable-facsimile likeness after Jack chose the coffin. *Is my brother decently covered?* Jack asked the man mentally. And *Is he guarded so the haunt can't get to him one more time?*

After a surprisingly few questions were asked and forms filled out, Jack was led by Fullerton Griner almost to the rear of the mortuary. He didn't realize he was in for the most grotesque shopping expedition of his life.

The aging Griner unlocked a door leading to a dark room, and the door even squeaked. Jack had known a lot of fearfully real haunting, and he smiled behind his hand, at first, when the undertaker flipped a switch and headed into the room with the air of a sales rep opening an automobile showroom for the day. New, burnished caskets were everywhere, most with the lids yawning wide in what Mr. Griner obviously hoped was an inviting manner. Jack also smiled briefly at the idea of such a place being locked for the night; who in the world would want to steal a *coffin*?

Then he had a few glimpses of discreet cards bearing the prices of the macabre containers and knew the answer to his question: loved ones who suddenly had a need for a casket, such as he, but didn't live on an inheritance that would even handle a burial.

Walking as briskly as he could past a recessed area with shining miniature coffins whose purpose

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seemed obscene to him, Jack realized how much the Kidd family estate said about the man who had made arrangements for it: The house itself was free from cradle to grave—as long as one occupied it—and so was the grave. But nothing had been provided for food, heat, lights, or entertainment, because they were the concerns and preoccupations of life.

When it occurred to Jack he was choosing a receptacle in which his little brother's body was to stay forever—as long as Ray *had* "remains," that revolting term—Jack simply pointed toward a casket, nodded wordlessly, and turned to go back to the mortician's office. Studiously, he averted his gaze from a door at the very end of the building. The sign on it read, "Private, No Admittance Except to Authorized Employees."

Back in the office Fullerton Griner, sliding behind his desk in the careful way that says a businessman is afraid he might scrape off his disguise, or his scaly skin, folded his hands. Jack thought he did so to keep from rubbing them together gleefully, given the size of the sale. All Jack wanted was to get out of there.

"The funeral can't be on Christmas Day, of course," Griner remarked. He peered attentively, perhaps helpfully, at Jack. "This leaves the question of just when your beloved brother's services are to be scheduled. Alas, I've learned from experience, it often proves difficult for loved ones to attend funerals on the day before Christmas, even though it is customarily a time when many people travel." Griner had already slipped the papers Jack signed into the drawer at his belly but nevertheless pro-

ceeded with considerable, cautious tact. "Besides, Christmas Eve is just two days from now, as you know, leaving a brief period of mourning and even less for family and friends to hear the bad news and—"

"I'll mourn for my brother the rest of my life," Jack said, "and I *am* Ray's family and his best friend." He started to add that Ray, if the hate-haunt hadn't withdrawn its protection from him, would soon have had a sister-in-law, nephew and niece. But there was no point to saying so, and he wished only to leave.

"Still and all," Griner forged ahead, "the day *after* Christmas has much to recommend it." He raised his chin, smiled, and awaited an answer.

Well, there it is, Jack thought. *Am I getting married on the twenty-sixth—or going to the funeral of the other person who loved me?* "When will Ray . . . begin lying in state, if that's the proper term?"

"Why, this evening, Mr. Kidd," Griner said briskly. His manner was changed, and his expression said clearly, "Can't wait to get 'em into the ground these days." But aloud he said, "We pride ourselves here on promptness. We're cognizant of the fact that many people can't really accept the departure from this vale of tears until they stand before the bier, as it were." He passed a folded page across the desk in an extremely circumspect manner.

"Then the funeral could be tomorrow," Jack said, ignoring the mortician's shocked expression. "I'll have to call you back in just a few hours." *After I talk with Rachel*, he thought, and drew the folded sheet to him. "What's this?"

"A photostat of the autopsy I was asked to pass

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along to you. The cause of your brother's demise was obvious, of course; you needn't read it. Sir, I'm not sure the ground at the cemetery can be broken so swiftly."

"Then Ray would just be kept here after the services," Jack said smoothly, rising, "for another twenty-four hours, correct? You suggested the day after Christmas, so clearly he won't be in the way." Jack reached out, shook the older man's limp hand. "Don't look so concerned, Mr. Griner, Ray and I were never much for graveside ceremonies."

Outside in his delivery van, Jack felt utterly drained. He leaned back a moment to rest and catch his breath. The Kidd brothers believed in God and a hereafter, but they weren't phonies who bought every social convention. Ray was either already where he was going next, or he would be after the funeral.

Noticing the photostat of the autopsy report he had carried out from the mortuary, Jack unfolded and read it. The amount of detail was as gross and difficult to read as he had anticipated, but it was certainly thorough.

Then he sat up straight, surprised by a single detail and obliged to consider its ramifications for several more minutes before driving home.

He wasn't angry at Ray, merely startled by how human the detail revealed his little bro to have been.

Somehow, Jack realized by the time his old house was in view, Ray's lie had convinced him of what he should do in regard to Rachel and the children.

It remained to be seen, he understood, if it would have the same effect on her.

"Sorry to descend on you with the flock," Rachel called to the woman standing in the doorway to an inner office. Rache motioned Nick into the outer office and steered Tricia inside by means of wrists clasped above the child's head. "I'm Rachel Sayre, and I couldn't get a baby-sitter for the hour or so we'd be away."

The private detective, a stunning brunette, gestured to follow her into her personal office. "Two children don't make much of a 'flock' " she said, smiling.

"I plan to work on that very shortly," Rachel said from the doorway. "If I can get Nick, my eldest, to keep Trish corraled, is it okay to leave them out here?"

Craig Ryce nodded immediately, perceiving that this job was more than just a trace. "Of course." she smiled for Nick only, looking incredibly sexy to Rachel. "So long as it isn't a huge imposition on *you*, Nick," she said.

"Gosh, no!" the boy said, for all the world as if watching his baby sister was his favorite thing in the world.

Tricia saying, "I don't have to do anything you want," to Nick was the last thing either woman heard until Rachel was sitting across from Craig.

The latter offered a cigarette box, was politely declined, and took one for herself. "How did you know I'm Craig?" she asked, touching the flame from a desk lighter to a Chesterfield King. "I could have been a file clerk."

"The woman I spoke to on the phone," Rachel

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replied, “understood my urgency and was far too professional just to stroll out of the office and break an appointment. And no one else was in the office but you.”

“Amazing, Holmes,” Craig said with raised eyebrows, “or perhaps, since I’m the detective, I should have said Watson. How did you happen to call me, by the way, Mrs. Sayre? Were you referred to me?”

“It was your name, Craig,” Rachel said. “And I’m Rachel. I used to read novels by a mystery writer whose detectives included an Irish lawyer named John J. Malone and a hip couple called Jake and Helene Justus, and the author’s name was Craig Rice, with an *i*. I didn’t know until she died that she was a woman writer.” She grinned. “I see from your face that you know all this.”

Craig, wearing a navy-blue pantsuit, rested one leg on her desk. “Once I was attending law school and my name was something different—I’m not sure I even remember what it was. Well, I started hanging out at the neighborhood pub, arguing cases there more than learning law in class. The old man had a hemorrhage when I flunked out and he tossed me out, too. Cost me a tidy little inheritance. So I figured he’d *really* be embarrassed if I became a P.I. and ignored his name—threw it away like he did me. Since Craig Rice’s characters were all detectives, in a way, and Malone drank better than any fish, I borrowed her name and spelled it a little differently. I was a Rice fan, too, you see.”

“Did it work?” Rachel asked eagerly. “Does what you do embarrass your father as much as you hoped?”

“S’hard to say,” Craig said. “He died before I even

got my name in the paper"—she opened her deep-brown eyes widely—"so now I can believe it did, when I'm pissed at him again, or *not* believe it when I'm inclined to feel guilty."

The topic turned to the reason for Rachel's visit after she heard Nick shouting at Trish and Rachel had to go look into the matter. And because she and Craig had hit it off so well, Rachel found herself telling a great deal of the story to the detective.

Craig proved to be such a good listener, Rachel felt she should comment on it. "I doubt most people, especially strangers, would be able to sit at their desks and hear such a fantastic yarn without giving some sign of their incredulity. Before Jack finally confided in me I wouldn't have thought I could hear it without laughing, so thanks for being such a fine audience."

For a moment that stretched into several seconds, Craig Ryce clearly considered how she wanted to respond. In repose, her beauty became even more obvious. Taller than Rachel, she also had a longer head with a prominent nose, balanced by a higher and wider forehead and a mouth suitable either to guffaws of hilarity or regal propriety. There was a languor to her posture, as she conversed, that suggested more coiled readiness to spring into action than real sloth, or lethargy. The pantsuit deemphasized her bodily curves at the same time that there was substance, a sufficiency to satisfy any male. And her shoulder-length dark-brown hair was clearly the enviable variety that fell into attractive shape with a shake of her head.

"First," she told Rachel, "I took from my brief legal training the view that a client worth having

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was one worth believing in—and since I'm *not* an attorney, it doesn't really matter what my beliefs might be, since you aren't going to jail even if you're lying or nutty as a candy bar. Second, you're not after a psychic—maybe you *should* be—you're asking me for information I can probably find, and within a reasonable amount of time. Third," Craig began ticking items off on her fingers, "I can corroborate your claim of the entire Kidd family living in terror by ringing your hubby-to-be and asking him—but I see no point in that when his brother just died unexpectedly and he was in his early thirties. Fourth, I'm a romantic at heart, especially when my client wants a happy second marriage, has two terrific kids, and certainly doesn't want to endanger them by *making* that second marriage."

"I didn't say anything about that," Rachel broke in hastily.

Craig smiled. "I don't even have to be Watson to deduce that," Craig said. "So what do you expect to find out about the man who built the Kidd house?"

"Perhaps he was an infamous killer, at least the black sheep in the family—so that there might be a biography of him or something." Rachel fiddled with her handbag, aware she hadn't really thought this through at all. "Perhaps he was murdered and he believed his family killed him—"

"So his spirit wants revenge on them," Craig finished for her. "Well, who knows?" she said to alleviate Rachel's embarrassment. "But I have a little trouble, myself, with an infamous murderer who's also successful enough to build such a big, durable house." She laughed. "These days, of course, there

are enough cutthroat executives and politicians around that I'm forgetting the old days probably had their own share of evil millionaires."

"I just want to free Jack and any other members of his family who come along from living in fear—or what happened to Ray, his brother—whether we can marry safely or not." Rachel drew out her checkbook and pen, blinked away unexpected tears.

"Don't bother with the check as yet," Craig said, rising and moving around to Rachel, who also stood. "I want to do some preliminary work that won't take me long and won't cost me anything but gas money." She escorted a startled Rachel to the door with a hand on her back. "Maybe I can help pretty quickly—or maybe you won't be able to afford me."

Rachel glanced at the P.I., anxious again.

"It was a joke, Rachel," Craig said, and began helping Tricia on with her coat. "Look around this outer office. I'll be glad to have a few things to do." She patted Nick's cheek and again gave him her look of undivided interest and attention. "I'll call you when I have something—and meanwhile, Nick, I'm counting on you to look after the women in your family."

"Don't worry!" Nick exclaimed. He tried to regain his cool and blushed anyway.

Walking back to the car with the children, Rachel realized she was impressed by Craig Ryce, too. Things *would* work out.

But what would she do, Rachel mused, if Craig found out Jack was a descendant of Jack the Ripper?

"Oh, good, you're home," Rachel said into the phone. She had sensed Jack needed her for moral support and stopped at a pay booth to phone him. "Was it as awful at the funeral home as it usually is for things like this?"

"There are no things *like* this," Jack said, "thank God. I'm really glad to hear your voice, and I have both a question for you and a fact I learned about ol' Ray."

She glanced out of the booth to make sure Nick and Tricia were nearby. Needing a few things, she had stopped at the grocery so she wouldn't be inclined to leave the kids in the car while she used a service-station phone. "Ask and tell me respectively, Mr. Kidd," she said, "but Tricia and Nick are with me at the grocery, so I can't talk long."

"Well, I'll ask the question," Jack said, "but don't answer until I tell you the fact. Okay?"

Rachel sensed Jack's problem with doing this quickly, which meant it was important to him; but Tricia had taken to pulling out greeting cards from a rack and stuffing them back in after she'd seen the pictures. "Okay," she agreed, tapping on the phone booth window and shaking her head "No" at Trish.

"I have to call the funeral director back right away. Should Ray's services be tomorrow—or the day after Christmas?" He added hastily, "Now comes the fact. Something I learned in a copy of Ray's autopsy report."

Rachel's attention leaped back to Jack with the

realization that she had failed to think about a potential conflict between their wedding—if it was still on—and Ray's funeral. *Dear Jesus*, she thought, *has any other couple had such a choice as this?* "Go on with the fact," she said softly, wondering what she should say, what she and Jack should do.

She heard him draw in a steadying breath. "I know what I said on your machine, that considering how Ray got a vasectomy to keep from placing any children he fathered in jeopardy here at the house, maybe we shouldn't marry at all. But the report from the coroner's office shows he checked out absolutely everything about poor Ray, and that's the news I have for you."

Rachel, in a very small voice, asked, "What?"

"Darling, Ray had a *normal sperm count*. He was one hundred percent capable of fathering children." He let that sink in. "I'm not angry at him. He'd been drinking, he was drawn to you and jealous of me, and very hurt. It was the most human thing he did, and of course he didn't actually *believe* he was about to die, he trusted the hate-haunt to stop him, not *force* him to pull the trigger! He would have straightened out his lie later."

She didn't really hear much of what Jack said toward the end. All she was aware of was that Jack still wanted her to marry him, and that she yearned to do it—soon. It dawned on her that the sacrifice Ray had claimed had influenced her in just the way it had Jack—

But logically, since it had turned out to be nothing but a lie, the real truth ought to be equally persuasive. And if a promiscuous man like Ray had never had the surgery he'd boasted about, he hadn't

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really been terrified by the haunt until it attacked him. There was also the fact that she, Jack, and the kids were *not* immoral and *wouldn't* set out to taunt and provoke the damned entity. That meant they might spend long years together as a family with nothing worse happening than an occasional haunting. Meanwhile, Craig was on the case; who knew what the detective might come up with that would—well, exorcise it forever

"I'm ready to answer your question, Jack," she said into the mouthpiece of the phone. She drew in her own deep breath. "If there were people—family members—who needed to get here for Ray's funeral, I'd say you have to wait. But there aren't, and he isn't coming back to life the day after Christmas—or any other one. You know that. So—what time is his funeral tomorrow?"

"You're marvelous," Jack said, "and I love you. I'll get the hour from Griner's and let you know. But I want you to ride with me."

Neither of them knew, yet, if they would marry so soon after poor Ray was laid to a rest he had certainly earned. But Rachel also knew, now, that it was likely, and that it was definitely going to happen sooner or later. They *would* be together!

At least, Rachel thought while she collected the kids and shopped, unless the "hate-haunt" registered some last-second objections. The kind they wouldn't be able to resist.

Chapter VII

1

Nick was happy again that it was Christmas vacation. Now he was able to lie on his back in bed and read for a while before dinner.

Besides, he had a Mounds bar he'd bought at the grocery—unbeknownst to Mom—to keep him company and stave off the early onslaught of starvation.

Life (according to the philosophy of Nicholas Sayre) did not get much better than time to himself, where only his own mind or body could make a demand he didn't want to obey (and could often ignore); days when there was no dumb schoolwork to do (he intended to pass a law when he grew up making everybody realize that *school* was the only place a kid should have to do *schoolwork*, especially if a teacher called it

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“homework”); and reading as well as eating while he lay flat on his back.

Having already eschewed books for children as boring and unimaginative—well, they might be all right for real *kids*—Nick had taken a whack at a book of philosophy and concluded the purpose of the subject was Figuring Out How to Be Happy and Not Hurt Too Many Others. Which seemed, in his eight-year-old opinion, just about as dumb as adults could get. The major purpose of growing up, Nick imagined, was discovering the answer philosophers sought—and *he* had figured it out right after he had learned to read! Big deal, philosophy. You stretched out by yourself and read and ate—what was hard about that? Oh, it was good to have a mom and maybe a sister, though a dog would be better, and it would be nice to have a dad and, when adults said you were old enough, both a computer—writing was good, too—and a car.

But this was the basic deal, what he had right now, and he couldn't conceivably believe anything or anyone else would ever change it.

Nick, I'm counting on you looking after the women in your family.

Who was it who had said that? For a moment Nick's concentration was broken, he didn't remember, and he gazed around his bedroom to try to remember.

Willowy long not-man body. Eyes the color of both chunks in his Mounds bar. Rising-and-pushing-out not-man's chest. Mouth that would not kiss like Mom's (not that Mom wasn't okay, but she was only Mom), he just *knew* that.

It was the detective-lady who'd looked to him to

help “his women”—and why hadn’t Mom gone to a *real* detective for whatever it was she needed, like in books and on TV? Guys who were in top shape and carried guns could be detectives. Why hadn’t Mom known that?

Nick wondered how he could have remembered what someone had said to him, out of the blue, without automatically knowing who’d spoken. He thought of what he *had* memorized about the detective-lady—Craig, that was her name.

Then he thought about her some more while he just lay motionless on his side, staring into space but not seeing anything tangible in his room.

Mom’ll call me real soon to come eat, he thought, sitting up and feeling a little guilty about thinking of Craig kissing him in the way different from Mom. He licked coconut from the candy bar off his upper lip, realized in his busy mind Mom must have gone to the detective-lady about something involving Ray, Jack’s brother. *Dead* brother, he corrected himself tidily. Weird that he was, since they had seen him a lot lately.

Dying, the business of being dead, that was one topic Nick Sayre didn’t enjoy thinking about and messing around with, but he’d had to back when his father “passed away,” as adults put it, and now he had to mull it over again. (*I forgot math*, Nick recalled; *I hate thinking about it too.*) “The business of being dead,” he said aloud, under his breath, thinking that if he wrote about it sometime maybe he’d get to liking it more. Part of the business was memorizing the expressions adults used. Passes were usually good things, they got you into movies free and a few older guys he knew talked about making

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passes at girls, whatever that meant exactly (*not-man bodies; rising-and-pushing-out not-man's chests*). Nick supposed he'd have to go to Ray's funeral, but he doubted anyone would give him a movie pass. Oh, Mom would *ask* if he "wanted" to go; that was part of the dead business—being polite even to kids; hugging; somebody acting brave; maybe being told to go look at the body with the rouge and lipstick—but being *asked* if he wanted to go to the dentist was the only thing he could think of that was, maybe, worse.

The thing was, Mom couldn't keep paying for the baby-sister the way she'd done lately and have money left for groceries, so Nick knew he'd answer "Sure." At least being *ordered* to go no longer applied to him as it did Trish, who'd be taken along or left at home depending on what Mom decided.

For a few seconds more, Nick was curious about what had improved his status to the extent that his mother believed she should *ask* him his preference, right before she told him what he was going to do anyway. Surely it wasn't just that he'd gotten bigger and could fight Mom to have his own way with a chance of winning, since he'd cut off his hand before he ever hit Mom. Whatever the dumb adult reason, it seemed likely that he would know, someday, when he was grown up, by the time he said "No" to Mom and she just nodded and let him do what he pleased.

"Get washed up for dinner, kids," Nick's mother shouted from downstairs.

No, Nick said in his mind, experimentally. Grinning, he went across the hall to wash his hands (which was all Mom meant for him to do, as a rule). "Okay," he called down, en route.

Maybe, he thought, simply turning the soap over and over in his palms, then replacing it in the soap dish, maybe parents began to talk to you about stuff and ask your preference because they noticed how much older you were than your little sisters. Almost nine, Nick sometimes saw Tricia as someone who hadn't yet gone through a doorway from little kidhood to bigger kidhood. Very dimly he remembered being where she was now, and how it was mostly okay for adults to make all the decisions, because you knew your own folks really wanted the best for you and chased away most of the weird stuff—like the business of being dead.

But what your mom or dad couldn't protect you from, because they had no memory of it, were the things you had in your mind either from the time (or no-time) before you were born or from the time when you were a tiny baby. All the moms Nick had seen treated babies like they were blind and couldn't think or wonder stuff at all. And they never gave a thought to the stuff from no-time because they didn't remember it—just as Nick realized he was forgetting the details about what or maybe who he had been then. When you were Trish's age, though, and you sensed that doorway was waiting for you, you just couldn't make yourself learn enough of the facts adults were trying to teach you and give up your really oldest memories—those involving the way anything and everything could be true. And maybe was, once.

Which was how, Nick knew as he trotted downstairs, Tricia could get visits from the mean old whatever-it-was in Jack's house. He didn't doubt at all it was real, in a way. Wherever it came from, it ex-

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isted next door to where his baby sister actually lived. All it did was take one step and it was there. Poor Trish.

The evening meal was a “clean-out,” Mom’s term for warming up leftovers and emptying out the fridge.

Rachel, as always, had cooked at least one thing new in order to pep up dinner. Knowing a funeral would be a strange and tedious affair for the kids, she had placed two hot-dog buns on Nick’s plate and one on Tricia’s to announce the treat. While they took their seats she made two trips to the kitchen and back, making sure they had all of what her own father had called “the makings”—mustard, catsup, horseradish, chili sauce, some chopped onion on a saucer, even sauerkraut. In no way did she see their hot dogs as a bribe to go to the mortuary with Jack and her; Rachel knew who was boss in her family, and she made no apologies about it. She just liked giving her children a treat now and then, and hot dogs certainly weren’t expensive in comparison with many of the other main dishes she frequently served.

“When’s Uncle Ray’s funeral?” Nick asked. Rachel wasn’t sure he was averting his gaze and showing how smart he was or concentrating on dressing his sandwiches precisely the way he preferred them to be. “Tomorrow?”

“Why, yes,” Rachel said, trying to catch the boy’s gaze. He had never been able to keep from grinning ear to ear or giggling when he was being a little smart-ass and had to look at her. *Thinks I’m paying him to go*, she decided; *how did I get one so bright?* “Did you ask because you want to attend, and be there for Jack?”

He glanced up, unruly hair standing up at the crown. "Sure," he answered with a straight face. "Wouldn't that be the thing to do?"

Rachel nodded slowly. "Yes, it would be, Nick." For the life of her she couldn't be sure whether she had just lost one of Nick's mind games or not. She noticed Tricia was trying to pour more catsup on an already gorily saturated hot dog and eased the fat bottle from her small hand with a whispered "I think you have enough."

"Mom," Nick said.

"Yes, darling?" Rachel spread mustard on her sandwich, picked it up cautiously.

"Did Ray commit suicide?"

Rachel's grip on the hot dog slipped and it fell apart on her plate. She glanced instinctively in Tricia's direction and the girl stared blankly back at her. She turned to her son. "That's hard to answer," she said. "He might have, in a way. But how could you guess a thing like that?"

Nick also looked toward Trish, and she was already prepared to meet his gaze.

"He was the saddest man I ever saw, that's all," Nick said.

2

Two entities haunted the old Kidd house the night before Ray's funeral, and each, in different ways, was haunted by it—and by the memories of many kinds that clung like shadows in every room, or stalked the long, gloomy hallways.

Each entity was aware of the other but remained in his own part of the house, attempting no contact

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despite many things they had in common, dominated by all those they certainly did not share.

Strangely, this was the one occasion on which they might have achieved a meeting of the minds—at least, in the broader meaning of the word—for the reason that each entity, the living as well as the never precisely alive or dead, grieved.

Jack sat in the kitchen chair where, across from him, Ray had joined him in both their best and most intensely guarded conversations. He was aware of but not in the least preoccupied by the wall against which Ray had perished. Had he seen a ghostly replay, a remnant of his brother, he wouldn't have been afraid. Each man had seen the other at his worst and at his best in a brotherhood that, by the nature of their lives, had been exceptionally, almost abnormally, close. Jack realized he had never had any reason, in life, to be frightened of Ray—or vice versa—and that there would not be a reason to be afraid of Ray in death.

Maybe, Jack thought, reaching for their final notebook in which they had jotted down the last of their mutual secrets, *he can scribble something to me*. Very little, just then, would have given him more relief than being “haunted” by ol’ Ray. He would be reassured that the spirit of the most spirited character Jack had ever known was surviving and that they might yet be together again. Taking a pen, Jack emulated Ray’s style by writing, on the top page of the open notebook, “Yo, Bro, what’s happening?” Then he paused and added, “Miss you.”

And he rose, blinking, to go over to the fridge. Ray might not have drunk his last beer. Jack de-

cided drinking it would be a sort of personal tribute, and there was a long night to get through before . . . tomorrow. Still to prepare was the eulogy he'd told Fullerton Griner, the undertaker, he would present himself. No man of the cloth had known Ray, not as an adult.

Jack found the Bud—no “lite” for Raymond, who'd liked (as he sometimes said) his women full-breasted and his beers full-bodied—and gratefully opened it. The funeral was set, now, for two o'clock in the afternoon. Jack took a swig the way his bro would have, instead of pouring it in his own usual fashion. But he got down a glass, because there were no refills and this beer could go down *fast*.

Upstairs, far from Jack, the haunt once more fought against the impulse to check on the surviving Kidd brother and make sure he was all right. It was doubtful he would be able to refrain, much longer, from checking.

Regret, regret, regret. He had gone against his own principles, his own *interests*!

An altered emotion, too:

Self, hatred, self-hatred, self-hatred.

Until Jack married, he was the single hold the hate-haunt had on existence. Its; his own. That was what had happened, what *mattered*.

If he could only have literally stood up and searched for a suitable weapon, he might have killed himself.

If he could *die*—but the haunt knew no way that could happen. As long as he possessed any memory, hadn't he *always been*? So far as his own understanding of himself went, even if Jack Kidd died of a heart attack before he got married—which prob-

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ably wasn't possible—his own existence, technically, would continue.

But it would be an existence of ghastly agony with no one to direct, protect, torture, or even tease and frighten, presumably for eternity (whatever *that* was).

The haunt doubled his fists in a paroxysm of indecision, knowing he had to do *something*, and soon.

But when Jack was married and that woman and those children were members of the Kidd family, *oh*, someone would pay!

Jack, meanwhile, located the family Bible—it had been Mother's; he wondered why he had never really read it when there was so little solace or inspiration elsewhere—and brought it out to the kitchen table. In it, he believed, he would find something appropriate to say about Ray in his eulogy.

There was new handwriting on the top sheet of the notebook. Jack saw it just as he was sitting, and almost overturned his glass of beer.

"Regrets, regrets, regrets," the message said in very faint letters written with his own pen. No one had signed it.

It wasn't put there by Ray's spirit hand, however, because Jack knew Ray's bold scrawl extremely well. He realized it was probably as near to an apology as the haunt would ever come. *Fuck you*, Jack thought; *you aren't forgiven*.

Then he opened the Bible at random and, sighing, began to scan it.

It occurred to Jack just at that point that he had managed to blank from his mind the obligation to return to Griner's in an hour. For what all the peo-

ple with whom he and Ray had rarely been allowed to associate called the “viewing”—as if a new horror film titled *Ray Lies Dead in a Casket* was having a sneak preview.

Maybe the ol’ “hate-haunt,” as Ray had goaded it, hadn’t just done bad things to them. Civilized, so-called modern human beings who let themselves be exposed to such nightmares were as stuck with inhumane traditions and principles as the haunt itself.

I’ll go, Jack thought. But only because there’ll probably be nobody else there at all.

3

“I should have known you two would want to go,” Jack said to Tricia and Nick as Rachel directed them into the area behind the front seat, then climbed into the van next to Jack.

“*Want to*” isn’t quite it, Jack, Nick thought. He and his sister found perches atop built-in shelving where the most fragile packages generally went.

Rachel gave Jack the sort of perfunctory kiss they shared when the kids were around. But she continued to stare at him, concerned. “How bad was it for you last night?”

“Pretty lonely,” he replied, resuming the drive to the mortuary. His serious eyes were bloodshot and darted everywhere, Rachel saw; he seemed both nervous and melancholy, and also acutely careful, for her and the children. It was as if his closer proximity to death had made him more intensely aware of all human frailty. “Mr. Griner was right about nobody knowing about Ray without an obit. And no-

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body came by during the so-called viewing hours but Griner's assistant and me."

"At least there was an obit in the paper this morning," Rachel pointed out. "I saved it, if you want to keep it."

"Thanks, but I never understood why people save those things," Jack said. He glanced at her, smiled soberly. "I'm pretty sure I won't forget that he died"—his voice broke, but he completed his remark anyway—"or when. As for the rest of it, including the funeral, I *hope* I forget it all. Except you, Tricia, and Nick being there for me." He glanced back with a grimace of a smile, but the children were staring out their windows.

Suitably, in Jack's opinion, the day was a wintry gray mess. There was too much humidity for it to seem cold, but whenever he turned down the heat in the van a chill crept through it like a damp blanket drawn up to their necks. *Or over our faces*, Jack thought. Maybe it was just him, but it created the impression in his mind that they had a fifth traveling companion, one they simply couldn't see—and that the weather could be ordered to make up its mind and dump new snow on them and the entire city whenever he wished.

"Darling," Rachel said, touching his right forearm, "I wanted to be there with you last night. But I couldn't have gotten my baby-sitter on such brief notice, and I really thought *two* trips to Griner's might be too many for the children anyway."

He patted her hand. "I'm not even certain *one* trip isn't too much," Jack murmured. "I'm grateful you're all with me, but kids shouldn't be exposed to death—just to the happy things of life. As long as possible."

And there it was, out in the open. The hard question he and Rachel would have to answer very shortly after the funeral. Jack had spoken on impulse, but honestly. He wasn't sure at that moment whether he regretted it or not.

"Jack," said a light, unchanged voice from behind the adults, "I don't think you're right. About kids being shown just the happy things." Nick, aware his mom was glaring at him, added, "I've thought about this stuff a lot lately. I'm not being a smart aleck, like you call it sometimes, Mom, I'm really not."

"Let him finish, Rache," Jack put in. His gaze met the boy's in the rearview mirror. "Please?"

Nick saw her almost infinitesimal nod. He leaned forward to be sure they both heard him. "There's probably a whole lot I'm too young for; most of the time I know that. And there's much more Trish oughtn't to know that *I* know. Right?" Nick paused, heard no objection. "Well, once we didn't know nothing."

"Anything," Rachel corrected him.

"Right, we didn't know crap." Nick's blond hair, plastered into place when they left home, was popping up a strand at a time as he shifted around and got excited. "Then you taught us to talk, and take a step or two, and how to pee in the toilet and not our pants."

"Go on," Jack said with quiet interest and attentiveness. "I want to see where you're headed, Nick."

The boy's face was right between Jack's and his mother's, suddenly, his breath warm and fresh. "You said kids should just have fun, see the happy stuff, and that was nice, Jack—but you're wrong.

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Because once you start teachin' us, you gotta teach us *all* of it, you gotta *keep goin'*—adults, I mean, not just teachers—and you can't *ever* stop!" Nick's enthusiasm at being listened to, allowed to have his say, was still in control, but just barely. "Like I said, maybe we have to learn it a little at a time, when we're ready. But for kids t'do better than adults, we have to see you live—and we have to see you die." He paused, sensing he had gone too far. "And the things in between, too," he added.

"I hope you're not in a big hurry about the latter," Rachel said without turning to him. All three of them knew what she meant.

"But that's exactly the part we *are* teaching him this afternoon," Jack told her. "People can sugar-coat it all they want, honey, speak about the flowers, the 'services,' old times, who's there and who isn't—but the center of attention will be my brother Ray, *in death*." Again Jack sought Nick's eyes in the rearview mirror, found them. "And all the ghastly but wonderful mystery that means to each person there, including each child. To say anything else is to be phony as hell. Right, Nick?"

Nick grinned. "Right, Jack!" He patted his mother's shoulder guiltily.

"Are we *almost* there?" Tricia asked, squirming with virtually terminal boredom.

At the mortuary, after Jack led them to the right parlor and inside the room, they found no living thing awaiting them. Rachel hesitated, then checked the register to the left of the entrance. "Jack!" she hissed, and caught his sleeve. "Two people have paid their respects."

While the kids dawdled and hung back, Jack

turned and took a step to check the names for himself. "The scrawl on the first line is my name," he said softly to Rachel. "This Mr. Simmons was Ray's last boss, I think." He glanced back to her, aware of how beautiful she was today, how perfect despite her limited budget—and the likelihood that, if she married him, she might never have the clothes he felt she richly desired. What a tragedy ol' Ray had never known a woman's love. *Doesn't that make him the real virgin?* he wondered. "Want to pay your respects," he asked her, "and get it over with?"

"Not exactly," Rachel admitted in a whisper, preceding Jack. "Take my hands, kids," she added. Tricia did so at once, while Nick pretended not to hear her. Both he and his mother had known she was kidding him about *that* instruction. Tricia was doing a sort of nervous, stride-by-stride skip when they approached the casket.

Nick looked fleetingly into it, then sidled expressionlessly away to read the labels on the meager number of flowers. With their arms around each other's waist, Rachel and Jack took the boy's place and she peered down at Ray's poor corpse-face. She tensed and couldn't, for a moment, understand why the youngish man whose body lay in the coffin looked so little like the person whom she had thought would become her brother-in-law. Then she realized this face was expressionless, and more: It was relaxed, and, of course, the dancing eyes with the near-the-surface hint of terror were closed. She had never seen a composed, tension-free Raymond Kidd in the relatively short time she'd known him.

She hugged Jack, who was microscopically be-

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ginning to lean more heavily on her. "God bless Ray," she said under her breath, and Jack whispered, "Amen."

Together, while Tricia and Nick periodically drew near the two of them before their youthful energy took them away, they inspected names on the flower tags, taking their time about it because they mostly wanted to be close to the casket in case others arrived for the funeral.

Not long before a lady entered the parlor and unobtrusively began playing an organ Jack and Rachel hadn't even noticed, the additional mourners filtered in. Jack was filled with a relief he found unaccountable and silly, as each of three people approached Rachel and him, though they had not come as a group.

The first was an aging teacher who had taught and liked Ray. Retired now, she kept saying, "He had such *potential*," with a tone of voice suggesting that something or someone must have kept Ray from fulfilling it and that, therefore, he had died young. Jack wasn't sure she was wrong.

The other two callers were pretty young women who spoke, independently, of knowing Ray well.

The second of the women was clearly in her last trimester of pregnancy, a fact that—coupled with her husbandless arrival—instantly caused Jack an enormous surge of apprehension. *I mustn't let her even hint that the child might be Ray's*, he thought, remembering his feeling that a fifth presence had come to the mortuary with them. *She could be someone the hate-haunt overlooked.*

"Thank you so much for coming today," he said,

hastily introducing himself and Rachel. He noticed Fullerton Griner entering the parlor and drifted toward him. "I must have a word with—"

"Your brother was a swell guy," she interrupted. He could not even remember the name she had given them. "Ray and I dated—"

"Forgive me," Jack blurted, more frightened for her and the child she carried, "but I must—"

"Until my old boyfriend came back to town," the woman finished obliviously. "I married him around a year ago. I didn't think he'd want to come today, you know. But I liked Ray a lot, even if there was no big spark between us."

A year ago, Jack thought, relieved. Ray had never gone in for adultery. He and Rachel chatted with the young woman until Mr. Griner moved to the front and the organist took that as her cue to stop playing.

Whatever Griner said went through Jack's mind as a blur of sound. He touched the page of notes he had prepared for his eulogy, almost surprised he hadn't lost it from the pocket inside his jacket. The only things he liked in the world in that instant were Rachel, seated next to him on the right, Tricia to her right, and Nick, companionably, to his left. Griner, before introducing Jack as "Mr. Kidd's beloved brother," said services would end after the eulogy and added that interment would take place "shortly after Christmas." *Without us*, Jack thought. *Enough is enough.*

Then he was rising to step forward—near Ray's remains—and he wondered if he could really let his little bro go, today or after Christmas or anytime. But it was his job now to speak truly and lovingly

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about Ray for the benefit of those who had attended to pay their respects.

But he glanced into the casket at Ray, wondering when he turned to face front why in the world he'd volunteered to undergo such additional misery.

"All of Ray Kidd's life," Jack began, seeking and finding Rachel's eloquent eyes, "his only constant was his brother. Me. Ray, of course, was mine, until I met the woman I love and who loves me. Part of what my brother had to endure in his young life is suggested in the seventeenth chapter of Proverbs, and the following is the first of the two salient verses: 'A cruel messenger shall be sent against him.' "

Jack paused to collect himself, and placed one hand on the corpse's nearest arm. He drew in a shaky breath. "Ray was, for our times, a decent man I will miss the rest of my own life, and he deserved much b-better." Jack raised his weeping eyes heavenward. "Perhaps now R-Ray can ask the reason for the second verse I selected: 'A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is b-born for adversity.' "

He squeezed Ray's lifeless arm and strode back to his seat between Rachel and Nick, resisting the impulse to run.

They, plus little Trish, were those who responded to Mr. Griner's warning that the services were concluded and the casket would be closed and sealed in "a short while." They walked forward at an unrushed pace Jack set, the kids' gazes on his carefully controlled face along with their mother's. He was extremely pale now.

"Tell the folks 'hi' for me," he told Ray. "Caitlin, too." That was right, this was the second time in less than a month that he'd had to send flowers to

a mortuary. *I should have made Ray get in the van and go pay his respects to her*, Jack thought with regret. People rarely had to cope with someone familiar passing away; then, when it happened and when the shock or ordeal was over, people stuck all the emotional reminders back into a mental cubby-hole so that the *next* death came as just as much a shock. "G'bye . . . little Bro." Jack edged back a step, clumsily turned around.

"It'd be okay to visit me sometime," Nick said in his quietest voice. "I got around to liking you, Uncle Ray."

"We'll meet again," Rachel whispered. "Someday. Have the eggnog ready."

Tricia, on tiptoe to peek in, said, "Your princess says bye for now."

An awful groan of sadness and loss sighed a strange path past the coffin. Everyone left in the funeral parlor jumped, chilled by the sound of eerie grief, and those who had reached the door spun to identify the origin of the noise.

The pregnant woman, Rachel Sayre, and Jack Kidd caught a momentary glimpse of something wispy, feather-light, wafting a foot or so above the impassive and imperturbable body in the casket.

Rachel and her daughter were the only living people who saw, additionally, a rain of petals falling from most of the flowers. Except, they didn't "fall"; they both descended and then, caught by a vagrant breeze, fluttered to the carpet.

"We must talk," Rachel told Jack, "when we get to my place. All four of us."

Jack nodded, said quietly, "I agree." But his ex-

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pression was even more mournful as he preceded Rachel and the kids to the door.

4

Driving back to Rachel's house, Jack felt numb and apprehensive, as if the final chapter in his life was being written, or perhaps an afterword to the ending Ray's funeral represented to him. He might have felt drained, too, inclined to relax into a pile of useless goo, except he realized this early-evening get-together could conceivably turn out to be the last one he spent with three people he had come to love with all his heart.

That damned haunt had seen to it with that blood-chilling wail Rachel and the kids, too, had heard. How could a mother as loving as Rachel even consider allowing her children to live in an old mausoleum in which invisible monstrosities could make their presence known out of the blue—a vicious, vindictive being mad as a hatter that insisted on being the last arbiter of what was acceptable in the home? If Rachel was merely a fellow employee of the delivery service and she had asked him what he thought she and her children should do, there was no doubt in Jack's mind what he would have advised.

He let her tell him and the kids to take seats at her dining-room table, then waited silently as she brought Nick and Tricia ice cream—it was too soon for dinner, Jack realized, stunned that the afternoon horror hadn't run through the evening to eleven or twelve o'clock—and coffee for him and her.

"All right," Rachel said, glancing around, "put up your hand if you like Jack a lot."

Both boy and girl unhesitatingly raised their hands.

Rachel lifted her hand, smiled. "Now leave your hand up if you love him a little bit or think you might *love* the guy as your father if we were all together every day."

All their hands stayed up. Nick, clowning to cover his embarrassment, made a pumping motion of teasing indecision; but his small hand eventually stayed in the air.

Jack grinned, even though he wasn't sure how definite it was, and raised his hand too. "I'll never forget this," he said, meaning it. "This might be the best possible help for me this evening. But each of you knows now, without doubt, you wouldn't have me alone to get used to." Jack lowered his hand, and was the first to do so. "I'm doubtful I can go ahead with our plans and not hate myself for it."

"Don't talk about hate," Rachel told him. Her tone was almost exactly the one she assumed when she corrected Nick and Trish. "I know that love wins over all and no one can talk me out of it. It's always been that way, and it will be even at your house. The four of us can make it a nice place to live."

"Look at what happened to Ray, darling," Jack argued. "And we loved each other."

Rachel felt her head start to shake "no," and she didn't do it. "Yes, there was love between you guys—but Ray had grown envious of both your

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health and, frankly, me—or how I was accepted when his girl wasn't. Surely you could see that."

"And he was really unhappy," Nick argued. "But you're happy with Mom and us. That makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure it does," Jack said, looking dubious despite his words, "but that's in normal circumstances. Without a . . . a haunt who has to have its way."

"But the old man is *sorry* about things." Little blond-curled Tricia, basically amazed to have a part in an adult discussion, gazed openly at each of their faces. "Didn't you see how sad he looked today?"

The others stared at the child in silence. "I don't think anybody but you saw that, Trishie," Nick told her quite seriously. "But I believe you, Sis."

Rachel watched Tricia, happier, spoon more of her melting ice cream into her mouth. She turned to Jack with pride in her kids. "Afraid you're stuck with marrying Old Mom the day after Christmas. The only change in plans I'd like is to have the wedding at the church where Nick attends Sunday school." She paused. "I spoke with Reverend Blowers today before we left, and he can do it. Said almost no one ever chose that day." She paused, studying Jack for his reaction. "I'd just feel even better if we asked God's blessing. It's an ordinary Protestant church."

"The church part is fine," Jack said. "I'm still anxious about the kids."

Tricia spoke up again. "If the old man—the haunt thing—just wants children, he won't do nothin' much to us—'cause Nick 'n' me, we *are* children!"

For the next full minute, while everybody was

laughing, Jack's only bleak thought had to do with how much his little bro would have enjoyed *that* one from the princess. "Who can argue with logic as clear and reasonable as Tricia's?" he said.

Rachel rose and gave him a big kiss, Trish a small one (plus a hug), and Nick shook his hand.

Perhaps it could work out, Jack thought, agreeing to stay for dinner when he was asked. After all, how hateful could the "hate-haunt" be when it even approved of this marvelous family?

Chapter VIII

1

The day before Christmas, there were a great many deliveries for Jack to make. With a real desire to do more than his part—if possible—to support not only Rachel but Nick and Tricia, he knew better than to slack off at a crucial period for his employer. But there was a great deal to be done in the two days before the wedding, both personally and in preparing two upstairs bedrooms for the children.

In the latter regard Jack hadn't wanted to appear cowardly to Rachel and had told her he'd clear "all the stuff" out of Ray's and his rooms and let the kids have them. Rachel and he could use a bedroom on the second floor.

Rache, however, wouldn't hear of it. "I'd worry constantly that they were slipping out the front

door," she had told Jack. "Your street is much busier than mine." She would, Rachel explained, "feel infinitely better if they have to sneak downstairs and past our bedroom, then make a long trek through the living room."

Besides, she'd added, "you'll have enough to adjust to with Ray gone and your new role as daddy without getting used to a different room in your own house." She had sniggered then. "This way, you can just look at me as a sort of permanent roomie—and bedmate!"

Rachel acts as if there's nothing else to be concerned about, Jack mused, driving, *than getting the wedding over and the three of them moving in.* He'd picked up his wedding suit on special order from the dry cleaners after a madcap day of deliveries and was headed back to Regional. Putting in a cursory appearance at the company Christmas party was very nearly mandatory.

He was inside the Regional Parcel Service building, and in an elevator halfway up to the floor he sought when he remembered something Rachel had tried to imprint on his mind: "Don't leave that Christmas party without getting some guy to agree to be your best man!" Jack had said he had always intended for Ray to fill that role, which had gotten him nothing but a stare—and a stronger order: "I don't care if you have to kidnap your boss or the man who empties ashtrays and wastebaskets at night!"

Jack had grinned and informed Rachel that smoking was no longer allowed inside the office, and she'd punched his arm.

Then he had promptly forgotten the whole thing

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until now, when it occurred to him that it was really a little annoying to go from one predefined social rite with a great many details woven into the fabric of the rite, and wholly unexplained, to a second—in less than a week. There always seemed to be one set of obligations or another to honor, from birth to innumerable holidays to weddings, even to death—and Jack couldn't think of a single soul who had ever been able to tell him *why*, or to *whom* he was obliged. Seen from that standpoint, the damned haunt was just a severely punishing version of the days in the year that seemed, to him, pointless days off that interfered with a routine that, Jack realized for the first time, had sustained him—Labor Day, Presidents Day, and Memorial Day, for example. There would never be a day on the calendar when he had to be reminded to remember his parents and Ray any more than he required Thanksgiving to give him permission to eat turkey or drink cider. Once, perhaps, Americans had paid tribute to the Founding Fathers; all Jack's life Independence Day had meant the fireworks *other* kids were allowed to set off.

The truth of the matter, he realized as he mingled with his fellow employees, was that he just wanted more than anything else to be with Rachel always—and the kids, until they grew up—but he was getting a penalty for the gravest social sin of all: He hadn't been allowed to be a normal boy, he had learned not to mind it, and Jack Kidd simply did *not have* a parade of male acquaintances—drinking buddies—to whom he mistakenly affixed the words “friends.” Ray had been his friend as well as his brother. Rachel would be his very dearest friend—

she'd already become that; that was another version of the jealousy Ray had displayed—as well as his wife.

So now he was supposed to pick out one of these birds getting a buzz on just to please the boss—guys who scarcely knew each other, because their work was done *outside*, in delivery vans—and persuade him to be present at the happiest rite of Jack's life.

Would the guy get to go home with them on their honeymoon and *watch*?

After paying a kind of courtesy call to his formerly paunchy boss—the middle-aged man had gone on a diet-and-jogging regimen after his wife divorced him—Jack mingled with the other drivers principally, but scanned the office personnel, too, for prospective best men. Most of them had flaws, he found, the primary drawback being that he didn't really know them from Adam. One man he tended to like, named Dave Griffiths, had a reputation for hitting on women, and Jack didn't like the notion of the guy kissing his bride. The two candidates he eventually picked out were chosen because he'd chatted with them once or twice and they were reportedly happily married men. Each of them politely backed out and gave him, Jack thought, odd looks; one was tacking a few vacation days onto Christmas, and Dave said flatly that he hated weddings and funerals both. Jack made a mental note to get better acquainted with the guy.

But people were beginning to depart, time was running out, and Jack began to consider stopping at the drugstore to ask George, an affable pharma-

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cist who even knew all of Jack's name. At that point he couldn't even remember another man who—

"I hear you're getting married, Jack," someone interrupted his desperate musings. "Just wanted to say congratulations. It's a relief after wishing so many folks a merry Christmas!"

Jack took the hand outstretched to him and peered into a smiling, pleasant dark-brown face. He knew he was acquainted with the good-looking young African-American but couldn't place him for an instant.

Then he realized it was the man's sharp suit that was making him seem very different. "Thank you very much, Harold," Jack said, shaking the hand and smiling back. He saw Harold every day, routing and distributing packages to the drivers, but the guy was customarily wearing a Regional Parcel uniform. "Yes, this year Christmas just seems to me to be a day to get out of the way before the big event."

Harold, who wore a thin mustache to look older, held on to Jack's hand another moment. "Well, she must be some lady for you to stick to your wedding plans. I was awfully sorry to hear about your brother. It's awful, losin' your bro."

"She is," Jack confirmed solemnly, "and it sure as hell is awful." He found tears in his eyes and had to blink. The company had sent flowers to Griner's, but not a soul had expressed his sympathy until now. And nobody else had wished Rachel and him well with their marriage until Harold. "I have a huge favor to ask of you, Harold. How do you feel about weddings?"

He grinned boyishly. "Pretty crazy about mine, Jack. When I decided not to stay in the Army as a career, I married Ruthie a week after my discharge. Been so happy with her the past four years, we don't hardly see anybody else or go anywhere. Ruthie and this job are about all I can handle—or need. Why do you ask?"

Jack smiled from ear to ear. "I forgot all about getting a best man, Harold, and I'm really stuck." He stopped, flushed, aware of how that could sound. "My bro was all I needed for a friend—a best man—but Ray's g-gone now." He pulled himself into an erect stance. "I'm desperate, Harold, it won't take long, and I'd be honored if Ruthie came with you. It's a small wedding, and women usually like—"

"Day after Christmas?" Harold asked. "What time would you want us, 'cause evenings are our time together. TV, mostly." He grinned. "And stuff you'll be learning about!"

Jack, elated and relieved, provided Harold with the details.

Then he stopped to see his boss again before he left, to learn his best man's whole name was Harold Dunning.

2

Eight, Andre called wordlessly, using all the arrogance of command that made himself, in Andre's own view, second only to the entity he summoned. He preferred to think of the spirit guide as serving him. He knew it was doubtful, should he conduct

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the closest scientific evaluation of their circumstances. *Eight, I have need of you!*

There, that would be a small test by itself. Andre sat upright in his desk chair, hands flat before him, waiting. The room was darkened.

"I see neither a client nor an urgent letter present," Eight said in the youthful psychic's mind. "Do you imagine that the entire existence of a guide such as I is spent supplying information to living people with your kind of small talent?"

Candidly, I suppose that was my supposition, Andre thought.

"Then you should know you are not even the *only* living person for whom I provide my service at the present. Just now there are two others. To one, I am known as Seven. To the other I am Nine."

Andre's brows rose, though he kept his eyes closed. *I presume you've also been numbers one through six. May I ask what happened to the people who addressed you by those numerical identities?*

"The same thing that will ultimately happen to you," Eight replied. "Would you like to know exactly when you are scheduled to join us?"

Andre's eyelids very nearly snapped open. He fought for his usual aplomb. He considered Eight's offer a few seconds, partly because it was the scientific thing to do, partly because knowing when he was supposed to die would give him certain advantages: leeway for taking chances until he was nearing the year or age; an opportunity both to prepare himself in many ways and to attempt to avoid fate with suitable preventive medicine; and a chance to test a pet notion that dying was a process with a

starting point that might be identifiable, and evaded or at least delayed.

For the present, he told the guide, I decline your offer, albeit with thanks.

"I knew you would," Eight said. Something in his manner made Andre imagine that Eight had turned to smile snidely at a companion. "It is just as well you asked for me. In regard to the recently crossed-over Raymond, whom you met, and the entity who had neither lived nor died—"

Yes, yes, Andre thought, I remember all that.

"Several others among the living have been added to the equation."

They, too, are in danger? Andre asked, frowning.

"Ray wished that I apprise you of this information. Among them are a woman his brother will marry quite soon, her two children, a female detective, men who refused assistance to Ray's brother, a man who agreed to provide that help—and you."

Ask Ray, Andre said grimly but in his most businesslike briskness, to tell me where he lived, and clarify that the source of danger may be found there. And if, in fact, the evil entity's approach is that of a haunting.

"Regardless of how clever you are, Doctor," the spirit guide said firmly, "you will not be informed of important matters involving you ahead of time. Neither this spirit nor I can place you on the scene until you are scheduled to be, even to save further lives."

Someone else communicated. "But that 'source of danger' you mentioned," the spirit Ray's voice broke through, "is definitely where I lived—and where my brother and his new family will be living." Ray's

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handsome face came to Andre's mind as he remembered the visit Ray had paid him. "And yeah, Doc, it haunted us, all right—and will Jack's wife and kids. *Hideously.*"

When the connection was broken, Andre replayed it in his memory, sifting for clues. The three-way conversation had not, he realized, gone entirely for naught.

He knew now he would be one of at least seven people who were in jeopardy from the mysterious haunt. Which had a primary base of operations, as it was true of the more customary infestations, and a home in which relatively ordinary people lived.

He *believed* he knew that Ray's surviving brother was shortly going to marry a woman who already had two children, and that all three of them would move in where the brother lived. Did that mean he was oblivious—or, perhaps, the woman was—to the haunting?

And Andre had also learned that Eight was not the ancient wise soul the guide liked to pretend he was. Eight had provided his "service" to only six people before Andre. Since the guide was currently working with two other individuals in the paranormal community, it could be safe to assume Eight's usual cosmic burden was three—allowing Andre to infer that the earlier six who died might well have comprised two previous groups of three. If each of them had made contact with Eight at an average age of, say, twenty, Eight's earthly life was surely spent no longer ago than the early nineteenth century or, at most, the late eighteenth. One day, perhaps, Andre mused, he would gather enough clues

to learn Eight's real name and astonish him by using it during their work together.

Assuming, of course, Andre reflected, switching on all his lights for the day, Ray's damned puzzling haunt hasn't murdered me before I have the chance.

. . . But if that happened, Andre would simply stare into Eight's equally disembodied face and *ask* him who he was—and had been.

3

Jack had gotten to Rachel's place by nine o'clock on Christmas morning, gifts he had brought for each of the Sayres in tow, and was surprised when Rache, Tricia, and Nick threw the door wide and shouted "Merry Christmas!" at him. (Actually, Trish added, "And many more," not entirely clear yet whose birthday they were celebrating.)

He hadn't been really sure they would all be up and about.

When he was led into the cozy front room, he was amazed to see that Rachel's gift packages for the kids had already been ripped open, their contents randomly distributed throughout the room. "You got to work pretty fast this morning," he said lightly, smiling as he gave Nick and Trish the presents he had brought them.

"Nope," Nick corrected him, plunking himself on the floor. "We were late this year. Tell him, Mom."

Rachel, shaking her head, supplied a confirmation. "I had to thank them for letting me sleep later than I have on Christmas since Nick was around three. They didn't get me up until seven." Sitting rather wearily in an easy chair across from Jack,

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she looked incomparably beautiful to him in a gold-colored robe that almost matched her hair. "Weren't you even allowed to celebrate Christmas when you were a little boy?"

Jack happily accepted a hug from Tricia and a medium high five from Nick; they were clearly pleased with his gifts. Just then he felt uncomfortable thinking of the past, the ever-present haunt that had influenced virtually every event in Ray's and his lives. "We usually got a present from Santa Claus, but nobody was ever eager to get up to see it. Well, I think Mother was . . . for a while." He paused. "We always got books and maybe some underwear; something practical. I didn't realize until I was grown how hard it must have been to buy us—well, acceptable books." He had given Nick and Tricia the most impractical gifts he could find, knowing Rachel could not make much money from her job and noticing the inexpensive new winter coats—child size—placed carefully on a dining-room chair. Already, she and Jack had agreed to buy nothing remotely expensive for each other.

During the rest of the day that, for them, was wedding eve as well as Christmas, they went over the details of a venture that would make them an instant family. Rachel clarified her intention of keeping her house "for the time being," saying she would like to put it up for sale during a "better buying season." Left unspoken was what she and Jack both understood, that it was simply smart to have somewhere for her to take the children if the Kidd mansion proved unsafe for them.

They would have to settle for a twenty-four-hour honeymoon. But Rachel's baby-sitter had said she

would baby-sit the kids there in the home they knew all night—specifically from after the wedding until noon the next day, when the girl would drive Nick and Tricia to their new home. “She wouldn’t even let me pay her,” Rachel said, eyes filling with tears. “She said this is her wedding gift to us.”

Jack was profoundly grateful to the teenager. “I’d mention her in my will if I didn’t think that would be a terrible way to say thanks.”

Rachel pointed out suitcases and sacks filled with her clothing and the children’s for Jack to take when he left today. “I think it would be nice if the kids and I had something to wear when we’ve moved in.”

“Well, the kids, anyway,” Jack said under his breath.

Nick giggled, making it clear he had been listening. Jack made a mental note to remember that nothing much was said or happened that his new son Nick didn’t know about.

“Before you ask me,” he told Rachel, “I lined up my best man.”

“There,” Rachel smiled, “that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Jack replayed all the thoughts he’d already had about society’s demanding traditions, but settled for giving her a semihard look. “I didn’t exactly find the kind of best man you probably expected, and I thought it wise to tell you about him now.”

“I don’t think I *had* any expectations about him, and I imagine you don’t have any about my maid of honor.” She reached out to take his hand. “So what’s different about this guy? Is he gay or something? Surely not a Democrat?”

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Jack shrugged. "Actually, from what I've seen about him—his name is Harold Dunning—I don't think he's very different in any of the nasty ways we have in mind when we say 'different.' He'll probably bring his wife, by the way. Harold's black."

Rachel's intelligent green eyes stared at him with studied blankness. "So what's different about him?"

Jack hugged and kissed her, chuckling. "He's quite a bit younger than we are," he quipped. "And I think he's a very nice guy."

"He'd have to be," she retorted, "to agree to this on such short notice."

They discussed only a few other matters during and after the early dinner Rachel served and before Jack went back to the house that would be theirs by that hour the next night. She lamented that her only living parent, her mother, couldn't get to town for the wedding. "It's just as well," Rachel told Jack. "She's harped at me like hell to remarry, but you wouldn't be good enough for me any more than any other man. I tried to explain to her that John Wayne, Cary Grant, and Humphrey Bogart are dead."

"Tell her," Jack said, "when you write or phone her that I'm a combination of all three, except for the dead part."

"Well," Rachel whispered in his ear, "that remains to be seen, doesn't it?"

Nick, with his sister beside him, came to say good night. "I'm really looking forward to my first wedding, Jack," the boy said. He appeared somehow shorter, slighter, in pajamas.

"Me, too," said Trish, an exquisite miniature Rachel getting sleepier by the second.

"I'm looking forward to having my first son and my first daughter," Jack told them, absolutely meaning it. But at the same time their early getting-up hour today terrified him. What would it be like the first time he had to give them orders or had to punish them?

Then he was alone for a few minutes with Rachel at the front door before she chased him away. Reminded that Rachel still wore her robe, he undid the sash before she could stop him and stared down at her desirable body in bra and panties. She tried to close the robe, but he stepped inside of it, held her near, and kissed her with a fervor that seemed nearly uncontrollable. "I'm not sure I can wait until tomorrow," he said.

Despite herself, Rachel ground her lower body against his. "Don't you know it's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?"

"This isn't what it means!" Jack argued. "But let me make love to you now and I'll keep my eyes shut."

She laughed, he did too; and the next thing Jack truly noticed was that he was back inside his big barn of a house, hands and arms loaded with suitcases and sacks, feeling like a man with one foot in a glorious dreamworld, the other adhering to the dank and mildewed carpet of hell.

He began to hang Rachel's clothes in the closet with his and, when it seemed suitable to him, in the chest of drawers that Ray had used. Yesterday he had emptied it of little brother's garb without sorting it and by piling all of it in a bag for Goodwill, working quickly and not focusing on any single item that had belonged to Ray. Any other method

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might have had him crying all night. Then he'd brought the dresser in here.

As for the kids' things, he didn't believe he could make himself go up to the second floor that night. It would be entirely different—because it would *have* to be—when his new family was together, particularly since Rachel, Nick, and Tricia were so gloriously, vibrantly *alive*. Even before Ray died there had been times when Jack Kidd, who wasn't even close to middle age, had felt as if he and his bro were haunting the house, too—as if they'd both died in boyhood, and didn't have permission to lie down and rot properly. Funny that the notion of little people such as Trish and Nick, who couldn't defend themselves physically against a strong young woman, brought him the feeling of safety, Jack mused. Perhaps it was just their vitality, or a belief Jack had that only children somehow scheduled not to reach adulthood ever died. Or maybe it was the power of family togetherness, loved ones unconsciously striving for a common good, that Jack anticipated. He'd never known much of that.

On impulse, when Rachel's clothes were put away—doubtless, he thought, she'd rearrange them anyway—Jack knelt beside the double bed he'd had the foresight to buy two years before when the single bed of his teens finally wore out. He clasped his hands to pray, still new to the act of faith, and recited the Lord's Prayer. Then, haltingly, he asked God for His blessing on the marriage and the instant family Rachel and he were creating. He also asked that his own deeply felt desire to be married not bring harm to her, to Tricia, or to Nicholas. "I suppose I'm behaving selfishly and endangering

them, Lord, but I guess I'm weak. So I ask Thy protection and also Thy blessing." In his head, Jack added, *If this damned thing that stays here must bring harm to any of us, please, let it be me, not them.*

Standing and blinking but feeling fortified by his new faith, Jack climbed the stairs with the kids' clothing and some other things and distributed them in the two rooms that would be theirs. And nothing whatever went amiss.

Returning to the first floor—unable not to run—Jack experienced a gigantic sense of relief tinged by elation. "Thank you," he said aloud.

He hoped he was expressing his appreciation to the Lord, but he wasn't absolutely sure.

4

It was strange, the haunt thought, that he no longer had any obligation to follow Ray and guide or protect him—yet he couldn't remember the last time he'd had to be so busy, so *vigilant*.

Of course, he reminded himself as he allowed Jack to go back downstairs unmolested, it was a matter of simple arithmetic: Ray defying him and dying *was* minus one. But Rachel, her blessed and delectably vulnerable first two children, and the woman Rachel had hired were four *pluses*—which meant a grand total of—of—well, of *more* people than Ray and Jack had represented originally.

He stirred, rearranged his space-cramming body in a position that was slightly less uncomfortable. He was sorry to have learned that Rachel's mother was unable to attend the wedding because it prob-

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ably would have been heartbreaking for Rachel to lose the woman, but there was nothing he could do to hurt her when none of the people to compose the expanded Kidd family had been in the old woman's presence since Rachel agreed to marry Jack. Besides, he had no idea in the world where she lived.

And it would not do for him to lose sight of the other human beings to whom Jack and his woman had inadvertently introduced him in the past several days. He had detested them all at a glance, but there were his standards to adhere to; a mere few had given him cause to destroy them, though it was still early. Griner, for example, exhibiting those ghastly containers for dead people had irritated Jack. But the fact was, he had cooperated with Jack's preferences eventually, and that left no grounds for exterminating him. The haunt's sigh was like wind moving in low-hanging tree branches. He yearned to see the Sayre baby-sitter unclad, but she was doing a favor for Rachel and, as the woman who would join the Kidd family and bring the children to him permanently, Rachel had to be protected. For now.

Resuming his usual crouching position, he thought briefly about Rachel's untimely meeting with the detective, Craig Ryce. A woman of infinite possibilities for enjoyment. His most personal enjoyment. He had found it impossible to understand her precise interest to Jack's woman beyond the fact that she meant to learn who built his house. He hated people who pried, but the fact was that he felt proud of his home—even if he *was* physically limited to a small portion of it. In time, it appeared, he was likely to be well within his rights to inflict sinis-

ter and subtle torture upon the female sleuth. For now, he would wait to see how much she overstepped her bounds.

At least he had the immediate delight of knowing that, when Jack went back to work after the wedding, he would be able to extend his delivery route as much as he desired. The men who had refused to be his best man, whatever that was exactly, would no longer be alive, and those who had simply ignored Jack were already painfully ill—incapable of returning to their routes for weeks.

However, the hate-haunt reflected with crossed arms, it seemed a pity that the man who had agreed to assist Jack was the kind of man he was. Though he had no accessible memory of how he had learned it—perhaps it had come from his creator, lord, previous existence, or whatever had bestowed existence upon him—this “Harold Dunning” was inferior, beneath any Kidd’s notice. He was not even the *color* of people, pasty and pale! The haunt didn’t recall seeing anyone else like him, but his appearance alone had triggered *some* latent information-point among the few dozen that informed him, and it would have been immediately clear that Dunning was disposable but for Jack’s decision that there was a purpose he might serve—although the very idea that such an alternative life-form could possibly occupy the role of “best man” seemed ridiculous and reprehensible with a Kidd around! Why wasn’t Jack automatically the best one at his own wedding?

Among the numerous complaints the haunt had on the eve of Jack’s wedding was the change of plan caused by Rachel’s decision to have it in her son’s

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church. The recent introduction of religion and faith in the Almighty, he felt, was most unfortunate and annoying. Where *was* the gratitude? Wasn't it he, himself, who had refrained from killing Ray and, when Ray had asked him to remove the pain, taken *most* of it back? Hadn't he relented and allowed Jack to become more entangled with the Sayre bitch? Had he taken any steps—except for what Ray brought on himself—to prevent them from marrying? Yet here was the religion matter surfacing again, as it had from time to time over the years, when he had so looked forward to seeing the rites in the beloved family home.

He had a good mind not even to observe the wedding at the church. Neither Jack nor Rachel had even called up from downstairs to tell him how welcome he would be! If it was not for his own plans, for *after* the wedding when they returned home—and for his long-standing need for children to be present in the house—he would stop the wedding this very instant. There would be none if there was no bride for Jack to marry. He suspected there would even be a delay in the proceedings if he terrified either Rachel's son or daughter into a permanent state of hysteria.

What am I thinking? he amended his thoughts. *I like children! They serve a variety of purposes.*

No, there must not be any disruption of their immediate plans, the haunt decided. He would even have to let the newlyweds perform their disgusting physical acts together—surely they would not be the deeds Ray's woman, Caitlin, had feared he himself desired to do—in order that they make a new, true Kidd to enjoy and protect over the years. He

wondered how many nights of such activity were required before the birthing process was accomplished. And how would they know—and would they have the simple decency to inform him?

Tonight, meanwhile, there were the people who had offended Jack to locate, if possible, and offend them far more lastingly. Afterward, then, while he was awaiting the arrival of the next true Kidd . . .

He would devise many little games to play with Rachel's existing children.

Chapter IX

1

He had not found the man who turned Jack down until this morning, the day after Christmas.

In one sense, the timing was excellent. This was Jack's wedding day, and the single surviving Kidd was probably too happy, too focused, on the nuptials for anything adverse to happen to him.

The haunt had observed that much over the long years, or had, perhaps, always suspected that to be the case. Feeling strangely introspective and philosophical after tricking Jack-rejecter number one into killing himself on the way to work, he thought there was a discoverable equation to human saving: First, the individual needed to have been relatively content within himself for a period of time so he was not harboring any unconscious urge to be

dead. The description probably hadn't applied to poor Ray since his boyhood, but the haunt doubted Jack had ever wandered far from it.

Then the individual had to have some day-to-day work from which he derived a sense of self-worth. Whether it had to be an actual job or not, he wasn't sure. The person who was generally safe appeared to require a second human being, or many of them, whom he could blame for a variety of matters he saw as wrong and to whom he could feel superior. In all likelihood, that was how Jack had felt toward Ray and would now feel—on occasion—about the children he was getting.

And Jack also did require, it seemed to the hate-haunt, a second human being—a female—for reasons that were not fully clear. In Ray's case that requirement had appeared to rise from a powerful yearning to merely see and examine the female's breasts, those dual differences from male humans that, the haunt believed, were involved with the creation of new humans. Oddly, poor Ray had not known, judging by appearances, what would be produced by pressing his chest to a female's projections, since Ray had not spoken of seeking children. Indeed, Ray had shown every sign of being as interested in the area between Caitlin's legs—and those of other women—as he was in her chest. Insofar as the haunt had been able to detect from looking at the lower regions of the many wives of Kidd men whenever the men did so, there was almost nothing to see.

Well, the haunt had avenged Jack, and protected him, against the first rejecter with an awareness that he was performing in the most human of ways

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and also, perhaps, enhancing his personal safety. He had made the man believe an attractive young mother with a baby in her arms was crossing a road in front of his car, stumbling and falling to her knees as she dropped the infant. The man who had turned Jack down whipped his steering wheel to the left, drove the car off a bridge and down an embankment, just to keep from striking the "mother" and the "child." And when the automobile burst into flames, the hate-haunt had convinced the man his door was hopelessly mashed shut.

Instantly the haunt had become content with himself, certain of his self-worth; he had punished someone who had done wrong, and he *definitely* had felt superior while he stared at the driver's burning face until it was charred and crispy.

Now he found the second fool who had rejected Jack's generous offer to be best man with his Regional Parcel Service van open in the back, in the process of making a delivery. "Sit down!" he commanded. As the man turned in surprise, got his feet tangled up, and sat, hard, on the van floor, the haunt decided to enact Jack Kidd again. "You must pay for not helping me at my wedding this afternoon," he said.

"What in hell you talkin' about? You said you hated goin' to weddings and funerals too, Jack." A hefty man, Dave Griffiths reached up to the man who wasn't really there. "Give me a hand, will ya?" His legs and back were unaccountably heavy, uncooperative.

"*Here's* your hand," the hate-haunt said, and swept the largest and heaviest packages on the shelves above the Jack-rejecter crashing down on his head.

But this was a whole day's worth of deliveries, it was only morning, and the haunt was just getting started.

Incapable of rising, the meaty married man (and woman chaser) threw up an arm that wasn't yet broken, attempting to cover his head, and watched in bleary-eyed astonishment as his fellow RPS employee apparently set out to kill him. Cartons he'd gotten into his van only with Harold Dunning's assistance came flying across the floorboards at him, one after another, hitting some portion of his head or body every time.

The pain was sharp and concussive, accumulative, and it did not really occur to Dave that a man could be murdered by boxes being hurled at him by a madman until he was almost dead.

Then he was.

2

The first things Rachel liked about the church where she would marry Jack today—apart from the fact that she was actually there for it, at last—were the Christmas decorations, still in place a day after the holiday. Slipping into the church's side door with the friend who would be her bridesmaid and who had brought her there, Rachel felt buoyed and reassured by the sprinkling of red and green colors and a small Christmas tree she saw outside Reverend Blowers's office.

Then the realization that she was wearing a white dress with embroidered *blue flowers* dawned on her and she turned to her friend with momentarily

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acute concern. "My God, Jane, I'm going to clash with all this green! Do you think Jack will notice?"

"Take it from me, kid," Jane Lange said reassuringly, drawing her back from proximity to the little chapel, "Jack will be too numb to notice anything." Jane was a fellow Avon representative whom Rachel had liked on sight despite her girth, largely for her sense of humor and candor. "They never do."

"Would you go see if he's here?" Rachel begged. "I know you haven't met him, but I described Jack to you and he should be up in front with a young fella, the best man."

Jane, badly nearsighted, squinted at her. "Breathe again sometime, you said all that in one breath." She squeezed Rachel's elbow and chuckled as she turned away. "Be right back."

Please don't let anything ruin today, Rachel prayed, eyes raised but closed tightly. How she could be so lucky as to have another chance at happiness, she wasn't really sure. Everything else that had ever happened in her life—except Nick and Tricia—no longer amounted to a hill of beans. The opportunity for a real life, the kind of life she had actually always wanted, started in a minute or two. Other women who put careers first were free to do so, and good luck to them. *For me,* Rachel thought passionately, *it all begins with love. There's just no substitute.*

Eyes open again, Rachel craned her neck to see if Jane was headed back. It absolutely would *not* be Jack's style to not show up, he had loyalty, character—but she wouldn't be angry if he'd changed his mind. Taking on the responsibility of two children

fathered by another man wasn't something every single man would do, she knew that, and he was no idiot who was completely unaware of how—

"He's there," Jane announced, wiping her lips. "I stopped at a water fountain," she explained. "He's a pretty good-looking guy, even if he's no giant." She paused. "Is his best man Jamaican? He's *really* cute, and I fall for those accents every time . . ."

What if she doesn't come? God knows I wouldn't blame her if she changed her mind, Jack thought, arrayed before Reverend Richard Blowers with Harold Dunning ready to step forward and hand him the ring. The danger to her and to the kids, and the risk of suddenly losing her husband, all because of an eerie force she would never have had to worry about if she'd never even gone out with an aging bachelor named Jack Kidd. Maybe even ol' Ray would be around today, Jack mused, if he hadn't been selfish enough to demand a more normal life, a measure of true contentment—in a word, love.

"Steady, Jack," the minister said just loudly enough to be heard. "I haven't lost a groom yet."

Sheepishly, Jack glanced toward the man with a grateful grin. It was becoming apparent to him why Nick, so soon to be his stepson, had liked this man and why Rache had trusted her boy's judgment enough to want a church wedding. Richard Blowers had a mane of movie-star black hair, the natural ease of a Reggie Miller at the free-throw line, and, somehow, a quality actors, athletes, politicians, and most others never seemed to have: The clergyman was exactly where he believed he *and they* belonged, at least for the present purpose. It was a

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kind of confidence he did not himself generate, because Blowers had the faith to accept another, much greater source. What he and the people before him were about to agree upon was for him the single correct choice, if they shared love, and no other decision or choice weighed heavily enough to be in second place.

The organist to Jack's right—Mrs. Blowers, he had learned—struck a chord and Jack almost took two steps forward and collided with Blowers.

He could never remember its real name, but Jack recognized the music as the "Wedding March." His mind was working rapidly, inanely, eager to miss nothing, in danger of missing everything. *Sure, sure, he thought, everybody recognizes three pieces of music right away—the Lone Ranger theme song, the "Wedding March," and "White Christmas," and two of the three don't really have those names.*

"Mr. Kidd," Reverend Blowers whispered, "you might want to turn around and see a sight you won't ever forget. Just link arms with her when she reaches you."

Jack turned around and knew at once the clergyman had been right.

The chapel did not contain many people that afternoon: The kids, Trish not assisting because Rachel's dress did not have a train. Their baby-sitter, Jack forgot what the teenager's name was. A lady of sixty or so with a distant resemblance to her second cousin Rachel, who'd told Jack the woman—Josephine something—could decide at the last second to attend. She had. A couple in their early forties, the wife overly made-up, presumably a coworker of Rache and Jane, the bridesmaid.

Mrs. Ruthie Dunning, best man Harold's serene and lovely wife. Also present in the chapel, of course, were Mrs. Blowers, the organist; beaming and dignified Harold; Reverend Blowers; Jack himself—

And the bride, as perfect and vivid, as she began her steadily measured walk down the aisle, as if she had been able to buy the finest dress in town—and as if all the subtlest and most softly luminous of sunbeams had chosen to merge their radiance with hers. The dress was not quite form-fitting, because (Jack recalled with pride) *his* bride was a lady; yet Rachel's beauty and a quality of sensuousness could not be entirely concealed, and the pearls that had been his Christmas gift to her added—for him, at least—a touch of regality, even exclusivity. Her eloquent eyes promised that, even before their vows, as her gaze met Jack's from ten feet away. Amazingly, to him, she wound up beside him just as the music stopped. He also realized with a feeling of having gone blind for a moment that Rachel's bridesmaid, however obese she might be, had actually preceded the bride and was prepared to hand Rachel the ring she would place on his finger. Jack's gaze swung to his best man, questioningly, and Harold showed him the wedding ring he would hand to Jack for her ring finger.

Then it was beginning, while they would not speak to each other except when the ceremony called for it, his thoughts and hers—and their emotions—were almost identical: *It's really happening, and, when I turn from here to leave, I'll be married . . . forever!* With the blessings this minister sought for them, loneliness would be gone—for good!

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They had chosen the vows their parents and probably their grandparents had found entirely satisfactory. After all, Rachel and Jack had each prayed for a traditional union from the standpoint of one that was based on mutual love and respect—and the absence of any darkly mysterious, haunting presence capable of bringing harm to themselves or their loved ones. Whatever novelty arose in their marriage was supposed to be the product of their individual personalities combined, not as something scribbled by either of them now, before they'd even begun to produce their first combined effort—the marriage itself.

Nobody dropped either wedding ring, and no one—not even a mournful howl to send shudders through every heart—showed cause why the two people should not be joined in holy matrimony.

Then the ceremony was complete and, even before Blowers gave him permission to kiss the bride, Jack was thinking, *Now comes the first kiss we give each other as husband and wife.*

They provided it, memorably enough that a few people, uncued by this clergyman, applauded.

Jane Lange gave Jack a hug and a kiss on the cheek, simultaneously introducing herself. "It's great to meet a good-looking guy and get to kiss him at the same time," she added before getting abashed and turning away. "You must come see us," Jack said to the broad back; and Jane, glancing around, asked jokingly, "What about tonight?"

Nick, who'd heard there would be no wedding pictures, was enthusiastically bustling around trying to create an "album" with the inexpensive camera Jack had given him for Christmas. He snapped

one of his new dad and the best man, Harold, whose pretty wife was a step behind.

Then Harold was extending his hand to Rachel, smiling warmly—and Rachel was stepping closer to give Harold a brief kiss on the lips, murmuring her appreciation for his participation in the wedding. At almost exactly the same instant Ruthie Dunning was embraced by Jack for a similarly quick kiss, this one on his cheek.

All four people separated simultaneously, with unnatural alacrity, Rachel and Ruthie emitting little sounds of pain. "Static electricity," Rachel said to mask the way her mouth was smarting, the other three glancing down at the chapel's plush carpeting.

Unnoticed, Nick stooped to pick up his new camera, noticing immediately that the shutter mechanism was broken—and appeared *scorched*.

Then, blinking back tears, he wandered up the aisle alone, two fingers of his right hand stuck in his mouth.

He didn't want anybody to see that they were burned and wonder how that could have happened.

Nick knew what had burned them, but he didn't want Mother and Jack to have their wedding or honeymoon to be spoiled—

Even if he *was* really spooked badly for the first time.

3

When Jack and Rachel drove through the crunchy snow to what was now their home, not just his alone, it was still before winter's abrupt blanketing of nighttime. In late December it could seem that

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the distinction between interminably long, gray days and actual night was a fine one of no importance, but only until darkness was complete. At that point for the lonely, the confined, the frightened or apprehensive the first gleam of sunlight was often like the first new breath to a man who had lost his own.

Jack was not lonely as he parked the van in the drive and, fingers on the key in the ignition, didn't quite kill the motor. He turned to Rachel, who was somewhat incongruous with last year's red coat over her wedding dress. "Do you think we've made a mistake in not bringing the kids to the house right away?" he asked.

She met his gaze steadily while she paused to think. "I'm trying to imagine why you'd think that," she said, pleasantly enough. "The sitter is more mature than she appears, she's crazy about them, and—at her age—she's a hopeless romantic. And she has the phone number here"—Rachel couldn't quite say "our number" yet—"if any emergencies come up."

Jack stared through a semicircle of the windshield without snow, toward the rear of the lot where trees like rugged sentinels cut off the light and usually made it midnight. "Maybe all romantics are hopeless," he said tonelessly.

"Well, *that's* certainly a turn-on!" Rachel exclaimed, opening the door on her side of the van. "C'mon! You wanna get me while I'm really in the mood!"

"I just want to find you in the *nude*!" he quipped, then reached out and caught her arm. "The reason I asked if we should have brought Nick and Trish

now is that the wedding was wonderful, almost . . . trouble-free." He paused, knowing she'd guess what he meant. "And the haunt might resent the children's absences."

Rachel had left her door open and needed to raise her voice to be heard above icy winds blowing. She was half turned to Jack, and she was as defiant and as brave as Jack had seen her. "Whatever he is—or *it*—he's a busybody who doesn't miss a thing. He *isn't* unable to hear, he gave permission for us to marry as if he was some aristocratic father in a Victorian melodrama on *Masterpiece Theatre*—and we *discussed* our plans for both the wedding and the honeymoon! Now, Jack, I'm going into my new home away from the kids for a whole night and morning, and I *hope* my husband is as eager to consummate his marriage as his wife is!"

Rache hopped to the ground with her purse and a mysterious sack, then hurried to the front door of the huge old house.

Jack was there at nearly the same instant, and, grinning, dangled a house key on a chain before her determined-looking face. "You might prefer to use this instead of breaking in." He saw her dawning of realization, and a relaxing of her lovely features. "Take it," he added, "I finally remembered to have one made for you."

She tried the key, and the lock worked instantly. Since copied keys rarely did so, she realized Jack must have already locked and unlocked the door with it fifty times. Beaming a bit apologetically at him, she turned and raised her one free arm.

Jack had already planned to carry his bride over

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the threshold, and he gathered her happily into his arms, then stepped inside.

"Women must have thought up that custom too," he said, setting Rachel down only when they'd reached the front room. She had put out an arm and slammed the door shut. "If the groom gets a hernia in the process, the bride has a free ride—and no ride!"

A few awkward moments ensued when he tried to hang up her coat, Rachel reminded him he no longer had to treat her as a guest, and Jack said he despised husbands who appeared to forget their wives were still ladies. "If they *are*," Rache added.

Then she was carrying her purse and the sack with the unannounced contents and heading in the direction of their bedroom and bath. "I'm going to use the facility," she called in a grand manner, "and I hope you'll be lying down when I'm through—I think you need a little . . . rest!"

"I need a little, all right," Jack called back. He was rewarded by merry laughter and, a second later, the sound of a door closing.

He checked to make sure the front door had locked and the living-room curtains were closed, then followed Rachel's path while his heart seemed to pound louder with each step. *Well, pal*, he thought, entering the bedroom with a peculiar sense of not having really seen it before, *this is finally going to be it. The end of the world's oldest non-cleric virgin.* In the bedroom that had always been his—and was there any other man who ultimately had sex with his bride in the same place where he'd told his secrets to his teddy bear?

Jack glanced in the direction of the bathroom, wondering if he should undress—and if so, how far?—or wait, in order to undress each other. Or had he misunderstood Rachel's wishes totally and she planning to cook dinner, would be fully dressed while she stared in surprise at his bare-ass flab? But she'd said something about him "lying down," and surely she didn't *really* think he wanted to nap. Not *now*!

Jack took off his pants, immediately annoyed that he hadn't begun with his shirt and T-shirt, vastly more bothered—and anxious—when he realized his penis was flaccid in his shorts. My God, shouldn't he already be as huge as a horse with his beautiful bride moments from joining him? Unimaginably, *infinitely* worse—worse than almost anything else he could conceive just then—what if the strains of the past week had rendered him absolutely *impotent*—maybe for good? It was possible, he ruminated, getting out of his tie, shirt, and T-shirt, then shoving down his Jockey shorts with a glance that was nearly withering in its bad timing, time had passed him by because of disuse. Or maybe Ray had been the only real man in the family, hadn't there been a report on *20-20* indicating a higher sperm count in the boys born later in a family? Why the hell had he ever thought it was possible for a virginal male in his thirties—a Kidd—to turn into a damned *stud* just because he was in love, because he'd finally been allowed to get *married*?

He got rid of his shoes and socks and stretched out naked in bed, on his back, hastily drawing a fold of the sheet over his probably dysfunctional genitals. Beneath it his hand was just beginning to

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fumble with his baby-soft penis when Rachel appeared in the doorway. Jack drew his hand back guiltily, started to speak, and then simply watched her cross the old, familiar room to him.

She wore a golden nightgown—now he knew what had been inside her mysterious sack—but it was so sheer and clung to her so intimately that he thought for a moment she was nude. Drifting noiselessly toward the bed, and him—Rachel's feet and legs were bare—her large breasts swung freely, vividly outlined, and the dip of her abdomen to her clearly unhidden pubic hair stressed the impression of nakedness. Jack lifted his gaze to her face—how lovely her fair hair looked, how hard she had worked in the bathroom to make it lie perfectly—and saw both the sweetest, most loving smile he had seen and tears in her eyes.

He took her hand, gently pulled her to a sitting position beside him on the bed. "Why are you crying?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Because I'm so happy," she said, lowering her face to his. "Because I want you to believe the impossible—that this is, somehow, the first time for me, too."

She kissed him with a depth of tenderness mingled with desire unlike any other kiss Jack had received. Even then, though, she was shifting her body—

And when she'd taken her lips from his and he had opened his eyes, Jack saw the exquisite woman, still clad in her nightie, kneeling on the bed next to his hip. She was slipping her fingers under the hem of the garment and slowly raising it shimmeringly up the length of her body and, at last, over her

beautiful head. In the process he saw the delectable, silken tops of her full thighs, the wide V of her groin and a freshly pretty spray of the blond hair where her legs met, the flare of her hips, her sunken navel in a tummy rounded from producing two cherished children, then breasts so perfectly suiting Jack's preference that he gasped. Because of the way she was sitting on her heels they looked even larger; her nipples seemed set directly in their centers like fabulous gems placed against the plushest of costly materials.

In recent days Jack had been afraid he would either climax after just seeing Rachel entirely naked or, worse, that he would not be able physically to register his desire at all. There'd been the sense that his beloved was like a brilliant portrait, and she had never been related, for him, to naked girls in a Cinemax late film.

Now she put out a soft, not remotely tentative hand to feel him through the sheet, then slip it aside to see him nude for the first time, too.

Rachel's eyes opened wide, the expression on her face very different now, and when she fisted him Jack was already more than prepared. He had no memory of when he had felt, or looked, readier.

Suddenly, without warning, Rachel's shoulder-length blond hair was spread on his upper legs and lower belly as she stooped, took the glans of his penis between her lips, and very lightly nipped the flesh below it with her teeth.

Then she was up, and lying on her back—all she'd just done achieved so quickly that Jack's extreme readiness was merely, incredibly, intensified. "That was only a promise for later," she said with a

little laugh that was tinged with both pleasure and a certain teasing amusement. "Let's keep things traditional a while longer so both of us enjoy—everything."

He rolled a half-turn toward Rachel—as far as he *could* roll just then—and when she opened her legs, he got to his knees between them.

Peering down at her, and over her body, he said the only thing he could think to say. "I love you, Rachel—and it *is* the first time, for you and for me."

For another second—not long, he did not wish to embarrass her—he was thrilled just to look. Everything was exposed; nothing was hidden. Nor was he, and what he brought, humbly now but not at all cripplingly. Staring at Rachel, Jack found, almost enabled him (in yet another psychic bond he knew they were forging) to see the way that *he* looked—from his bewitched eyes and heavy-lensed glasses and his fond half-smile to his unmuscular torso and arms to his slight paunch and on to his upraised, rigidly stony penis. The latter was suspended scant inches above the darling place where he had wished so long to place it.

At last he reached up to caress Rachel's breasts, and their position and her length caused him to graze her between the legs with his glans. Sitting up immediately, Jack lowered his hands to brush his fingers over the softness of her abundant pubic hair, then her firm inner thighs—finally, her vagina. He could not easily see it from his position, but its moistness and feminine mystery released him to act.

Lying above his bride, Jack saw her raise her hips from the bed, saw all he hadn't seen, and his simi-

larly moist masculine member met her with a precision he only vaguely attributed to Rachel's own maneuvering of her body. He slid into her with an ease Jack thought amazing, instantly adoring her warmth. He pushed forward until, bracing himself on his forearms, he was able to peer down between their bodies and see her dark-blond hair mingling with his brownish patch. The glimpse, even while he knew distantly he was being absurd, excited him beyond much further holding back. Perhaps it was because it was as if he had lost his penis—or because he knew full well where it was—

But he extended his arms to achieve leverage and to support his weight, and both sought and found, with his beloved, the right rhythm, rising away from her sometimes-compressing depths, plunging in again and repeating the desperate yet certain search for fulfillment and release. Before it was definitely too late to delay, Jack strove to decide which urge was greater in him—to caress and kiss her everywhere, and vice versa, or to accomplish this climax with Rachel now.

And the awareness that *this*, all they shared, was intended for *always* overjoyed Jack—astounded him! At that second he experienced his orgasm, and the way Rachel continued to rock up at him—on him—kept him going for timeless moments he felt he would not forget.

Then she shuddered and spasmed in what seemed to Jack as if her whole, magnificent body was involved, and dropped back on the bed, gorgeously sheened with sweat.

Jack's gaze touched his alarm clock. Fifteen minutes had passed since the two of them had gotten

into bed for the first time. He knew he would never subject himself to the tyranny of hours and minutes again. Not voluntarily.

He was surprised when Rachel got up and padded barefoot around the end of the bed, smiling at him over her shoulder, and left the room. He realized he had paid no attention to her back or buttocks before, and shadows forming on each revealed yet another aspect of his bride's beauty he swore not to neglect in the future. She'd gone, he realized while he lay contentedly on one side, to tidy up. As a single man in every solitary sense of the word, he had merely gone to sleep after—the term got all Jack's scorn now, it seemed such a lie—he had “relieved” his pressures. As a married man, he'd want to follow Rache's practice as a matter of common civility—but later, he decided sleepily, *I couldn't rouse myself from this wonderful relaxed feeling for the world.*

Then, hearing the sound of her padding feet—already the slight noise was distinctive, instantly recognizable to him—he looked up in time to follow the rest of Rachel's return to bed with his eyes, and every other part of his body.

She had brushed her beautiful hair so it fell forward, ending above her breasts. Jack gaped at them, marveling that they and virtually every inch of the naked Rachel presented new and different appearances—and caused fresh reactions in him—whenever she moved. *This* Rachel, approaching, was one of totality, not the portion-by-portion offer to inventory or catalogue. Although he was as wonderingly inquisitive about and eager to explore the golden down of her underbody, the standing

Rachel's exquisite legs, pretty bare arms, and soft belly attracted him fervently.

"I'll be right back," he said as she slid in next to him. He was tumescent once more and still shy about his condition, but he didn't think he had ever been more truly awake.

Rachel called to his own bare back, "Wash *real* good, okay?"

He did, astounded by the masculine image in the mirror, but he didn't take long. When he headed back to their room, he strutted in the short hallway, then hung one hand modestly if awkwardly before him when he reached his destination.

She knelt on the bed, facing him, but otherwise sitting straight. It was a new "favorite" look of Rachel's, her nipples pale in the gradually receding light, her navel shadow-dark, her perfect legs spread and the pale hair between them dipping down. "Stand in front of me on the bed," she suggested, and licked her lips.

Jack let both arms hang at his sides, proudly, until he had complied with Rachel's idea. Then he raised them and pressed his fingertips to the sides of her face and smiled gratefully down at her. . . .

4

He was growing angrier by the moment and realized only narrowly that he could not retaliate as he was accustomed to doing without jeopardizing the plans he had for the woman's progeny.

Never had Jack seemed happier than he had at the wedding or here, in the Kidd home, and not one iota of it appeared to reflect Jack's appreciation to

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him for *allowing* Jack to continue seeing the bitch or, amazingly, even for letting the two of them wed.

Forcing himself to crouch where he was, arms locked around his knees, the haunt was outraged and repulsed by the cavortings of Jack and the new Mrs. Kidd. How many *more* times, he wondered, in a mental scream, did they have to—to *couple* in order for Rachel Sayre Kidd to create an infant member of the family? Didn't the two of them *know*?

And how many more unlikely places on their bodies would need to be kissed, lapped, handled, and penetrated before the next and youngest Kidd was on its way?

Tentatively, the haunt peeped again through each of the people's eyes. What he saw nearly caused him to lose consciousness.

Jack and the woman were strolling around the house—*his* house!—absolutely undraped! Rachel carried one of her undergarments in one hand, but her whole, different body was as nude as Jack's—and even now, away from the bedroom, they couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other. What was the *attraction*, the *appeal*? The haunt did not have the slightest, smallest clue.

Ah, this was encouraging! Jack had remained in the kitchen to make coffee, and Rachel, in the front room, was stepping into the garment and pulling it up to her waist. That left her always seductive breasts bare, but she was lying back on a sofa, presumably waiting for Jack to bring her coffee.

He waited, too, hoping their mating was finally at an end. What more could be done to create the future Kidd?

Jack was actually glad to be temporarily apart from Rachel as he made coffee in the kitchen and she relaxed in the front room. He hoped (however unrealistically) never to be farther apart, but so many thrilling and fulfilling things had happened so far this evening that he wanted an opportunity to memorize as much of it as he could.

Part of his thinking was that complete family life, which included the children, started tomorrow. Rachel and he would go on making love, and they would become increasingly practiced in pleasing each other. Which was why he had talked Rachel into what they had been doing the past hour or so, and what they *would* do after they'd had coffee:

He had been more than happy to let Rache take the lead in their first two sex acts, and, during and after an incredibly blissful nap, they had mutually improvised another two couplings—the second summoning an athleticism Jack hadn't suspected he possessed.

That was when he'd had his two "wild ideas," as he himself described them, as they were getting out of the bathtub: "Let's not get dressed," he'd said. "We may never have a chance like this again. All the shades and curtains are closed, so no one will see us." He'd helped dry her and was already aware of stirrings in his body. "Let's fix dinner together, nude, and eat it naked, too."

"But—why?" she had asked.

"I dunno," Jack had replied. "As an independent or defiant act. To look at one another as we really

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are, physically, in the common, daily chores. To have even more memories to delight us someday—even if *I* have a lot better ones than you.”

And when she had agreed, he'd asked her to take her panties with her.

Then the two of them had done what Jack proposed, and Rachel got into the spirit of it—playfully brushing his shoulders or arms with her breasts, stooping and bending to pick up things she had dropped on purpose, pausing once to grind her naked groin against his before carrying in a delicious-looking Porterhouse just when he desired to continue. During their meal, they sat beside each other at the dining-room table where he was treated to the full repertoire of her whole torso's various postures, and they wound up, still seated, their legs spread wide but neither lap visible, fondling each other.

“Put your panties on in the living room,” he said at last, “get comfortable on the couch, and I'll bring coffee for us as soon as possible. Okay?”

Now the cups were poured and set on a tray, and Jack, almost supine, was headed for the front room to replay the first time he had seen Rachel, nearly nude, waiting for him on the couch. *But there'll be one major difference this time*, he thought. *We have permission to do what we please on the sofa.* The haunt could throw things around and drop them downstairs all it wished, and Jack would simply ignore it.

Because his vision was certainly no better than it had been back when she had so stunningly surprised him, Jack was once more unable to see any details of Rachel's eloquent expression, her pose, or

her body until—pace by pace—they came into clear focus. This time she was lying back on the sofa with her hands above her head, supporting it, her breasts raised so the pink tips aimed toward the ceiling. But as before, she wore white panties and her right leg was hooked over the top of the couch, the left one partly dangling over the edge. Jack had no pants this time, and when his penis rose little by little until it reached its maximum size, there were no undershorts or trousers to conceal his arousal. But reaching her, and setting down the tray, he realized he was even more excited that she could see it.

“Coffee is served, madam,” he said, sitting down at her feet and gazing up happily at her.

“The way I recall the way we were interrupted,” Rachel said, “except for seeing you all uptight in your shorts, is that I was doing *this*.”

And raising her legs together while she rolled back farther on her bottom, she slipped her panties slowly down to her ankles and lifted them off her feet, dropped the dainty white cloth to the floor.

He said softly, “And what I might have done next is this,” and lowered his face between her still-wide legs. Rachel’s thighs still struck him as exceptionally beautiful, and he drew his tongue over each of them and upward to the exposed goal, anxious to please her in a fashion comparable to how she had so magically gratified him. Little by little, she started to moan, the sound scarcely audible, and to close her thighs around the sides of his face. When breathing was getting difficult for him and her moans turned into pants, Jack straightened, lifted her legs until her ankles could rest on his shoul-

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ders, and guided himself into her. She was as ready and eager as he had been the first two times and thrust up at him forcefully, arms thrown wide in the anticipation of all she would feel. *Five times in three or four hours*, he thought, matching her pace, her power, *not bad for a guy pushing thirty-five*.

Then he sensed as much as felt the form of a suffocating and damp warmth—all along the length of his back, butt, and legs.

For half a second Jack imagined Rachel was doing something uncharacteristically displeasing with her hands and fingers. But he saw her pretty arms thrown wide, fingers clenching and unclenching—and he also saw the moving impress of ten fingertips as they formed, vanished, and once more formed in the yielding flesh of his bride's breathtaking breasts. His own hands were curled under Rachel's hips, and that meant something was lying on his back but reaching around him in the effort to feel and stroke an intimate part of Mrs. Jack Kidd's anatomy—and her beautiful eyelids were closed in approaching ecstasy, unaware that a *third presence* was with them on the sofa.

I won't let it ruin this for her, Jack swore mentally, and lay flat atop her bosom. Except for that determination, the shudder of terror and disgust he knew then would have prevented him from finishing.

With it, he exerted greater effort than he had any other time that day—driving upward and forward without any pause—and brought his beloved to a squealing orgasm.

They slept the night away side by side, lovingly drained, after returning to their bedroom.

He didn't awaken until early morning, stirred by

the gentle stroking of Rachel's hand—and her loving smile—seeking more. He played possum until he was completely awake, some eight or nine seconds later. It hadn't taken long.

6

Before, he had been angry and shocked and revulsed.

Now he was uncontrollably furious, filled with a killing rage, and insulted. The only reason the haunt had not struck out and slaughtered someone Jack or Rachel—and, therefore, he—knew was that he was too violently angry to remember the names and locations of anyone at the wedding except people such as the children, for whom he had later intentions. Their features were a blurred smear of detestable human faces in his single-track mind, none of them individuals to him except the newlywed Kidds and the two children, who, by virtue of the marriage, tentatively qualified as Kidds—and what self-discipline the haunt possessed this night ruled them out until they were disobedient.

So his nearly incandescent fury seeped out of the house like a viral disease and was gratuitously absorbed by the many human beings who were, unbeknownst to the haunt, on the verge of committing deeds of noncancelable evil, thereby shoving them over the edge. The newspapers and televised news of the next several days would, once more, report a bizarre and hideous crime wave, and many perpetrators would speak of "awful feelings" coming over them. It had been that way for decades.

The insult paid him by Jack, he realized, was un-

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forgivable. It *would* be repaid. The young man and his deceased brother had dwelled in his house all their worthless lives, just as Kidds had done for decade after decade, obliged to pay *no* rent and to expend *no* effort in making something of themselves. They'd had the benefit of his mature guidance and leadership every step of the way.

Now, this very day, Jack and his bitch wife had put on a disgusting exhibit of riotous nude frolicking, incessant stimulation of one another's coarsest and crudest—and apparently pleasure-seeking—human senses, and enough (the haunt attempted to devise an accurate term for it) *conjunctions* to be carrying an *army* of little Kidds in her belly!

So he, himself, mystified by what was taking her so long, had merely reached around Jack to try to feel her breast-things and possibly manipulate the big objects in a fashion that had not occurred to Jack. Maybe a second, much more mature party, the haunt had thought, would be fortunate enough to encourage the arrival of a tiny Kidd.

Then Jack, too clearly to be denied, had tried to brush his hands aside, perhaps even to *crush* them with his clumsy, human weight! *That* was the insult, and it wasn't forgiveable or even to be forgotten!

Of course, he was only projecting himself, it was not his *real* body, or *real* hands, that had touched her. He could never be hurt that way. It was the principle of the thing, the continual way Jack behaved as if he had no need of his lifelong protector, and suddenly a Ray-like absence of both respect and fear.

The haunt peered into the bedroom in which the hedonists lay, found them sleeping. He stared down

at the naked, sprawled bride, eager to frighten her now if he could. For the first time he truly looked elsewhere than her mounded bosom, down farther on her body, and fully recognized and accepted the fact that what Rachel had between her legs did not resemble what Jack had.

And the haunt remembered that while Jack certainly had stroked and kissed the woman's breast-things, even rubbed himself between them, Jack had *primarily* put his man-thing into a space between her legs. Even the Caitlin bitch whom he had visited, and killed, had believed the haunt wished to do to her what Jack had done to Rachel!

The revelation evoked his enthusiasm, and what he saw when he glanced down at his body gave him his idea. It would be just a projection, but it was worthy of a try.

Picturing Jack's bride as its target, he imagined himself sexually aroused as Jack had been and projected an enormous penis that crept down the hallway toward the steps leading in the direction of what was now the master bedroom. He concentrated simultaneously on Rachel Kidd's open legs and the slithering descent of his projected penis down two steps, a third, and fourth—

Then it stopped, because he had merely willed its greater length; there was no human arousal to it. It had never risen at all, like Jack's; it had promptly fallen limply to the floor.

Yet the woman had somehow awakened, and the haunt saw how her hand lay on Jack's member, and he saw Jack's member begin to rise even before he was awake.

Unable to make even his true body stand, the

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haunt had a fit of ferocity and demolished nearly everything within kicking-and-thrashing range.

But her children are due here today! he remembered, abruptly relieved. One by one, they would *all* pay for their ingratitude, his embarrassment. *Each and every one but the very youngest will be disciplined as I have never disciplined anyone!* Ultimately, he told himself, everybody in the house would die—except *him!*

Chapter X

1

Nick and Tricia weren't inside the house—their new home—two minutes before Jack felt he had no choice except to behave as the father he was now obliged to be.

Which turned out, to Jack's chagrin, to be not only correcting the kids but laying down fatherly rules of behavior.

The baby-sitter had dropped them off at the house a full ten minutes before noon—and before Jack had quite finished, after washing up, putting on his clean clothes. Rachel had let Trish and Nick in, then gone out to the sitter's car to bring in some of the kids' things and undoubtedly thank her for her efforts. Jack had wanted to add his heartfelt appreciation—

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But when he left the bathroom, he caught a glimpse of four short legs clattering their way up to the second floor.

"Hey!" he shouted, the first word that occurred to him.

Both children, almost to the landing, paused in midflight to stare questioningly, even innocently, back down at him. "Was your honey's-moon nice, Jack?" Tricia asked, arms squeezing some game boxes, a mama-doll, and a Barbie.

"I only wanted to say 'hi,'" Jack mumbled. He had a dim awareness that he hadn't answered the little girl's question. How could things be going so poorly so fast? "And to tell you—"

"Hi, Jack," Nick answered Jack's greeting, and turned to continue upstairs.

"You're not to wander around all over the second floor," Jack tried again. Why had that sounded imperious even to his own ears? "It was very nice, Trish, thank you," he added, smiling and catching up.

"What was, Jack?" Tricia asked.

The front door closed a bit loudly, and Jack removed the one foot he had placed on the first step of the stairs, hideously aware it could look to Rachel as if he had already put the children on the carpet. But *hadn't* he?

Tricia called down, "We was just takin' our stuff to our bedrooms," and Rache materialized beside Jack. "Mama told us to, Jack."

"What's going on, Jack?" Rachel asked.

He scarcely noticed Nick had trotted on up to his new room. "*Jack, Jack, Jack*"—he couldn't remember ever having heard his name spoken so many times in such a short period of time, and the hon-

est fact that not a single use of it had been accusative or resistant didn't make him feel less resisted or accused. "The kids went upstairs before I had a chance to ask them to stay out of the other wing as well as the other rooms in this one," he told Rachel. "Neither Ray nor I went hardly anywhere up there, and I'm not sure they're safe. Remember, all we really got ready was their rooms."

"And the bathroom up there," she added, looking marvelous but also somehow more housewifelike in the space of a couple of hours. She added, kiddingly, "They can use the bathroom, can't they, boss?"

"Don't be ridiculous, of course they can," he snapped angrily. "It's their *home* now, too!" Determined to convey his wishes to the kids, he called, "Nick, please come here after—" and, turning to the stairs again, found both Nick's and Tricia's faces about two feet away. They moved fast.

"We put our stuff in our rooms," Nick said matter-of-factly. "I wouldn't wander farther down the hall than the bathroom again for a thousand dollars."

"Well," Jack said, starting to turn as the kids jumped down a step, "come springtime, the four of us will take a tour and see what needs to be repaired or just . . ." he wound down slowly, seeing both children were headed in the direction of the kitchen, "cleaned up. Sure glad you're here, guys."

"The short one's a girl," Rachel said, flattening her body against him. "Lighten up, big guy," she added, kissing his mouth and gripping him through the front of his pants. "Nobody expects you to be nominated for Father of the Month for at least half a year."

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Jack realized abruptly that almost all grown-ups got to stay awake longer than the children and kissed her, too.

Yet in a strange way no one could have been sure about, the unfortunate first residential exchange between him and the two kids might have presaged the aura of heaviness they came shortly to feel, even if no one mentioned it.

Nick and Tricia ceased to be the animated boy and girl Jack had come to know and like very much. He noticed their long silences and didn't know whether to attribute blame to himself—or if the haunting presence had begun to frighten them. In the first few days since they had moved in, they went up to their rooms only at bedtime, choosing to play separately on the front-room floor in full view of Jack and Rachel. On one or two occasions, primarily following a quiet dinner, Nick had taken a notebook and pencil out to the kitchen table where Jack and Ray had spent so many hours together, informing the adults that he was "writing." But Nick never asked to read aloud what he'd written, and a single glance Jack managed inside the notebook had revealed a mixture of blank pages and the boy's practiced signature—as "Nick Sayre," "Nicholas Sayre" and "Nicholas Sayre Kidd." The latter had been drawn through, heavily.

One night before New Year's, when both kids—Nick had needed to be reminded by Rachel—had kissed their mother good-night, Jack pulled a chair over to where Rachel was sitting. "I'm getting a little worried about how things are going."

Rachel glanced up with an expression of apparent surprise. "For goodness' sakes, why?"

"Well, Nick and Tricia say almost nothing to us—and not much to each other." He paused, considered his words. "Don't misunderstand me. A part of how I feel is incredible joy that you're all here and I'm not stuck with trying to live absolutely alone in this enormous house. I guess I'm afraid the kids aren't happy, that maybe I—I intimidate them."

Rachel laughed, touched his cheek. "Of course you *do*, at times! That's the natural way for an Aries man!" She saw he was scarcely able to muster a smile. "What I mean by that is that you always know what you're after, so your decisions appear easy—and then, according to Arians, no *other* decision makes any sense!" She got a quick breath. "Nick and Tricia don't talk much with each other and never have—she's even younger to Nick than she is to us, in a way. And he probably seems older to her than you do—because *you* take the time to understand her."

Jack sighed. "Sure, I suppose you've got it right." But he said nothing of the oppressive atmosphere he'd sensed since the kids moved in. *Maybe*, he thought, *it's entirely my imagination*. Yet no sign of the hate-haunt, as Ray had called it, made him wonder when it would drop the other shoe. He pressed the side of his head to her shoulder, stroked one breast. *Maybe I'm simply overworked from having to work the route of one of those poor guys who died so unexpectedly. Talk about sudden tragedies.*

"Be glad Trish hasn't mentioned any of her 'nightmares' since we moved in," Rachel said softly, seeming telepathic in bringing up—in a round-about way—the haunt. "Honey, you've forgotten

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the obvious reasons why the kids aren't being very communicative."

Jack peered up at her intent, lovely face. "What reasons?"

"Christmas vacation sooner or later gets to be a drag for any child," Rachel answered. "There seems nothing much to do. When Nick has homework to do, he'll seem a lot more animated, and Trish will have no choice except to find things to occupy her."

He grinned. "'Animated,' as in finding things he'd rather do, I'll bet. What's the other reason they haven't been more talkative?"

Rachel swung her arms to the side. "The only people they know in this neighborhood are—us!" she exclaimed. "Parental and honeymooning *us*—and they don't really know *you* the way they will even a few weeks from now. Also, neither one of them tends to be particularly sociable, and I won't let Trish even go more than a few houses either way on this side of the street; but children are only short, uneducated people who aren't free to come and go, as adults are."

"*Most* adults," Jack corrected her, meaning him and his own situation.

"But you and I at least know people through our work, and whether they're our buddies or not—"

"They give us things to talk about," Jack finished, getting Rachel's point and nodding.

"Right." She nodded back, hugging him. "Until Nick has enrolled in a new school in this neighborhood, he has no chance to become acquainted with anyone. I only hope there's another little girl living

nearby whom Trish can get to know after some of this snow has melted."

They made love again that night; but when the lights were off, Rachel felt free to dwell on her own concerns.

The major one involved the fact that Jack, glad to be married, have both sex and a family, appeared to her to have almost forgotten the presently quiescent curse that had plagued members of the Kidd household so long. There was a time when Rachel would have loved to see Jack brushing away the mental cobwebs and believing in the possibility of a family life with no greater predictable problems on the horizon than adjusting to Nick and Tricia, or perhaps somebody's dental emergency.

But she had already passed through her period of skepticism, she thought, turning away from Jack and kicking her bare feet and legs out from under the heavy blankets he preferred. She'd had to have the presence of a haunting *something* proved to her, and it was just as closed-minded for her husband to pretend it had merely gone away as for a different person to imagine he was haunted when wind from an open window blew a piece of paper off a table.

It was wonderful, in a way, that no one had been threatened or even scared in the brief period of time they had all been together, especially that Trish's nightmare visitations had seemingly ceased. It was tempting to decide the haunt was a fourteen-carat fool who was unaware Tricia was under this roof, and that it was continuing to drop by the girl's former bedroom, dim-wittedly wondering where Trish was.

But Nick had told Rachel—when she asked—how

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he had burned a finger right after the wedding, and the terrifying, obviously supernatural act of bigotry seemed to match Ray Kidd's description of it as a "hate-haunt"—a warped and loathing force, but one that thought clearly enough and, on occasion, with deadly purpose.

Nick had begged her to have his partial roll of film developed, claiming he still wanted the pictures so he could create a wedding album. She had both doubted they'd come out and that Nick didn't have a different reason, now, for seeing the photographs of her kissing the best man, Harold, and Jack kissing Harold's wife, Ruthie. Rachel had dropped the film off at a drugstore with a sense of apprehension, and now, she supposed, they might be ready for her to pick up.

Meanwhile, she'd kept what happened to Nick from Jack, ambivalent about the wisdom—and loving kindness—of diminishing the happiest few days of his tormented life. Maybe Craig Ryce, the detective she had hired, would discover information that would be useful in defending themselves against their uninvited lodger.

She closed her eyes, tried to fall asleep. But she knew now that she'd made a terrible mistake not to insist that she and Jack also sleep on the second floor. Yes, it was marvelous to enjoy privacy with him, possibly vital for Jack's transition from bachelor to a husband and father of two.

But she couldn't stop listening for the frightened cries of little Trish or Nick, especially when her own lights were turned off for the night and the creepy old house fell still.

Eventually, Rachel sensed with a certainty that

made perspiration pop out on her forehead and temples, it wouldn't be at *all* quiet.

She had to be ready to think, faster than she ever had before.

2

The next day was uneventful for Jack, but oddly interminable. His enhanced route took him to the outskirts of the town in two directions, even though Harold, his best man, had clearly attempted to lay it out in a fashion that eliminated as many stop-lights as possible. The problem stemmed from the city's reluctance to give Harold a thoroughly updated list of streets and roads that were being worked on, any given day, despite Harold's regular and earnest efforts to collect the data.

To his surprise, Jack realized he and Rachel could become genuine friends with the Dunnings. He was surprised not because of the racial difference but because he'd never particularly tried to form friendships. Maybe, he thought, in his delivery van way out in the boonies, it was that he and Harold were both married men now. Before marrying Rachel, Jack hadn't known anybody who had a haunting in common. There weren't any support groups he knew of for folks whose houses were infested with anything but roaches or mice—and probably not even for them.

He might have asked Harold and Ruthie over to dinner by now, but even with the presence seemingly content for the time being, he was afraid of the consequences for the Dunnings.

Or, Jack thought, spotting the address next on his

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route slip and grinning privately, *maybe I don't want company. If they stayed late, Rache might be too tired to make love.*

Halfway to the front door with the store package in his arms, he remembered with a twinge of unhappiness that his bride had to make Avon deliveries tonight. *Lord help me*, he realized, *it'll be the first time I baby-sit the kids.*

He hoped he'd be better with them, alone, than when he'd snapped at them on the stairs. *Already*, Jack mused, knocking, *that seems like ages ago.*

3

Rachel had fed the children and eaten lunch herself when, laying out a route for her own evening deliveries, a number of facts and a potentially horrific interpretation occurred to her:

It was a pity Jack had to work longer hours for RPS at a time when most new husbands would have still been on either a one-week or two-week honeymoon. And it was certainly strange that he had to do so because a couple of other routemen had died so unexpectedly just when Jack was getting married—

And both men, Jack had told her with a tone of regret, *were men he originally asked to be his best man!* She raised her head, gazed across the dining room without focusing. What were the odds against two men in a not very hazardous job getting killed after a *third* fellow employee had asked them to serve in his wedding?

She recalled for the first time in ages Jack's explanation that the haunt didn't kill people willy-

nilly because it appeared to think its jobs were to discipline and to protect members of the Kidd family. Was it possible it included *revenge* under its own definition of protection?

Rachel huddled watchfully in her chair at the dining-room table, terrified by the far-flung, insane ramifications of that. Maybe it had shocked Harold Dunning, and her, because its old-fashioned principles made it believe she should kiss no man but its protected Jack, and shocked Jack and Ruthie Dunning to discipline and punish them. And perhaps it shocked Nick for—for *witnessing* such conduct, and attempted to destroy his little camera so there'd be no record of such an outrage?

The phone rang like an hysterical scream and tore Rachel to her feet.

"It's Craig, Craig Ryce," the detective's voice said the moment Rachel said hello. There was a note of urgency there, perhaps excitement. "This is Rachel Sayre, isn't it?"

"Yes. Well," Rachel dutifully corrected the woman with a light laugh, "Rachel Kidd now. I was wondering when you'd have something for me."

"Congratulations," Craig said tersely. "Look, I've found something rather odd. I'd like to meet you somewhere to discuss it, preferably for lunch day after tomorrow. Yeah, I know it's a holiday, kind of, but I'd hate to wait on this and I'm all tied up tomorrow."

The "holiday" was December 31, the day of New Year's Eve. "That's fine with me, Craig. Where?"

"Let's make it the little place in the same block as my building. It's just north of there, you can't miss it. I generally have lunch there anyway."

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Rachel agreed. When they'd hung up, she realized how wise Craig had been on two counts: She had said nothing whatever about the haunt on a phone call going into this house, aware something or someone else might have been listening. And she'd neatly avoided mentioning either the address of her office's location or the name of the restaurant at which they would meet.

Rachel knew she would wonder during her deliveries and all of tomorrow what new "rather odd" information the beautiful brunette had unearthed.

4

Right after she had eaten an evening meal not much larger than Nick's, Rachel jumped up and began gathering her deliveries for the night. "I don't think I'll be very long. Right before New Year's Eve, most of my women customers really want the makeup I deliver, so they tend to have their checks made out." She was circling the dining-room table, bestowing her last kiss on Jack's waiting lips. "Be good little varlets for your old man—remember, he's a rookie and has a lot to learn."

"I'd rather you put this off tonight," Jack said with all his patented sincerity. "Harold saw the weather forecast on his lunch hour and said snow flurries are expected."

"His lunch hour is about ten A.M.," Rachel said, tugging on her coat. "That was hours and hours ago—and my lady customers want their beauty gloop. *Now.*"

Jack had anticipated her answer and had his

trump card ready. “*I know! Why don’t the kids and I go with you, just for fun? I’d be with you in case you had any car trouble—or we could take the van, if I’m driving, and you wouldn’t have to turn off the engine at every stop.*”

Rachel, who had kept moving, paused just inside the dining room. “School resumes the day after the first, and I’ve already told both Nick and Tricia they have to begin going to bed earlier.” She pointed her finger at each child in turn. “Starting tonight. ‘Bye.”

Disconsolate, already missing Rache and fearful of his new responsibility, Jack listened intently for the sound of his bride’s motor turning over, hoping it wouldn’t.

The instant it did, Tricia glanced up from a plate that appeared to be carefully coated with buttery mashed potatoes. “She didn’t mean I hafta go to bed earlier,” she told Jack with massive solemnity as her substitute for sincerity. “*I don’t go to school. ‘Member?*”

“She does too go to bed when I do!” Nick exploded. “She’ll have the same hour even when I’m ten and get to stay up an hour later, ‘cause she’ll still be a baby!”

“Ain’t a baby!” Trish told Nick with a ferocity that extended to her inflamed cheeks. Her small hands fisted, a fork brandished in the right one. “*You’re the baby,*” she added, “*the big baby!*”

“I am, am I?” Nick retorted, shoving the center piece of his eyeglasses higher on his nose. “Then what time *is* it when Mother wants us to go to bed tonight?”

Tricia looked stumped. Despite himself, Jack was fascinated and waited to see what the four-year-old

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would say. He sensed the magnitude of the moment for both children and couldn't believe the sibling war hinged on anything as elemental—to *him*, apparently to Nick as well—as telling time on a clock.

Suddenly, with brilliant insight worthy of her mother, Trish showed the two high-and-mighty males her point *didn't* depend on telling time. "I awready said Mama didn't tell me to go t'bed when *you* hafta! You're talkin' about two *different* times, Nick!"

Jack impulsively clapped his hands twice for the small child.

Then he realized there was no choice, if he ever intended to have any clout in his own home, except to make a bedtime decision for both kids. He really didn't dare let them walk over him. "Trish," he began, holding her hand, "you're right that you don't go to school yet. You can play all day while your brother's being told what to do. But you're *newer* than Nick, you're entitled to the best of care Mama and I can give you—so you *stay* new and special as long as possible. For tonight only, I want you to go to bed in forty-five minutes and get *lots* of sleep. An hour later it will be Nick, all tired and yawning, who goes to bed—because I won't *let* him go until then, even if he begs."

Nick observed Jack's wink at him and played along. "Not 'til *then*?" he whined. "Gosh, Jack, I'll practically be out on my feet by then!"

Tricia's expression said she almost saw through the plot, but her dubiety kept her quiet—a seat before the TV also didn't hurt—until forty-five minutes had passed. Jack let another few minutes go by so she could see the end of a program. Then he

cleared his throat, opened his eyes wide when she glanced toward him; and Trish skipped over to give him a hug and a good-night kiss. Then, to his astonishment, she said, " 'Night, Nick," and cooperatively headed for the stairs.

Jack stared after the child, his mouth open. *Gee, maybe I can be a decent daddy after all!* he mused proudly.

"Way to go, rookie," Nick told him with a grin, referring to Rachel's joke before she left. "I think you have a shot at making the team."

Jack grinned back. It was practically the first pleasant thing the boy had said to him since he'd challenged them on the stairs. "Do you know how to make popcorn?" he asked, pushing forward in his chair. He knew Nick's propensity for eating everything in sight.

"Kind of," Nick said. His face lit up with expectancy. "Do we have some?"

"C'mon." Jack started for the kitchen. "If a kid has peanut butter and bread and has learned how to make popcorn, he needn't ever worry about starving to death."

Out in the kitchen Jack rummaged around, located the popcorn maker, and melted a stick of butter. Then he showed Nick how to operate the little machine and let Nick pour in the Orville Redenbacher while he found two saltshakers. "Every man has the sacred right to have a saltshaker handy, to add more salt when he pleases. It's in the Bill of Rights, I think."

"*Daddy!*" a small child's voice called from the second floor. "Would you come here a minute, please?"

For the flash of a moment, Jack forgot his new

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household name and wished "Daddy" would answer the child.

Then he remembered, and, for another beat—even as he began hurrying toward the stairs—was terrified that something awful was happening to Tricia.

He found her in her room, barefoot and wearing a nightie, starting to climb into her bed.

"Would you tuck me in," she asked, turning to peer up at him, "and help me with my prayers?"

He felt an enormous welling-up of affection and wondered if he had ever seen anything or anyone so cute. He stooped, got the covers just the way she preferred them. She was satisfied, smiling and sighing before beginning her prayer.

And as he listened, he grew aware of the tremendous difference that had been made in this room—partly by Rachel, in replacing each item on Trish's pretend vanity table where they had been and hanging the child's clothes in her closet. But the primary changes were Tricia's. It had been one of the many bedrooms on the floor that Jack and Ray hadn't entered in years. Both of them had remembered the lifeless, graveyard silence of rooms in which no one had slept, dreamed, made plans or love for decades. The very beds had made the young Jack think of slabs in a morgue.

Now Trish lived here, vibrantly. Even her discarded clothing and her stuffed animals and dolls breathed spirit into the place somehow.

He heard that word again, in the girl's whispered prayer—"Daddy"—and realized in his heart it was his name now, it belonged as much to him as the name "Jack."

He kissed her forehead and said, "I love you," while she squeezed his neck and, in the midst of a yawn, told him the same thing.

Downstairs again, he found the aroma of hot popcorn and followed it to the front room. Nick had turned to a basketball game on TV and left a huge bowl of the wondrous snowy balls next to Jack's chair. Beside it was a full saltshaker.

"You can turn to something else on the tube," Nick offered, hand wrist-deep in his own mound of popcorn.

"Why?" Jack said, sagging into his chair. "I love b-ball." He pointed to the team handling the ball. "They're the Cream and Crimson of Indiana University, and the two kids at guard are A. J. Guyton and Michael Lewis. See, A. J. passes the ball into number thirty-five—he's Kirk Haston, the best I.U. center since Kent Benson—and Haston is scoring on a nice left-handed hook shot. But Indiana isn't getting back fast enough on defense. See that back-cut Iowa worked on the Hoosiers?"

Nick turned his head in Jack's direction with surprise and new respect. "You really *do* like basketball!" he exclaimed. "You *know* it!"

"Kids and grown-ups make the same mistake, Nicodemus," Jack remarked. "You assume adults fit the same mold—are all alike—and grown-ups think the same thing about kids." He waved his hand airily. "That's one of the sources of all bigotry, you know—lumping together millions of people in a single group and imagining—"

Tricia cried out wordlessly. This time Jack knew who needed her daddy even though she hadn't called his name, and was out of his chair at once.

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Then Trish emitted a wail of clear fear, and Jack was running.

He caromed off the banister, rounding the corner and dashing up the steps, settling for holding his left biceps and gritting his teeth. An atmosphere of menace assailed him as he sprinted toward the child's bedroom, but the slightly numbing feeling in his arm kept him going, nearly blocked out the sensation of an evil that was inexplicable and perhaps beyond human comprehension.

He'd left a single light burning in Tricia's room, but it was pitch dark in there now and Jack felt sure she hadn't gotten up to turn it off. He'd been anxious about the dark places in the house since Mother died and hated the idea of stepping through this doorway, partly because of what he might find.

But he made himself enter and bend to punch the switch of the small lamp on a table to his right, then look up and search for Trish.

He saw her cowering on her knees in the most distant corner of her bed, a sheet drawn up to her chin and her Barbie doll clutched for defense in the same hand. With her other one Trish was pointing toward an area just under the ceiling . . . at nothing. Her lips moved as if she were chattering away, nervously, but no audible words emerged.

Jack was to her in a split second, supportively grasping her arms. "Darling, what is it? Are you all right?"

"He said I'll be his toy now," she said in a scary mixture of terror and frustrated rage. "and that he'll be mine. B-but I'm not anyone's *toy*, I'm a little girl!"

Tears of fury filled Jack's eyes. He held her close,

trying to think clearly. "You're absolutely right, Tricia, and you're Mama and Daddy's little girl—not anybody else's!" He saw, above the child's head, Nick standing in the doorway, not quite as cool of manner as usual. "Son, I want you to take your sister down to the kitchen and get her some ice cream. Fix some for yourself, too, if you want it."

Then he waited until Tricia had run over to the older child and until he heard their footsteps descending the stairs.

And Jack closed the bedroom door, then returned to stand in the area—beneath the ceiling—where Trish had pointed. "All right, you warped god-damned bully, show yourself! I'm not afraid of you anymore, not when you're a miserable *coward* who picks on little children!"

He paused, not really expecting the haunt to materialize but angrily hoping for *some* dialogue, however vituperative. There was a strange, enveloping heat where he stood waiting, but that was all. It was as if the aged presence listened, possibly longing to kill Jack as it had wounded and tricked Ray into shooting himself, but it was making itself hold back. Was it devoid of ideas suddenly? Was it perhaps unable to show itself to him, or more than once in a certain period of time?

"Where the hell do you hide, you perverted freak?" Jack shouted. He poked into Tricia's closet, flattening her dresses and other clothing against a closet wall. Then he peeked under her bed before staring again toward the highest part of the room. "Well, hear this, weirdo! You leave these children alone or I'll adopt them as my own immediately—

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then take them and my wife out of this mausoleum, and set *fire* to the dump!"

Somewhere in the house—he couldn't identify a direction—there was a thump, then a moan that was scarcely audible.

"No, wait!" Jack exclaimed, spinning about and grinning. He pointed a finger where Tricia had pointed. "*Here's the deal!* If you go on terrifying my family—if you do any harm to Rachel, Tricia, or Nick—I'll take my own life. Intentionally, not the way poor Ray did it! And that will finally get rid of you, too—because Rache isn't pregnant yet or she would have told me, and these children aren't formally Kidds! Your rulership over my family will be over then, *for good!*" Jack laughed, shook his fist at the ceiling. "You understand that, you phony damn tyrant? If you make me fulfill my threat, I won't be around to father new members of the family—and nobody else ever will be!"

An object that picked up striking force as it fell shot down from the ceiling and hit Jack's head. The injury only smarted—and badly frightened Jack—and he stooped down to pick it up.

It was Tricia's favorite doll—not Barbie—and he remembered what she had said: "I'll be his toy now, and he'll be mine." The sadistic haunt had *taken a doll away from a little child*.

Did throwing it back mean the cruel presence had agreed with Jack's deal and would leave them alone, or was it simply displaying its bizarre talents?

Chapter XI

1

He had matched the address on the package he was delivering to the address on the white box's label and was starting up the walkway to the front door. The identification typed on the label read, "Dr. Andre Jordan, Paranormal Heuristician," and that surprised Jack a little. There was no shingle on the door, the yellow brick front of the building bore a resemblance to the other residences in the neighborhood, and Jack was pretty sure the area wasn't zoned for business.

But the man for whom the delivery was intended called himself a doctor, so Jack tried turning the knob and pushing on the door—

And he found he was, indeed, standing in a wait-

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ing room of sorts, even though nobody was sitting in the four uncomfortable-appearing chairs looking as though they expected to be greeted momentarily. *There isn't even a reception desk*, he ruminated, *or a place to pay nurses for Dr. Jordan's services.*

What Jack *did* see was a single framed message, on a wall across from the quartet of chairs, and a closed door leading (Jack presumed) to the examining rooms.

He read the printed message while trying to decide his next step. It read: "Dante had made the same mistake as Swedenborg in believing that 'in this world is the Ultimate of Heaven.' This is the most damnable Falsehood of Satan. . . ." The author, or speaker, was Malcolm Muggeridge in *The Green Stick*, the date given 1982.

Holding the package that required an acceptance signature under one arm and dangling his RPS clipboard from his other hand, Jack fell to contemplating Muggeridge's quotation and trying to apply it to his own life. Until he'd married Rachel he would have had no difficulty in seeing "this world" as the farthest thing from Heaven. But the remark, posted by itself on a physician's wall, seemed to Jack a—

"Who *are* you," a carefully cultivated voice began, behind Jack, "and what the *hell* do you think you are doing on my premises?"

Jack had turned, rapidly, before Andre completed his question.

The man in white shirtsleeves, facing him, possessed the authoritative manner of someone many inches taller and many muscular pounds larger

than he was. In fact, this imperious, stiff-necked person was slightly shorter and probably lighter than Jack—though wiry, so challengingly up on his toes that he seemed athletic—and was at once slender and aesthetic of manner. At first glance Jack had thought him white; closer consideration indicated the fellow had regular features but those, very possibly, of an African-American.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Jack said, showing him the label on the package, then extending the clipboard. The route slip had a heavy straight line and an X obviously calling for a signature. "I have this for you, and I thought this was a doctor's office. Because 'doctor' precedes the name 'Andre Jordan.'"

Andre produced a fountain pen from his shirt pocket, took the clipboard, and scribbled illegibly on the heavy line. "Are you in the habit of entering everywhere there is an unlocked door? Including women's rooms?" He reached for the package. "I am entitled, by virtue of my doctorate, to describe myself as 'Dr. Jordan.' Possibly the words appended to my name—'paranormal heuristician'—mystified you and caused your head to reel, uncharacteristically experience a wave of . . . curiosity?"

More annoyed and insulted than he dared show, Jack said, frowningly, "I know what the word 'paranormal' means. If memory serves, a heuristician is considered, these days, a kind of problem solver."

"It would be more precise," Andre replied, "to say that a heuristician teaches others to understand a matter—exactly as I've done, once more, for you. No charge." He gave Jack Kidd his first more-than-cursory look as it occurred to him to wonder why he was spending this much time—unpaid—on a

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total stranger. Andre recalled, at last, how many times in his past he had dawdled as a sort of act of faith—in the Other Side, or God; Eight; his own psychic instincts; whatever—over outwardly unpromising places, imaginative whims, people, even animals he'd befriended.

And not once had he failed to assist some soul (here, or there) in trouble, learn a valuable lesson (small or large), or earn a fee.

This thing about his unconscious mind notifying him by making Andre carp at or make quips at people, sometimes trap and bore them half silly with what seemed like stupid stalls—or, worse, making *passes* at people!—was simply unfortunate. But it was also teaching him why more men and women didn't have intuitive or clairvoyant incidents when they might assist one another: The high probability was—they *did*.

But if *he* found it hard to let himself appear to behave like a critical asshole, or to turn himself—with *his* dignity—into a clown, when he *understood* basically what was happening, how could he expect a college prof, a banker, a dramatic actress or a high school principal to mark up a psychic moment as anything except a hunch or an absurd whim?

Andre was willing to bet a small fortune—his own small one—that most such flashes of unknowable knowing were actually reported, passed along, when they were dream memories. Aside from Freudians, practically nobody expected dreams to be realistic. The president or his wife could mention dreaming that they were mowed down by irate citizens with Uzis while they were engaged in a drug orgy, and no

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one would hold them accountable until something of the kind happened; they had just had "silly dreams."

"As for you 'knowing' the meaning of 'paranormal,' sir—what's your name?"

"Kidd." Seethingly spoken. "Jack Kidd. *Mr. Kidd, Doctor.*"

"Well," Andre said more mildly, "follow me. I think I can prove that you know nothing about the subject—if you have a moment?"

Jack paused, nodded, and followed Andre through the door.

His name is Jack, Andre thought, recalling how Eight had told him a month or so before to expect someone new whose "home disturbances" were of an "unusual kind of psychic" problem, and the materialized spirit, before entering the tunnel, had been worried about his brother—Jack, or Jackson.

Of course, many men had that name or sobriquet, Andre reasoned as he cleared off a chair for the deliveryman to sit. Had his business been involved with numerous or innumerable men, this fellow's name would have meant nothing on the face of it. Andre's clientele, however, consisted of research groups for whom he served as a consultant; three filmmakers and two writers for suddenly popular television programs; and a steadily fluctuating number of face-to-face, mostly female individuals who fell—as a rule—into one of two categories: Either they were would-be opportunists who believed the recently deceased relative had left money, jewels, or a will concealed somewhere, or they were truly scared out of their wits by spectral phenomena (or their own mental problems). The trouble for Andre with the face-to-face clients was

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that when he completed his work for them, they went away and were almost never repeat customers. *Most folks*, he thought as he took a perch on the arm of a sofa relatively close to his guest, *have one ghost or group of ghosts to a customer*—if he did his job properly.

Andre adjusted his suspenders and pressed the fingers of his hands together. "I'm not going to go into a trance or produce ectoplasm from my ears for you. It's immaterial to me whether you believe in the paranormal or not. This isn't meant to be the 'Magic with Jordan Hour' or anything of that kind."

Jack met his rather piercing gaze, thinking he couldn't remember when he'd met anyone who oozed as much arrogance. "I didn't say I disbelieved in the subject," he said, selecting his words with care. He was, Jack knew, the last man in the world to hold no stock in the paranormal, occult, supernatural, or whatever Dr. Andre Jordan wanted to call it. So if the self-confident young man before him was any damn good, he certainly *ought* to be able to sense something about the haunt—with no clues from him.

"I think, Mr. Kidd," Andre said, "you, your new wife, and children are those I was asked to protect from a most unusual haunting entity in your family home."

Jack nearly threw himself back against his chair in amazement. He said nothing immediately that would verify Jordan's observation but knew his expression had surely done so. "Who asked you to help us? Has my wife been here?"

"No, she has not," Andre replied. He sat even straighter, but when he finished his answer, he

spoke with the same tone of voice. "It was your brother, Ray."

Jack felt his mouth open in astonishment. Then he shook his head forcefully. "My wife and I sometimes know each other's thoughts. You've developed your telepathic side." He arose unhurriedly, rankled that the grief he still endured had been used in an effort to wangle a few dollars. "My brother didn't come to you for help. He's dead." Jack managed a half-smile and turned toward the door.

"Yes," Andre said quietly, staying put, "I know he's dead. He was shot in the top of his chest. Before he moved on to the Other Side, he was aided by my spirit guide in materializing, in my presence. He was very concerned that a certain haunt be prevented from harming his 'bro,' called 'Jackson,' and a blond woman named Rachel." Andre looked at the way Jack was frozen in position—a common reaction posture, to Andre—and added, softly, "It is not my way to pursue prospective clients. However, I believe the 'hate-haunt' has not departed and that Ray was right in fearing for all your lives. My services *are* available, and something else I was told about your 'presence' intrigues me enough to waive my fee."

Jack turned halfway back to the astounding, impeccable stranger, automatically taking the business card Jordan proffered and poking it into a pocket of his pants. It occurred to him for one of the first times in his existence that life—when the other end of it was factored in—was not really very much what children were taught to believe it was. It was all such a forward-looking affair, from the

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uncountable lessons of infancy throughout childhood and education, from job-or career-seeking to marriage, having and rearing kids, into eventual old age. Then modern society seemed to say, *halt!*—the progressive steps come to an end. Which, Jack perceived in a flash, made life appear to make no sense. Not unless there were *also* steps toward what seemed to be death, and what lay beyond.

The awareness he experienced convinced Jack more than anything else in his existence that there was more, after one died. Much, much more. It was only that it was understood or anticipated by aged grown-ups no better than a child was able to see the value of the alphabet and reading, or eating enough vegetables, with the exceptions of some religious people who occasionally had the faith to look forward to the conclusion—the final step of looking ahead—of their learning experiences.

“You may be exactly who I need,” Jack said at last, “and I appreciate your offer. I’m a little overwhelmed right now.” He chuckled uncertainly. “I was just making a delivery and didn’t expect this.” He reached out to shake Andre Jordan’s hand, and the parapsychologist offered it. “Perhaps I should talk with my wife, Rachel, since our haunt has been there for many years and has caused terrible things to happen to people who are—well, disobedient. I *have* to be cautious, Doctor.”

“I understand.” Andre’s manner, in general, matched the words. But Jack sensed tension in him, some kind of urgency that seemed far more personal—to Jordan himself—than he had ever sensed in a medical doctor. “But you mustn’t wait

too long, Jack. Your brother Ray mentioned that your family and you will be *hideously* haunted if you do not act against it."

"I'll remember," Jack said as he retraced his path to the front door with Jordan behind him. He was leaving with equal measures of relief and doubt that he should leave at all without the paranormal heuristicsian in tow. "Thank you for—"

"Don't wait, Jack," Andre's melodious voice sounded in his ear, "until your only resort is the one Ray was constrained to consider."

Jack turned back, but Jordan's door was closing, gently, in his face.

2

At some level and some point, Jack pondered a block or so from Dr. Jordan's office, he had begun to draw some conclusions about the family haunt, and he had probably resisted Jordan's offer of immediate help because of those assumptions.

In no particular order, Jack could figure out they had to do with belief in extraordinary, inexplicable conditions; the likely reactions (and beliefs) of people other than Kidds; and the nature of Jack Kidd's reasonable expectations or aspirations as well as limitations.

Where the first assumption was concerned, Dad had told Ray and him at early ages about the haunt, and both Mother's sudden death and their father's authoritative position as their only surviving family grown-up had convinced both boys that Kidds *were* haunted. What else could swiftly destroy as vital a woman as Mother?

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And while many of the events in Jack's life seemed to make it certain that the conclusion was factual, a part of his mind wondered—even now—if the haunt did not *feed* on fear, possibly survive as long as it had by being the ultimate center both of discipline and sheer attention.

But until Rachel consented to spend her life with him, Ray had been the only person—once Dad was gone, too—to share Jack's belief with him. Dimly, he recalled two or three other little boys to whom he had confided aspects of the haunting. None of them had understood that the central point of meaning in young Jack Kidd's existence could not be sports or TV or vacations from school, and his acceptance of a stark difference between their preoccupations and his made any friendships impossible.

Even when he grew up Jack realized the probable reactions he would get from potential buddies would remain disbelief, plus a challenge based on their own beliefs. He didn't mean only the tenets of their religions—some of which would not allow them to believe in anything ghostly even if it showed up with Marley's chains—but the generally pragmatic if not altogether agnostic belief in nothing they could not see, hear, or touch.

And Jack had spent most of his adult life with no peer relationships other than literal brotherhood by—the admission of it in the delivery van as he headed toward the next address on the day's route rather stunned him—believing he (and Ray) *were made special* by the haunt. It was, after all, *their* phantom protector and autocrat, the *Kidds'* haunt, nobody else's.

He had clung to that notion, mostly uncon-

sciously, until meeting Rachel—by disbelieving most of the tenets in which his peers appeared to believe. In addition to never attending any kind of church, Jack had eschewed their big articles of faith: going after positions instead of jobs; drinking excessively or using drugs to escape and for artificial highs; picking up women to use for sex; staring at football games all day Saturday and Sunday; apologizing for the stray, insightful observation; studiously avoiding all solitary and independent thinking that was not job-related. Instead, he had done virtually everything differently from his peers, down to and including marrying the girl of his dreams—one with two growing children.

Now, Jack confessed to himself, *I guess I'm not certain I'm ready to give up the haunt because the beliefs I've maintained shaped me and, in a round-about way, attracted Rache—who is faster to accept a challenge than any man I've met.* Besides, he had been able to keep the damn thing at a distance most of the time and usually outsmart it. *Except for kissing its ass, Jack thought, I turned out to be the most independent guy, mentally, I know.*

He had arrived on Kessler Boulevard; it was a straight shoot for his next delivery, but traffic was fairly heavy.

The decision to ask Andre Jordan in or not seemed to Jack to revolve around the question of whether or not the haunt had believed Jack's shouted rebuke and warning and would leave Tricia—Nick and Rachel, too—unbothered and unharmed. What it had done to Trish—frightening her and taking her doll—seemed ignorant, pointless, and uncharacteristic to Jack. How could a being who had propelled

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poor Ray's car into another vehicle or taunted a full-grown woman into killing herself have a desire to tease and badger a small child by stealing her baby doll?

A new thought made Jack's nose wrinkle as if he had smelled something foul. Maybe teasing Tricia had been the *least* of what the haunt desired to do to her. In memory he heard what the little sweetie had reported him saying to her—that they would become each other's toys.

Jack hadn't ever been the sort of man who viewed the opposite sex with such terms—let alone four-year-old children—but he kept up with as many of society's deteriorating, so-called "lifestyles" as he could and knew such masculine notions were widespread. Impulsively deciding to go back to Dr. Jordan and beg for an exorcism, or whatever the man deemed necessary, he glanced to the right in search of a driveway in which he could turn around.

The man sitting beside him on the front seat of the van kept him from seeing through the passenger window.

Jack almost piled the vehicle up, and not just because he'd believed he was by himself in the van.

"Hello, Jack," Eugene Kidd—Jack's father—said in the mildest of ways.

Jack's dead and long-buried father.

"Hi . . . Dad," Jack said, trying to regain his normal breathing pattern. He'd almost said, instead, "Dad, what are you doing here?"

"You've grown into a fine-looking, mature man, Jackie," Dad said, clearly observing him closely. "I think marriage agrees with you, son."

Jack was managing to sneak hurried peeks at his

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passenger without driving into the automobile in front of him. What he really wanted then was somewhere to turn in and stop the engine, really chat with his father's ghost. "*Jackie*." Dad had been the only human being who'd called him that! There was no fear in his heart. Why would he be scared of the man who'd fathered him, an apparition now or not? He'd only been startled by his visit.

"Rachel is a wonderful woman," he said at last. "Are you with Mother—I mean, usually?" Jack swallowed. This was an all-new experience to him, he was groping frantically for suitable things to say. "Does she know, too, that I married?"

"I'm sure she approves," Dad said. "But I didn't come here to talk about her or your blond wife with the big breasts."

Jack glanced sharply at the father figure—his very own—and, with the line of traffic halted by a stop sign, took a really good look. Eugene Kidd looked only slightly older than he had when Jack last saw him, which sounded appropriate; there was no reason Jack knew of why a person who was youthful at death should continue aging. Perhaps Dad's reference to breasts was merely his way of welcoming Jack to full adulthood, especially since Mother had been beautiful to Jack and he knew, deep inside, she and his father must have had enough sex to bring two sons into the world.

But Dad wasn't supposed to be of this world any longer.

"I've longed to see you again, Dad," he said, "but you haven't . . . been back . . . until now. Why this afternoon?"

Dad's unmistakable voice raised in a roar of fury

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Jack had never, in Dad's life, heard from him. "*You were telling that—that man back there our family secrets! Or getting ready to do it!*" His face, when Jack again saw it, was twisted by anger and outrage into a mask of revulsion and loathing. "Don't you remember when you and Ray were tykes the way I told the two of you all I knew about the presence in the house—how relaxed I was, and how I said we'd all be protected, forever, if we just did his bidding?"

"I'll never forget that talk, Dad," Jack said quickly. "But I've just realized what a deceitful damned *liar* it is, and how it's not only vicious but petty—that the haunt is like *everything* evil, it does what it wants for pleasure whether it's a huge, impressive act or something as pathetic as taking away small children's dolls!"

"I know about that!" the visitor snapped. "It's lonely, Jackie, it has no one. All it wants with those kids is a little fun and games! You must learn to be more forgiving, more understanding, and *appreciative!*"

Jack struck the steering wheel with his fist. "You want *me* to forgive a monstrous, homicidal *thing* that orphaned my brother and me—not to mention God knows how many aunts and uncles and grandparents—and tricked that kid brother into taking his own life! Ray's dead, you know!"

"'Walk a mile in the other brave's shoes'—remember when I taught that old Indian saying to you boys? *Do you?*" The man sitting beside Jack, in many ways resembling him, actually had tears in his eyes. "People who are so confined that only their thoughts and concerns for others can flow out

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into a larger world develop little quirks, boy, little private needs . . . and desires . . . that those with freedom always at their disposal need to empathize with, to—*understand*, just as I said.” He squirmed on his seat until he was a foot from Jack, practically facing him. “Have you forgotten that you have *never* been injured—”

“I’ve known heartache I wouldn’t wish on many people!” Jack interjected.

“Not even suffering a childhood disease, not so much as a goddamn *cold*?” the visitor finished with a rising voice filled with incredulity. “You should get down on your knees in thanks for the guiding force of your family! Even those adorable little brats he urged you to take in along with their big-breasted mother will be protected identically—once you legally adopt them, make them Kidds, too!”

“Quit talking about my wife’s body!” Jack exploded, swiveling his head to take another look at the apparition. “Identically protected? Does that include the haunt ceasing to spook them, like he did poor Nick in our photo gallery?” Jack was yelling now, and didn’t care. “Does that mean the fucking old pervert will keep his hands off Rachel and not try to molest our innocent children?”

“How dare you use such a tone of voice to your poor, dead father!”

“My father,” Jack flashed, “had a mole on one cheek.” Jack spoke quietly.

“Yes, I do,” said “Dad,” touching the left side of his face and smiling. “Good memory, son.”

Suddenly frightened by the audacity of what he meant to say, Jack caught a fast breath and said it.

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"Better than yours. The mole was on his *right* cheek!"

"You impertinent brat!" the projection exclaimed, and slapped Jack on his right cheek. It felt like a warm, humid breeze yet mildly stung. "You're no son of mine!"

"Well," Jack said, "you got something right at last!"

"*I could make this vehicle rise into the air and crash against three others!*" screamed the haunt with Jack's father's face—although the entity's countenance was like slow-melting plastic now and the look-alike body was starting to fade away.

"You'd be repeating yourself and becoming boring!" Jack yelled back, "and you'd be alone forever!" He fought not to slam down the accelerator and to remember to brake. "Before you run along—just what the hell *are* you? Or who did you *used to be*?"

The haunt amazed Jack by answering his question just before it vanished. But a passing car with a boom box covered the reply completely, and he was alone in the van.

Chapter XII

1

The boy who had been softly rapping on the front door was pop-eyed homely and short, but neither fact evoked a particularly negative reaction from Nick.

"Hi," the stranger said. A second after speaking, the corners of his wide mouth turned up as if remembering belatedly that a smile was in order. "I heard some kids moved in here. I'm Angus."

"Hi," Nick said, putting out a hand for a shake, "I'm Nick. Yeah, the man who lives here married my mother." Nick unconsciously awaited some kind of reaction, such as an expression, but didn't get one. "Where do you live, Angus?"

"Oh, around here." The delayed smirk again. He wore no coat, jacket, or boots despite the fact it was

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very cold out. His long, skinny arms just dangled at his sides and his feet, almost covered by blowing snow, did not shift. "I'm real close," he added, then asked quickly, "You want to come outside and mess around?"

Nick considered it. Mother was away at lunch with that real pretty Craig Ryce, Trish was in the dining room where the baby-sitter was reading to her at the table, and Nick was exceedingly, almost painfully bored. "I guess I could for a little while," he said, "but I'll need to stay close in case I'm called."

He went to get his coat, which was lying in a chair where he'd left it. From the open front door he heard, in a harsh whisper, "If your baby-sitter finds you were out, tell her your cousin stopped by for a visit."

"She knows I don't have any other relatives," Nick answered as he closed the door, unlocked, behind him. "I'll just tell her the truth if I have to."

"Oh," Angus answered tonelessly. He was ambling off to the side of the huge old house, leaving footprints that looked amazingly deep, to Nick, for such a little guy.

Nick hesitated, aware something he had just heard or said didn't make sense.

Then he had it. "How'd you know we have a baby-sitter today when you didn't see her?" he called as Angus bent in the snow as if he had dropped something. "You *couldn't* have, from the door."

A massive, weighty ball that contained nearly as much ice as snow collided with the side of Nick's head, knocking off his glasses and making him fall

partly on his face. It hurt a lot, and Nick felt dizzy. But he heard the smaller boy trampling a fast, heavy-footed path toward him and threw out both arms to paw about for his glasses. Just before Angus loomed over him, Nick located and snatched up his spectacles, crammed the shafts over his ears.

"You said your mother was at lunch somewhere," Angus said in a rush of words, "so I just figured your sister and you had a sitter."

"Oh," Nick said. His head was clearing; nonetheless, he couldn't remember saying anything about Mother being gone to this jerk. He started to rise, and Angus shoved him back into the snow, giggling. "Quit it!" Nick snapped.

"You wanna fight me now, Nickie?" the strange boy asked, still giggling. He didn't look mad, to Nick, as much as playful—and peculiar.

Watchful to avoid being shoved down again, Nick stood and brushed at his coat and pants. The lenses of his glasses were smeared and water ran here and there. "I know you were just horsing around." What *did* annoy him, other than the sneak attack, was that the frames of his eyeglasses felt funny, bent. He was also shivering with cold and, glancing at Angus, couldn't understand why—with no coat—the other boy wasn't shivering. "I need to pee," Nick said. "I guess I'll go in."

"No, wait!" Angus exclaimed, unzipping the fly of his pants. "You ever write your name in the snow with piss?" He giggled again, gripping an odd-looking penis in his hands and aiming. "I've heard it's pretty neat—like yellow letters on a white sign!"

Nick hadn't heard of it and couldn't imagine how

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he'd feel if somebody came by while he had . . . it . . . out in the open. "That's gross!" he said, seeing a letter A appear in the snow near the neighbor's fence.

Angus lifted his head and glanced daringly at him. "You chicken, Nickie?"

2

Sid's Subway turned out to be the only restaurant on the same block as Craig Ryce's building, and it was a basement place accessible only by descending several steps from the sidewalk to a heavy door. Tugging it open, Rachel realized that a wish of hers had probably been granted: Instead of selling mammoth sandwiches crammed with what her grandfather had colorfully called "flat meat," Sid's had the name it did because the place was under street level. A number of leaflets stuck to the door advertised a variety of luncheon plates.

Eating out was such a rarity for Rachel that it had merely seemed a shame to be stuck with spending three times as much money to have a gigantic version of what, basically, she fed the kids for lunch two or three times a week.

The restaurant turned out to be twice as large as she had expected from the ordinary entrance to Sid's Subway. It kept the tables divided into opposite sides with a surprising amount of room between them for a carry-out line and a second cash register for customers to pay their checks.

And heading toward Rachel after apparently placing an order for food to go was Craig Ryce, resplendent in another ordinary pantsuit. The

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brunette was extraordinary, Rachel mused admiringly, seeing a graying man in the carry-out line look away from the detective, then back for a more serious appraisal. Craig wasn't a kid any more than Rachel was, but her confidently unhurried pace and carriage, along with her rather prominent nose and cheekbones, made her an attention-getter.

"Glad you could come," she told Rachel, steering her toward a table. "I hate it when people do this to me, but I took the liberty of ordering lunch for both of us."

Rachel slid into a chair next to Craig's. There was a continuous undertone of conversation in Sid's, and she wanted to hear everything the woman had to say. "What did you order?" she asked pleasantly, remembering how Hale, her first husband, had insisted upon choosing her restaurant meals in accord with his opinion of whether or not she had put on a pound or two. It had fundamentally ruined every such meal for her.

"Sid's makes the best roast beef sandwich plate in history," Craig said, laying her napkin in her lap. "Because his baked beans, potato salad, and deviled eggs are also the best, and they come with the sandwich." She raised a hand dismissively. "And because I wanted you to try the plate, I'm picking up the tab."

"Not if it's as delicious as you say," Rachel said firmly.

"All right, if you think it is, we go Dutch treat," Craig agreed, and gave Rachel a neatly typed, single-spaced page peeking from an envelope. "This is a copy of what I've learned and will be telling you about. I used an unmarked envelope because,

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frankly, I don't want your haunt to be able to find me."

"Then you believe that it is something supernatural?" Rachel asked.

Craig looked down at a photocopy she'd kept of her report and made a face. "Let's just say that if the man I've researched is the ghost behind your troubles and your husband's, I want nothing to do with him—and I wouldn't be surprised if he *is* the same old creep."

"You were able to learn his name and some things about him?" Rachel inquired.

Craig nodded. "The bird I'm talking about was named Howell Moulton Kidd, and I'm unsure whether he was your husband Jack's great- or great-great-grandfather. He's mentioned all up and down the family tree, and I think the rest of the family would like to have hung him from it."

"Why?" Rachel said. "Was he the Kidds' black sheep?"

Craig had a serious but odd expression on her long, lovely face. "Howell Kidd was probably the most brilliant and talented member of the whole family—and, I think, crazy as a loon."

3

Staying close to the house, Nick stared in amazement as the neighbor boy, Angus, made a pile of well-packed snowballs bigger than the one that had struck him. He did so with remarkable speed, at the edge of the Kidd property. It crossed Nick's mind to wonder if he should just go into the house or quickly make a pile of them himself, for defense.

Between his position and the smaller boy, the name Angus had urinated in the snow stood out like an obscene yellow-neon sign. Not only did it give no evidence of fading, but the five letters had been simmering and now seemed to have been burned two inches deep into the snow. If the temperature kept dropping below freezing every night, Nick thought with annoyance and a little awe, the damned name might be there until spring. *Guess I'll have to hope for snow*, he decided, even if he *did* hate winter.

Suddenly Angus threw one of his huge snowballs at an older-make car that was barely creeping past. *He can't throw that far*, Nick thought—and the snowball slammed into the driver's door with a great force and an audible *splat!*

The pleading eyes of the old woman at the wheel were focused on Nick when she glanced over at the yard in terror and just kept edging her car along.

"*Angus!*" Nick shouted, running toward the pop-eyed boy. "*That's enough!*"

Another snowball seemed to explode against the side of a stray dog with its avid nose in the gutter. The first astonishing thing was that the animal didn't make a sound or run; it just fell over on its head in the street and stopped moving.

The second—which actually had happened first—was Nick's mind's-eye picture of the effortless way Angus had hurled the icy weapon, yet it had crossed the street like a white cannonball, all before Nick had even *seen* the poor dog.

Now Angus had another fat and juicy snow-and-ice ball in his hands, it was raised up next to his ear, and a pair of girls in their early teens were the sole

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living target in sight—even if they *were* almost half a block away. Nick had seen what happened to the stray, and caught the smaller boy's lifted arm in both hands.

Angus's arm went forward anyway, pulling Nick off his feet. The homely child actually managed to throw his snowy weapon in the direction of the girls, but Nick's weight prevented it from going any farther than the street. It shattered like a bomb and strew chunks like shrapnel.

"You *are* a chicken!" Angus shrieked, spinning to face Nick, his odd face crimson with anger. "I'm just tryin' to make friends with you!"

Nick waited a moment to be sure the strong little shrimp wouldn't attack him, then turned toward the house. "Forget it after the stupid stuff you've done."

What occurred next was truly peculiar.

Nick heard no sounds coming from Angus, felt no little-bitty fingers clawing at his sleeve. In his own thoughts were nothing but disgust and the desire to put the past forty-five minutes behind him for good, plus a certain astonishment that that anyone so crude and cruel could imagine that was the right way to get on his good side.

But Nick halted nonetheless, with a nearly paralyzing impression that *something* behind him—something with the insensate destructive force of a nuclear warhead—might go off at any second. He wanted to run for it, but he manfully stood his ground.

"Stupid," Angus said, repeated the word, and added a questioning tone. "You think I'm *stupid*, do you?"

"Look, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings," Nick said, cautiously turning.

"Well," Angus said from a few yards away, shutting one eye and locking a thumb beneath his chin, the elbow in his other palm as if he was thinking deeply, "let's see which of us is stupid!" He jabbed an index finger at Nick. "What is this stuff we're standing in—what is snow?"

"Frozen water that falls from—"

"Wrong!" Angus retorted, giggling. "It's always either flakes or clumps of ice crystals." Another jab of the finger. "What shape are the crystals?"

"They come in all kinds of shapes," Nick said fast, having seen blown-up photographs of them in schoolbooks.

Angus howled and was already pointing his index. "*Boy*, that's stupid! They're always hexagonal, plain hexagonal." He bent over double, laughing. "Right or wrong: A lot of snow falling will freeze all plants."

"Right!" Nick answered. Flustered, he tried to slip in a comment. "This isn't what I meant by—"

"Wrong, wrong, *wrong*!" Angus screamed in triumph, and danced a grotesque jig. "Fresh snow is a good insulator and protects underlying plants from extreme cold! Wow, Nick, if you don't like stupid, you can't *stand* yourself—right?" He spread his arms and ran forward as if to embrace the stunned Nick. "So *I'm* smart, and we're pals now, is that right?"

Nick shoved him, turned around quickly, and started away. But that didn't end it.

"You know what snow blindness is, Nickie?"

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Angus demanded. Nick kept walking. "Here! Take a look for yourself!"

A canvas of blinding white swept up over Nick's eyes, and now he did stop. He felt as if both eyes were beginning to swell shut and squeeze out moisture, and his imagination pictured himself with blood spurting out and clouding his glasses. The worst part, however, was the sharp pain in his eyes; it was as if daggers were being forced into his pupils. He threw his arms out in front of him and took a few staggering steps in what he hoped was the direction of the house.

"*Am* I stupid, Nickademusiaskya?" Angus demanded, behind him but hissing the words into Nick's ear while he teased him about the way loved ones played with his name. "*Am* I, huh? The tears and swelling—which is edema—are usually caused by too much ultraviolet reflection from the snow. But *I* didn't just define snow blindness, Nickapukie—I made you feel just the way it feels! So *say* I'm not stupid and we're pals now. *Do* it!"

Nick strained to see the front door of the house, thought he made out the inky framework of it. He knew his mom and dad weren't home and, terrified of what was happening to him, shouted, "Tricia! Tricia, get *help*!"

Then he heard the door swing open against the wall—and Trish, her voice rising with fright, calling his name.

But then Nick heard her distinctive footsteps on the part of the walkway Jack had shoveled, and he hadn't meant for her to come outside, he didn't *want* that!

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"Well, look, buddy," Angus said, giggling, "somebody *else* has come out to play!"

4

"To begin with," Craig told Rachel, "Howell Kidd practically *collected* degrees. The things he didn't know, people said, weren't worth knowing."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Rachel asked.

Craig made a face. "He also came to know a lot that really *wasn't* worth knowing, it appears. I think the word is 'arcane' knowledge. Things said by others to be forbidden. The oddity there is that, like Howard Hughes, he was also a good businessman for a very long while and amassed quite an estate before he began to turn against people. That didn't happen until he became a writer."

The food had arrived, and Rachel was finding it as delicious as Craig had promised. "What did we 'ordinary mortals' do to make us so terrible in Howell's eyes?"

Craig paused to ask a waitress carrying coffee from table to table for another cup. "I'm basing part of what I tell you on a biographical brochure some fairly distant relative wrote about him and on what I read between the lines," she said. "It appears there was something of a cult built around Howell, and I'll explain why in a minute. Well, his own father was something of a tyrant after discovering how brilliant Howell was; the boy wasn't allowed to have any friends or any real childhood at all. So he grew up liking children most of his life at the same time he knew nothing about how to behave around them. And the only child he fathered, he neglected, except for hav-

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ing the money to lavish him—it was a boy—with things.”

“You were right,” Rachel said, swallowing the baked beans slowly enough to savor them, “Sid’s Subway is fantastic.” She patted her lips with her napkin. “Howell Kidd sounds more to be pitied than censured, so far. What was so dreadful about him other than digging into some dubious topics?”

“He wrote just one book, so imaginatively insightful—and terrifying—that some very bright colleagues of his called it a masterpiece. He’d spent years on it and was no longer young when he finally submitted it.” Craig broke off to have her last bite of the roast beef sandwich and sip her coffee. “You should know, Rachel, that Howell reached the point by then of believing all his business and scientific achievements were only important in that they had contributed to his book.”

Rachel nodded. “I’ve heard some authors become that devoted to their work.”

“Maybe they have to be. I’ll find out, since I’m writing as a sideline now myself.” She drew an unfiltered Chesterfield from her cigarette pack, touched a vivid Djeep lighter to it. “I meant that Howell had put everything he had into his book, and all the well-to-do and scientific men he respected encouraged him to believe it would be bought for publication. But it wasn’t.”

“Why not?” Rachel asked, her brows rising.

“I have a copy of the rejection letter sent to Howell by the last publisher he tried. The man said the scope was ‘breathtaking,’ the scenes of horror and madness were ‘frightening beyond my powers of description’—and that it went ‘much deeper than

Frankenstein,' but the 'serious proposal of a means to immortality is *unnatural*.' As such, the publisher said his firm wouldn't dare touch it. And your husband's ancestor destroyed his copies of the manuscript, then contacted his son and the rest of the family to say it would be the last time any of them heard from him 'in life,' according to the brochure about Howell."

Rachel considered that, draining her own coffee cup. "I can only suppose they despised him because he cut them out of his will. Is that it, Craig?"

"Howell's wife had divorced him—technically, just gone to live elsewhere because it was harder back then for a woman to divorce—and she died under circumstances their son, and others, found mysterious. She was an excellent swimmer, yet she drowned." Craig blew consecutive smoke rings cleanly. "When Howell died, he left the will that has kept your husband in residence at the house—and all the Kidds since Howell's son moved in toward the end of his life."

"I think it's sad," Rachel said, "dying hated by everyone in that big house."

Craig shook her head in doubt. "There was something else interesting in that brochure, Rachel, but I'm not sure how relevant it is: The biographer quoted a Dr. Thorncroft Kidd as saying that a dead human brain still pumps out signals for around a day and a half, but he believed Howell's emitted them for almost a *week*."

Rachel grimaced. "I *was* going to pay the check because you were right about the food. It's not sitting so well right now."

Craig smiled. "I already paid the bill. Glad you

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like the place. But to finish, old Howell clearly was unstable all along, then went a little weirder from loneliness and isolation, and turned bitterly antisocial—entirely unreasonable—as a result of being neglected as a kind of all-purpose Renaissance man. Your standard unappreciated genius. I don't know if what has pursued the Kidds is a ghost or not, but I'll bet Howell Kidd is behind it. Why else spend his last earthly dollars to arrange for a family he had no use for to live in his mansion practically forever?"

"You're probably right," Rachel said immediately, "and your research in this period of time has been incredible. Perhaps this knowledge will help Jack and me figure out how to get rid of the thing." She retrieved her purse, put her finger-tips on her checkbook. "I'm very grateful. What's your fee, Craig?"

Craig pushed her chair back in readiness of rising. "I haven't told you about a package I'm halfway expecting that could tell us much more, if we're lucky. May I keep digging?"

"Absolutely!" Rachel exclaimed, adding, "But not too *literally*, okay?"

Craig Ryce laughed, and the two women exchanged hugs on the sidewalk.

5

"What's a matter, Nick?" Trish asked her big bro, not yet scared, but—he could tell from the tone of her voice—near enough to it to have tightened her stomach muscles to prepare for a scream.

Nick felt Angus's grip on the back of his coat, un-

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derstood it was his warning not to make her go away. He still couldn't see anything, but Nick swung one elbow backward the way he'd seen on TV, saying with preternatural poise, "Just go inside, Sis—I'm playing with my new friend."

"You've learned no discipline yet, boy," said the voice behind him. But it was no longer a weird boy's voice, it was that of a grown man whose size—height and width—Nick sensed the way dark clouds warn one of a darker day. He tried to shrink into himself and, frantically, to think, knowing now who "Angus" had been. *"I'll have to teach you."*

"Anything wrong out here?" The baby-sitter's voice.

"You hurt yourself or something, kid?" asked the gigantic boyfriend of the sitter—

And Nick saw them clearly, without pain.

Behind him he saw nothing much but a poor, dead mutt in the gutter across the street.

"I'm just coming in now," Nick said, walking briskly up the walkway.

Inside, he gave Trish a hug, and she stared at him as if he'd gone mad.

6

At long last, Rachel remembered to stop at the drugstore and pick up the photos Nick had taken at the wedding. She didn't open the thin yellow bag, though she wanted to, because they belonged to her son. And Nick was bound to notice she'd peeked.

Still away from the house, her car in the drugstore parking lot, Rachel cracked a window open for air and wrote a note to Jack on an envelope lo-

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cated in her purse. In it she told him about finding Craig Ryce to learn more about the history of the Kidd house and family. Then she scanned the detective's report to be sure Jack would be able to follow it. Craig had been thorough about including all the essentials, as befitting the writer she hoped to become.

The trick now, Rachel thought, is to find a time when it's safe to give my note and Craig's report to Jack without Howell Kidd's ghost—or whatever it is—catching me and reading over Jack's shoulder. Craig was right not to want a visit from him, particularly the kind Caitlin got; besides that, it wouldn't be very sensible to let him know Jack's wife was trying to identify him and give him the boot.

She couldn't believe her luck when, approaching the house half a block away, she recognized Jack's RPS van just pulling up to the curb.

Speeding up, she got there in time to block his driver's-side door from swinging wide. Headed in the opposite direction in preparation for parking in the drive, she rolled down her window and motioned for Jack to do so.

"Hello, handsome," she said, stretching her arm as if to touch his cheek through his window. "Want a little action?" She dropped the report and her note in his lap and followed through by pinching his nose.

"Gosh, what progress!" Jack said, glancing down after smiling naturally at Rache. "Street girls who make deliveries on their *johns'* streets!" Then he read the big printing Rachel had thought to affix to the top of her note. It read, "READ THIS NOW!"

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"See ya in the house, big guy," Rachel said sexily. "After a while. Five bucks for everything!"

Nodding slightly, Jack watched her turn into the driveway behind the van and saw her all the way inside.

Then he turned the motor and heater back on and settled down to read.

Chapter XIII

1

"I know you're there," Andre said to no one visible in his office—and neither his spirit guide, Eight, nor any soul on the Other Side attempting to get his attention was present in his remarkable mind. "Please be good enough to let me see you and to introduce yourself."

Doubtful that his intruder would be polite enough to accede or competent enough to harm him before doing what it had come to do, Dr. Jordan did not even open his eyes.

Ever since Jack Kidd had merely taken his card and left, Andre had sat quietly and attempted to accomplish the usually rather easy task of leaving his body and traveling astrally to the Kidd household. He had taken Eight and the spirit of Raymond Kidd

quite seriously and had hoped that an unseen sweep of the property might have provided him with additional data, perhaps enough to warrant a physical visit to Jack and Rachel Kidd.

But he had been blocked even from the routine out-of-body experience for reasons he was unable to discern, despite using the whole range of methods he'd learned, and had just begun trying to reach Eight and learn if he could explain the difficulty—

When Andre's already aroused abilities had sensed he was no longer truly alone.

For a few moments he wondered if he was the victim of one of the most familiar dangers in his line of work and if his failure to practice psychic defense properly had caused the destructive entity in the Kidd house to sense *his* probe and, in effect, ride it back to his own office. The objections to this were two, Andre realized: First, he'd never *gone* to the Kidds astrally, he couldn't leave his body just now. Second, from the beginning he had been reliably informed that the entity had neither lived nor died—so there was no logical reason to believe the thing to be a ghost in any customary sense of the word.

He was about to repeat his polite request when several papers on his desk fluttered two, then three feet above it, then floated across the office and dropped promptly to the floor. The wastebasket beside his desk also levitated into the air, turned upside down, and emptied its unwanted contents on Andre's desk. A low-pitched moaning began—almost everywhere in the room—and ascended in pitch until it became a positively maniacal cackle. Finally, invisible fingers pulled Andre's suspenders

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out from his chest and let them snap back into place.

"Oh, come," Andre said in his most condescendingly boring tone of voice. "You are no more a *poltergeist* than I am. If you're what I believe you are, such juvenile tricks are beneath your intelligence."

There was a pause. Then a relatively normal male voice—Jordan was certain it didn't "sound" in his mind, but he also could not detect its origin—asked, "Then what *am* I?" That question was nearly inflectionless. The one coming in quick succession was derisive and all too familiar in tone. "And just *what* are you?"

"I am the white man *and* the black man who can ease your torment if I am allowed to know, in full, the answer to your question about yourself. Let me see you."

A creature resembling nothing so much as a massive, filthy, twitching snowball—one perhaps formed by starting at the top of a high hill and accumulating more rolls of itself in addition to twigs, dirt, and dead leaves until it was a huge, tightly compressed mess at the bottom of the hill—came into Andre's sight and dripped on the carpeting. Eyes of what probably was coal regarded him balefully.

"I didn't want to see what your imagination could produce," Jordan snapped. "And I can't imagine why a snowball would frighten anyone."

The icy being blinked out, and in its place appeared a shadowy, segmented construct that Andre realized was the representation of a monstrous human forearm. He knew it was that because it grew down to the largest seemingly human hand he ever saw. Each of the digits had great tufts of nearly

white pseudo-hair sprouting like bushes from the knuckles, and each enormous finger was poised on its tip, on the carpeted floor, as if to reach out—to spring—at Andre Jordan. For the first time he felt a cold gush of fear spasm near his bowels. A hand like this would not go around his thin throat and throttle him, it would encircle his whole body and, if it wished, crush even the very small bones in his extremities.

“Magnificent,” he said, “I’ve never seen such a display.” Deep inside, he’d already begun saying every prayer for psychic defense he knew. “However, it still is not you.” Jordan swallowed hard and rushed on to the next prayer.

Away went the giant hand. Here was—

A little boy with a face that would stop a clock, his Peter Lorre eyes fairly popping from their sockets. There was literally nothing adorable or remotely likable and winning about him, unlike any boy Jordan had met in the past. Aside from the hand-to-child transformation—now the ugly creature was trying to grin appealingly at him, even fiddling with the wastebasket trash on Jordan’s desk—the one point of interest to the heuristician was the apparition’s clothing: It might have been made in another century. *Was* this refugee from a Dickens novel the boyhood version of some long-dead sadist in Jack Kidd’s family? But how or why would that be the truth if he was right and poor Jack’s haunt was not a ghost?

“I’m Angus,” the boy declared, not even bothering to sound like a child. “Wanna be my buddy?”

Andre sat straight at his littered desk. “I’m not married, nor am I likely to become a father. How-

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ever, if I had a son I would endeavor to serve *as* a father, not as a companion. If you are, in truth, an adult of some kind, I repeat my offer to assist you to reduce your torment. And you *are* the bully from Jack and Ray Kidd's house, aren't you?"

Angus threw a handful of trash from the wastebasket directly into Andre's face. The only item with any appreciable weight was a thumbtack, and it struck Andre's right cheek deeply enough, he realized with surprise, to sting and draw blood. "I'm in no torment!" Angus's adult voice roared. "I *administer* discipline *and* torment in *my* house!"

"Then I will offer to you what I would any insolent brat," Andre told him, leaping up and stretching out his arms to the sadistic haunt.

Trying to put "Angus" over his knee almost resulted in a hernia. But Jordan exerted more effort, succeeded, and began to spank the entity enthusiastically. "Tell me precisely *what you are*, to the best of your knowledge," Andre demanded, whacking the hard-as-a-rock posterior again, "or I will *deduce* the truth and force you to leave their home forever!"

"No," the same deep voice said quietly, "you won't."

Andre slapped the top of his thigh enough to hurt, before he realized he was gripping mere air.

"*I truly want to annihilate you, now.*" The voice rumbled from apparently everywhere.

"You won't answer me," Andre said firmly, rising, "because you *don't know* what you are. *Do you?*"

"*But I will exercise restraint, and wait. Yours is the first challenge I have received. Of course, it is*

meaningless. But it will be refreshing to me for a change."

"If you are being truthful," Jordan said, turning around and around in a wary circle, "I shall be sure to provide you with your first torment."

He awaited a reply, and slowly realized his office was, at last, empty except for himself.

Andre went in search of a whisk broom to clean up the haunt's mess.

2

"Where's your brother?" Rachel asked Tricia. She had been inside the house and in the kitchen starting dinner for ten minutes, wondering what Jack thought of Craig Ryce's report—and hoping he wasn't angry because she'd consulted Craig without telling him about it. Nick's absence from sight had not occurred to her. "Up in his room?"

Trish, learning how to scrape carrots, kept her gaze on the orange vegetable and the little scraper Rachel had given her. "I think he's still in the bathroom. The *downstairs* bathroom."

Rachel glanced at her, noted the secretive manner. "But I was in there before I changed clothes," she argued. "Why didn't I see him?"

A pause. "Maybe he got out a second 'n' hid near the stairs."

"Why would he hide?" Rachel wondered aloud. "Was he bad while I was gone, Trish?"

"I don't think so." Trish's blond curls were all she had turned to her mother then. "He was talkin' to somebody out front—sorta yelled at 'em—but I

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didn't see anyone." She took a longer pause. "When he came inside, he *hugged* me."

Rachel stared at the child in astonishment. Trish overdid it by making the word "hugged" sound like "vomited on," but it *was* surprising for brother or sister to show affection to the other.

It could mean Nick was getting more mature, Rachel mused. *If I want to believe all the kids' gifts really came from Santa.* Or the explanation might be that Nick, who was actually rarely bad in any way, had cooperated in some minor mischief with a neighbor boy he had just met and was trying to bribe his little sister with a show of affection.

Hold on, Rachel thought, there's the matter of Nick apparently hiding from me—but there's something else much more frightening and worth hiding from than I am. My poor little boy, who seems half-grown just because Trish is so young, may have simply been relieved to see his sister—

But after *what* happened to him?

Rachel whirled toward the kitchen doorway, intending to barge into the bathroom and learn what, from Nick himself.

She stopped in the short hallway leading to the bath, suddenly aware that Nick must know she was home, respecting his privacy and telling herself the boy would let her know eventually if he needed her. "You okay in there, Nicademo," she called from where she stood, "or did you fall in?"

"I'm fine," his noncommittal voice answered Rachel.

She stared helplessly in the direction of the closed and undoubtedly locked door, having heard

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that reply from Nick one hundred times already in his life and knowing it had been a falsehood on at least fifty occasions. It meant, "Butt out, I need to work this out for myself," and Rachel knew that; knew as well that she could usually have made the boo-boo better far faster on half the fifty occasions; knew she'd hear "I'm fine" another three hundred times before Nick was grown, and God-only-knew how often from Trish, who had only begun to seek brave independence; and she wondered how she or any parent was supposed to endure it when each parent's child was only a *baby*, whatever age they attained. "Dinner when Dad comes in," she said dully.

"Mom," Nick answered, his voice louder as he initiated a subject, "just call me 'Nick' or 'Nicholas' or 'Son' from now on, okay? None of those funny names, all right?"

"All right," Rachel called to the bathroom door, almost dizzied by a wave of helplessness. She yearned to say no and to demand to know why this word game each of them once had cherished should be abandoned. "I'll try to remember."

"Mom?" Nicholas Sayre Soon-to-Be-Kidd said as she was mentally turning, slumping.

"What is it?"

"Love you," he said.

And he would continue to do so, lovely, still-young Rachel Kidd realized, just as long as she gave him his lead, allowed him—increasingly, without doubt—to wander farther and farther from the nest of cozy camaraderie, gentle humor, and, above all, general safety she'd striven to provide. Until, one

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day, he was the man he had chosen at all kinds of levels to attempt to become and might say "I love you" and genuinely believe it.

She prayed she would recognize that Nick.

"You, too," she called in return.

3

Until she opened the big mailer and reluctantly withdrew the contents, Craig Ryce was gravely concerned that the most important break of her life had turned sour—

But the editor at the publishing house to whom she had sold her first book hadn't changed his mind at all. The top sheets in the package were her contract, as promised, and whatever the other pages were, a glance let her know they *weren't* her manuscript pages being rejected.

What Craig had told her client Rachel about trying to become a writer was not untrue. But she had been too superstitious to add that she had a literary agent, and that Mary Lee Kavanaugh had phoned a few days before to report her success in placing the book with an old-line hardcover publisher. Craig had read in *Writer's Digest* or some publication for writers that it shouldn't be considered a sale until the contracts were signed and an advance against royalties had arrived.

However, Variety House editor Stiles Milburn had been enthusiastic over publishing a book concerning the nonfiction adventures of a lovely private investigator, enough so that he had confided his house had been one of those to turn down How-

ell Kidd's novel years before. It was Milburn who'd already faxed her the long-ago rejection letter Craig had quoted to Rachel Kidd.

Then he'd expressed his own curiosity about a novel considered so remarkable and brilliant, and said he thought he remembered seeing a copy of it in the house archives.

Craig's eyes widened in amazement when she glanced again at what was in the mailer beneath her book contract and realized it was a modern-day photocopy—of Howell Moulton Kidd's old novel, a tale of the unnatural and arcane. Still Milburn's note, attached to it, read, "Possibly this will enable you to assist in solving the current case which you discussed briefly toward the close of your book. Note that the Kidd manuscript is not here in its entirety. S. M."

Suddenly Craig felt that every aspect of her life was opening up. Still seated at her desk and feeling both curious and dutiful toward Rachel, she decided to read a few pages of the Kidd unpublished "masterpiece" before going home. She had a date with a homicide detective she liked, and she realized, smiling, this should be her best New Year's Eve in years—and probably her best new year! She read the first two paragraphs, bothered by the dated style of the writing, dimly aware of how much the author's powerful views already seemed to intrude on the characters and plot he was trying to establish—

And glanced away, knowing she hadn't absorbed or believed a word she had read.

Her contract, in triplicate, lay on a corner of her desk. Unread. More important for her piece of

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mind, they were unsigned. Mr. Milburn had discussed them on the phone with Mary Lee, her pleasant and warm-voiced agent, then sent them directly to Craig as if to confirm his commitment to the book. But they still had to be signed and mailed first to Mary Lee for a review before Stiles Milburn got them in his hands and could, as his actual cover letter put it, "schedule it for publication."

And also before Variety House cut her advance check and mailed it to Mary Lee.

She set aside the ancient manuscript, brought the pile of contract papers over, and stared with a mixture of excitement and nervous anticipation down at the stiffly conceived lines of legalese.

Which was when she saw the blood welling up along a hyphen-long paper cut on the middle finger of her right hand.

Craig lifted her hand quickly as she saw a blood droplet about to fall on the first contract page. It didn't do that, but it ran back down her palm to her wrist. Cursing, she put out her left hand and plucked a Kleenex from its gay designer box, then pressed it to the wounded finger. "Stop, damn you," she told the paper cut.

Craig waited until her wristwatch informed her thirty seconds—more or less—had passed, and took the Kleenex away.

The cut bubbled with a new attack of bleeding, appeared to lengthen to nearly an inch, and washed red stuff over her whole hand before oozing past her wrist to Craig's forearm.

Jumping up in what remained more annoyance than alarm, Craig held her arm aloft as she'd heard the surefire method to be and rushed, be-

hind her, into the miniature bathroom where she kept a box of Band-Aids. While she was getting them out of a small medicine cabinet above a comparably tiny washbasin, she glanced toward her injured finger.

She could no longer see the paper cut because of the way blood was pumping from it, leaving that hand awash with metallic-smelling blood that, in turn, was almost literally *flowing* down her raised arm onto the shoulder of her sweatsuit. Craig gaped at the mess, wondered how much blood a person could lose before they passed out. "Mustn't think that way," she said aloud, setting down the Band-Aid box to see if she had any actual bandages. "Mustn't!" No bandages. What did she think, the good fairy had slipped into the bathroom and *given* her some bandages?

Got to make do, Craig thought, the distinctive stink of her own life substance making her feel like gagging, and using just her left hand to wrestle herself out of her shirt. *Mustn't pass out, because it's New Year's Eve, I'm alone in the building by now*. She felt exhausted—drained—by the time she had the shirt off and let it droop for a moment from her left (good) hand while she half-sat on the washbasin.

Then her eyes opened and the pool of blood under her feet very nearly made her faint. It was running into the corners of the tiny room, even headed back out to her carpeted office.

Desperate, Craig wrapped her sweatshirt around her hand—she couldn't recall which finger had the cut and couldn't tell from looking—and then up her arm, holding it on by stuffing some of the shirt

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under her blood-caked armpit. She glanced into the mirror, shocked herself badly by discovering how *white* she looked and, much more stunningly, by seeing blood beginning to show from *underneath* one bra cup! Craig almost sagged to her knees. Instead, she whispered, "That's impossible," and managed to unclasp the brassiere and let it dangle from her shoulders.

Her left nipple emitted blood right after she noticed the hyphen-long paper cut in the center of it. Her chest started to turn crimson and she just stared at her reflection, unwilling to peer down at herself.

She saw, then, other evidence of new bleeding beside her navel and under the front of her sweatpants. "Got to . . . call for *help*," Craig said. She turned feebly and, balancing on the walls, attempted to force herself to walk through the doorway back to her desk—and the phone.

The door slammed shut instead.

The breathing of someone else became audible, immediately in front of her. "Meddling *bitch*!" a voice rasped.

"You're," Craig Ryce said with one of the gasps left in lungs that couldn't provide her with sufficient air without an instant surcease from her terror, "Howell Kidd's . . . ghost."

"How *dare* you!" the voice snapped with furious indignation, the bulk of him scrabbling still nearer. Strong and unseen hands clamped on Craig's shoulders, forced her to a sitting position on the toilet. "He was one of a kind. Now—see me as *I* appear and know that I am *no ghost*!"

She blinked her eyelids as she looked at the thing

crowded into the tiny room with her; and it gripped her breasts, its mouth opening widely, first, on the one that was bleeding. It licked a path down her as, within Craig, she fled forever.

4

Jack completed his reading of the report from the detective Rachel had hired, his mind racing. Whatever rancor he had felt at the outset, for Rachel doing what she had done without asking him, had been long since overwhelmed by the detective's thorough research.

Besides—in two parts—all of his wife's loved ones might be in jeopardy as long as the house remained haunted, and he had to admit that he would have pooh-poohed the idea of consulting such an outsider as a detective. Now, for the first time, they had *some* notion of who had disciplined and sent so many members of the Kidd family to their early graves—if not *what* that presence might be.

Jack was shivering with cold in the almost-empty van, but he made an effort, before going inside, to remember what his exceptionally small family had said to him, as a little boy, about Howell Kidd. Although everything they'd discussed was guarded, he and Ray had learned to listen intently whenever family gossip came up.

And the impression Jack had formed, some three decades before, was the black, utterly negative one this Craig Ryce had learned. That Howell was a genius—well, that was never questioned. And Jack had briefly heard that Howell had crafted a masterpiece that was rejected by every publisher, plus

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innuendo suggesting Howell, in turn, had rejected the world—not just his own family. So it was still likely (viewed one way) that the old man's revengeful ghost was enjoying the torment of his descendants, encouraging the propagation of new Kidds and murdering every one of them—drawing in other people as mere vehicles for the children-to-be—when they'd outlived their usefulness to him.

But however good a case he and Rachel might lay out for first-degree murders aplenty, Jack didn't know of a cop anywhere capable of arresting a ghost.

He opened the door, saw that the snow falling now was coming down in monster flakes. Pausing to work up courage for a fast sprint to the front door, he remembered how rational and brave his wife was and wondered for the first time in ages if there could be such a thing as a ghost that had control of their freedom. Many folks died embittered, but they didn't always plague their children. *I think Rachel's sleuth is close to the truth*, he thought, *but there can still be an explanation that doesn't involve a true ghost*.

Jack was halfway to the house, running with absolutely no care to his footing, when he saw that he'd always moved recklessly and, exactly as the haunt had reminded him, he'd *never* been injured. Never once.

Maybe I should call Dr. Jordan next and see what he makes of the detective's discoveries, Jack reflected, dashing inside at once while Rachel held the door open.

Chapter XIV

1

Although he had always felt that if there was a holiday exclusively reserved for adults it was surely New Year's Eve, Jack began immediately to enjoy the way that Rachel let the kids stay up to see the old year out—

And to welcome the first one all four of them would experience as members of the same family.

Hell, I never did anything very exciting on New Year's Eve anyway, Jack mused, going back for thirds from Rachel's hastily served cold buffet. At one point he'd imagined the evening was a time when men everywhere scored, if they had dates, almost as if girls were swayed by the date itself and toppled into the backseat of whatever vehicle the boys happened to be driving. It had not been that

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way, then or when he became a reasonably eligible bachelor in his twenties.

But after informing him that late December started the Capricorn period, which was a naturally frustrating square to Aries people such as he, Rachel had embraced Jack closely in their bedroom and made him a promise: "After the kids have banged on my older pots and pans at midnight, you can bang *me*! Jack Kidd will finally score on New Year's Eve!"

Meanwhile, there were the monster sandwiches he and Nick were making with the variety of cold meats and the fixings Rachel had laid out on the dining table to make the hours pass pleasantly.

He had also succeeded in munching down as many carrot slices as he could swallow, clued in by Rache that Tricia had scraped them. "I just can't seem to get enough of these," Jack said several times to the beaming child.

Sotto voce, Rachel said in Jack's ear, "If you stop saying that just about now, she may actually believe you."

Jack stopped, thinking there certainly was more to bringing up children than he had ever imagined.

2

The slender detective was engaged in what he called "searching the decedent's effects," but, to his superior, it always looked like rummaging through them as if he might find something worth pocketing.

Probably that's not fair, homicide detective Ned Van Hatter thought, making himself avert his gaze from Bill Garing at work, *since I've never been able*

to catch the lanky dude ripping off anything. But the impeccable sergeant had this uncanny eye-and-hand coordination only another cop noticed after working with him awhile—or a sharp pickpocket, maybe. Garing's slender mitts kept moving as if he were with a slow-thinking dame who didn't mind the touches on top, just not underneath, so that by the time Bill spotted anything out in the open, his fingers were already closing over it.

Van Hatter turned to speak to Garing, aware of other smooth little tricks the younger man reportedly had in his repertoire. Other troopers said he was a slob on the streets, eager to get close to a creep with a rap sheet to bust him—or bust him up—if said creep didn't make him and bad-mouthed the department. And because Garing kept in motion and slouched, he rarely looked nearly six-five until he'd drawn his piece—or maybe the illegal weapons Garing was reputed to pack on duty.

"Learn anything useful about the dead woman, Billy?" Ned asked him.

The sergeant was suddenly standing, appearing merely to peer, with gravity, down at the deceased P.I.'s desk—by the time Van Hatter had spoken the word "learn." No one but Van Hatter might have found the smooth rising motion sneaky. "Well, her name was Craig Ryce, Lieutenant, and her license had almost two years to go before it had to be renewed." Garing paused, studiously blank but solemn. "I found her home address in a checkbook."

"Her name and line of work are on the front of the office door, Sergeant," Ned said casually. "Since we didn't come here to bust her for violating her li-

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cense, I tended to expect the things in her desk drawer to prove she was a private dick." He had been a police officer a long while and couldn't get used to the "P.I." terminology. "The personal checks, Bill—do they show it's a joint account?"

Garing had to look again. "No, sir, just her name." His long head rolled up again with the boyishly blank look. "Evidently no husband—which was some guy's loss," he added with a glance at the deceased, "if you don't mind my saying so."

Van Hatter's expression was legitimately blank. "I do, Sergeant," he said. "I mind it very much." It had been a very long time since he had noticed the looks of any naked dead woman. Ned worked his job in pursuit of a retirement while he was still young enough to enjoy it, and he believed death was not much of a beautician. "The lack of a husband's name with Ms. Ryce's on the checks doesn't signify much these days. She could have had a live-in lover. Or there might be a husband with company *and* personal checks of his own." Van Hatter held up what he had raised from Ms. Ryce's desk and then leafed through. "This may be of interest and use."

Bill Garing ignored Ned's last remark. "You've got a point, sir," he said, lifting his brows. "Perhaps you and I should get over to her apartment after the coroner arrives. Who knows what's going on here, if somebody she was investigating might be a little off center, maybe way off center. She could even have kids."

Ignoring the junior detective, the graying Van Hatter brushed past him and peered a second time into Craig Ryce's appointment book. Her final date

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was with a woman named Rachel Sayre Kidd—the last name had been added in a different-color ink, suggesting “Rachel” had married since Ryce accepted her as a client—and it had been scheduled for this afternoon.

And Ned’s surmise seemed strengthened by a change of both phone number and address scribbled in the same ink as the name “Kidd.”

“We’ll swing by that home address, Sergeant Garing,” Van Hatter said, “just in case there’s anyone close to notify. But I rather imagine I know what Doc will say, so we’ll be making a different stop first.” He shook his head in mild annoyance. “I can’t imagine why you’re generally so eager to go to the homes of decedents, unless you’re hopeful of getting into a shoot-out situation.” *Most people, Ned thought, are just there to cry. And most cops don’t enjoy telling them. Most of us have hearts.*

“Well, sir,” Garing said, moving away from the desk, “what is it you think the coroner will say?”

Van Hatter peered through an office window, anxious to be out of there. “That Ms. Ryce had a heart attack and died. Of course, they’ll perform an autopsy—quit drooling over that poor woman’s remains, Sergeant!—and that may well be the end of that. You may or may not have seen her expression, but it’s not what we find on an overdose victim’s face. I can *guarantee* you this isn’t a suicide.”

Garing looked astonished. “Why? I mean, how?”

“The lady just sold her first book, Billy.” Ned showed him the contracts. “If you ever hear of a writer who has definitely done such a thing, you’ll find the five people he loves most on earth also died the same day—and hideously!” He sighed. “This

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woman was *very* happy just a few minutes before *something* went wrong. I want to know what it was."

"If you're right about the heart attack," the slender Garing said slowly, "then this isn't a homicide at all. Right?"

Ned turned from the window after seeing the coroner's vehicle pull up. "Not necessarily."

"Then what *did* happen, Ned?" Garing demanded.

"I don't think there's a mark on her body, Billy—nor a drop of blood spilled, unless it came from that paper cut on one finger. The expression on her face is one of stark terror." Van Hatter had a grim and determined look on his face as he dropped Craig's contracts and the box from which they came in a large evidence folder. "In my book, something or *someone* scared her to death."

Then he added to the folder as well the manuscript Garing had completely ignored.

3

It had been a busy evening for all of them, in part—although nobody mentioned it—because no unseen entity and no travesty of a human being had ventured downstairs to interfere with their harmless family activities.

Jack was willing to believe that the combination of his contacting Andre Jordan and his point-blank threat to the haunt in Trish's room might have driven their "presence" into a kind of retreat. He didn't know how long that absence might continue, but he intended to enjoy it as long as it lasted.

Rachel was, that last night of the year, more con-

cerned over what had happened to Nick, but he seemed fine now, and her brainy new friend Craig was searching for more ammunition to use against the intruder.

Tricia was mostly getting sleepy as she always tended to do when she was permitted to stay up late, and privately she just wanted to pound loudly on something, yell a few times, and then go to sleep.

Nick had finally come to the realization, during the period of time he thought things through in the folks' bathroom, that there was no "Angus" of the kind he had met and been humiliated by on the entire planet. Instead, it had been the haunt, in disguise, and that cast everything in a different light, maybe one Nick should recall with pride. After all, Uncle Ray and other people who were older and bigger than he was himself kept running into the ol' hate-haunt and practically getting killed! The mean old fart had disguised himself, to begin with, and all he'd done to him, a *boy*, had been make him believe he was blind. And eensy Trish plus two teenagers—the baby-sitter and her boyfriend—had chased the old faker clean out of the yard.

So the clock ambled unportentously onward, toward midnight, the snow came down in the streets beyond the old house like curtains trying futilely to fall on any one-act plays that were available, and the Kidds were snuggled down into easy, comfortable camaraderie.

At eleven-forty-three, Rachel rose quietly and slipped out to the kitchen for pots, pans, and spoons calculated to awaken any of the dead that were merely dozing. Jack tried in vain to find on

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the television an emcee and a band completely unrelated to rock, rap, country, and both Lawrence Welk's and Guy Lombardo's that were counting down to twelve o'clock. But Nick and Trish were already fairly bouncing up and down at the front door, awaiting the high sign from Jack or Rachel, the boy with an old pan reserved for turkeys and the girl with a more manageable pot—each child also armed with long-handled spoons suitable for pounding.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood the racket of party horns and assorted noisemakers was already seeping into the oldest and largest house on the block. Jack used his remote to switch off the TV, glanced at a smilingly beautiful Rachel, and said, "Oh, heck, gang—let's do it!" He jumped to his feet, and the kids ripped the door open.

"Happy New Year, darling," he told Rachel, happy to enfold her in his arms with the first winds of January carving an icy swath through the foyer and front room.

She was twisting to check her watch. "It's still over half a minute to go."

"Oh, darn," Jack joked, holding her hand as they moved forward to stand behind the children in the frigid open doorway. "Now I'll just have to kiss you all over again."

Tricia had given up beating on her pan to wrap her arms around herself and shiver. A full yard from the door, already white-haired and-eyebrowed with downcoming snow, Nick had relieved Trish of her pot and was whaling away on it and his own pan. "Happy New Year, Mom and Dad!" he screamed good-humoredly above his own cacophony.

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Rachel and Jack yelled their similar wishes back to the boy with smiles, and Jack took her in his arms. "I think it's going to be a terrific year with you and the kids part of it every single day."

"So do I," she replied just loudly enough for Jack to hear her. She raised her face for his kiss—

And saw, down at one end of the block, both headlights that seemed like sea-monster eyes glimmering through the swirl of snow—and the distinctive, revolving red flasher of a police patrol car.

All four of them were aware the car was stopping right out in front when they were speared by a blinding white searchlight, and two men in plain clothes climbed unhurriedly out of it.

"What a short year this one was," Jack said to no one in particular.

4

The older officer—Van Hatter, Jack thought he introduced himself—had said he "might have some bad news" for Rachel, and the Kidds had allowed both men into the house.

Jack had instantly thought of Rache's friend, Jane Lange, she of the dozens of pounds overweight, then realized police who didn't have to wear uniforms surely did not go out on New Year's Eve to report bad news about unrelated friends. Then he remembered the older woman, Josephine, who was a family member and had attended their wedding.

Meanwhile, Rachel simply coaxed the kids off to bed—Nick was obviously frustrated as he could be to be deprived of hanging around real policemen—

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and offered their guests coffee. The taller, younger man said he would appreciate that, and Jack saw the corrective glare Van Hatter shot his way.

What amazed Jack was Rachel. She accepted the mood-smashing intrusion of official strangers with avowed bad tidings as graciously as if they had visitors at midnight every night and might have been expecting unwelcome news. His admiration for her grew more daily—

At the same time he was irked to be left to try to make chitchat with two guys who could well be preventing him from making love to Rachel that night.

Suddenly, Rachel was back in the room with four cups of coffee on a tray plus a cream pitcher and sugar bowl, in case either of the officers didn't like it black. "I decided you were just extra considerate, Lieutenant Van Hatter," she said, turning her head toward him.

"He's like that," Sergeant Garing said from the chair before her. His hooded eyes carefully avoided an inspection of her casually clad form. "I'm sorry I asked for the coffee, but I've been up today even longer than the boss-man."

I don't like this one, Rachel thought, ignoring the slender sergeant and moving with the tray to the lieutenant and Jack on the couch. She was happy to see a look of passing pleasure on this graying officer's face as he added a dash of cream and accepted a cup. Jack lifted his cup from the tray, touching her hand with his as if in sympathy or as a shared sense of apprehensive curiosity.

Rachel took her customary chair, had a sip of coffee. She put it carefully back down on the coffee table and sat back with her arms akimbo. "Please

ask or tell me whatever you need to, gentlemen," she said as calmly as possible. "Neither of us has a big family, so . . . ?"

"Your name and address were the last entries for today," Bill Garing said with no preamble, "in the appointment book of a private investigator named Craig Ryce. We don't know who else to talk to, Mrs. Kidd." He blinked his insolent eyes. "It is 'Missus,' isn't it?"

Both his superior and Jack reacted to the implication. Rachel was more concerned with Garing's news. "Craig has done nothing wrong, of course." She said it with conviction for one who was becoming a friend. "You're . . . homicide detectives, aren't you?"

"Yes, we are." Garing nodded. "Now, just what was Ms. Ryce to you?"

The past tense did it. Rachel started crying, unostentatiously. Jack rushed to her, stooped next to her chair. "Someone we needed," she said, shaking her head. "I liked her. I w-wish now I hadn't ever phoned or gone to her office."

That would be last month's appointment, Ned thought. "Mrs. Kidd, we don't know yet that Ms. Ryce was murdered. Her death may have nothing to do with your problem." He paused to see if Rachel would volunteer that information; instead, her pretty face just looked dubious. About her own problem, or his admission that Ryce might not have been killed? "I'm operating here on a professional hunch, that's all. And following up on what might be a coincidence in a manuscript I found at Ms. Ryce's office." He raised the coat he'd had lying over his evidence folder.

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"Are you at liberty," Rachel said, taking a Kleenex Jack gave her, "to tell us how she died?"

Van Hatter glanced at Garing, hesitated. *In for a penny*, he decided. "My experience, and the coroner's first look, indicate the poor woman may have been—well, frightened to death."

Rachel's gaze met Jack's and neither one, each detective observed, looked surprised.

Van Hatter inclined his head toward the sergeant, who flicked at lint on his knee. "The coroner's office will check out her medical records, and my associate here may be right and Ms. Ryce's demise may go down as a heart attack, period."

"But you think she was pretty young for that," Jack put in, nodding.

"And that it was caused or induced," Rachel finished with a nod. "That makes sense to me, Lieutenant." Her eyes flickered in Garing's direction. Garing ignored her, sipped from his coffee cup.

Ned Van Hatter opened the evidence envelope he had brought, slipped the contents out. He couldn't imagine Rachel or Jack Kidd scaring anybody into a heart attack; besides, if they were responsible for it, why wouldn't they have gone along with Garing's assessment? He looked up at their midnight hosts. "Ms. Ryce had just sold a book she wrote about her work as a private detective. We know she knew, because the mailer her contracts came in was open, lying on her desk, and she didn't have a secretary."

"I think you're an excellent police officer," Rachel said.

Van Hatter murmured his thanks. "The *real* reason I wanted to talk with you folks tonight is that her editor made reference to a part of her book that

mentioned her current case." He eyed them purposively. "And along with Ms. Ryce's contracts he sent her"—Ned's stumpy fingers separated the letter and contracts from what he'd thought to add to the folder—"photocopies of what was a very old book his company refused to publish. I read some of it, and I can't blame the publisher."

Together, Jack and Rachel eagerly took and peered down at the sheaf of pages the bluff homicide detective placed in their hands.

The first thing they saw on the top page—it had been scrawled there twice in an enormous, sweeping script—was the name of the author: *Howell Moulton Kidd*.

"This may be some kind of evidence, if a crime was committed," Van Hatter said, "so I can't let you have this. But I may eventually be allowed to turn the photocopy over to you, if you're this lunatic's heirs. It's clear to me Ms. Ryce was looking into the past for you, ma'am." He caught Rachel's glance. "Who was this Howell Kidd?"

Rachel saw that Jack wasn't listening, he was reading snatches of the book. "He was my husband's ancestor," Rachel said to Van Hatter, "and my plan in contacting Craig was to learn if Howell built this great house." She tried not to perspire, strove to sound as credible as humanly possible. This burly lieutenant and his tall sidekick with the down-his-nose attitude toward other people—women, at any rate—were probably armed and believed they could cope with anything short of an army. Yet the haunt might take umbrage any moment to being called a "lunatic" or seeing Howell Kidd's book bandied about, come roaring down the

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stairs, and force the policemen to shoot each other to death. He'd already shocked poor Craig into a fatal heart attack—she would stake anything on that—and who could be sure the presence wouldn't take out his next fury on Jack and her? "We've thought of raising the money for a statue in Howell's memory."

Van Hatter saw Rachel lift her gaze upward—toward the ceiling—after speaking; he hoped she was simply listening for her children and not, as another of his hunches occurred to him, anxious about angering some imagined ghost. Or was everybody who felt themselves invisibly watched these days fearful of a UFO abduction instead?

"You called my relative a 'lunatic,' Lieutenant," Jack said. "I'm sure you read a bit of it." He spoke quietly without ceasing to scan and read Howell's book. "But I think you forget this was written as a *novel*, a work of fiction. Listen to this:

"The youthful professor once more scanned the several high stacks of data he had gathered with meticulous candor and finest detail concerning the most perfect human being he had known: himself. Nothing connected with the immortality project had he taken lightly, and the contributions he meant to make to mankind had not even begun from the standpoint of his extraordinary scientific knowledge. Instead, he had begun by objectively evaluating the characteristics of two groups of people while *excluding* himself from both test groups.

"One of those consisted of the best men whom he knew well. The second collected humanity itself. The men on the first list were intimate associates, some of whom might be disposed to call him a

friend. They were remarkable men without exception; recognized and honored for their achievements; pillars of the community wherever they lived. In the case of the broader humanity the professor omitted those nationalities and races with which he was completely unacquainted; in point of fact, that was the majority of them, and he rationalized their omission logically by reminding himself that his objective stressed the single bias of an educated and civilized test group in each instance. Cultures other than the Western were unreliable due to their wide range of beliefs and superstitions.'"

Van Hatter's arm was slightly extended and he was perched on the sofa's edge. "I read some of that myself, Mr. Kidd, and I don't see—"

"The next part is what I think is essential here, Lieutenant," Jack said, catching Rachel's questioning expression. Instead of giving the pages back to the homicide detective, he resumed reading: "The professor's study of the top men revealed character flaws and a range of glossed-over inadequacies at once. At least fifty percent of the subjects were obviously overweight, a few obese. Most of them imbibed alcoholic beverages on occasion, many to frequent excess. He had been present on several such occasions as well as on those when these men of high repute addressed both female guests and wives with ill-disguised ardor. Many of them enjoyed telling coarse jokes, and two of them had boasted of pornographic collections. The professor, of course, had married a prim lady who perished in childbirth, and that experience had ended his romantic and sexual pursuit.

" 'Seeing no obligation to continue examining

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those men whom he had hoped were exemplary, he turned to the record of humanity at large and very soon realized it was a sorry one. War and violence did not especially impeach the population; the professor accepted the proposition that men of goodwill sometimes sought the same objective and required it, and that a creature evolved from a lower existence was mentally obliged, from time to time, to remember it where lower animals could remember—in their jaws, limbs, and claws. But orphanages and child labor were inexcusable to a species that continually made claim to adore its young, and the same cool-handed logic argued that there would be virtually no crime if the criminal class had been reared with unflagging discipline, taught appreciation of its parents. Then the professor weighed each of his own truthfully recorded attributes and immediately perceived that his intellect and morality, on balance, rendered him both the loneliest man on the face of the earth—and the sole candidate for his brilliantly conceived immortality project. Sheer reason dictated, then, the need to dwell in isolation.’ ” Jack stopped, returned the manuscript pages to Van Hatter. “Surely this passage establishes that my ancestor was writing *fiction*, and was no lunatic.”

“How do you figure?” Sergeant Garing asked, rising and stifling a yawn.

“Two reasons,” Jack answered. “First, only a monomaniacal genius could possibly believe he was the only person alive worthy of living forever.”

Ned shoved the photocopies back into his evidence folder, sure an explanation for Craig Ryce’s abrupt demise lay elsewhere. “What’s your other ar-

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gument?" he asked, leading the rest of them toward the foyer. "He still sounds pretty odd to me."

Jack squeezed Rachel's hand. "Apparently the original editors believed Howell Kidd's fictional theories for eternal life might work. The only chapters that seem to be missing from the manuscript are the next two—where it's obvious that he meant to show how *some* kind of actual immortality was feasible."

Chapter XV

1

"It's certainly hard," Jack whispered while Rachel and he were outside the house, "to save some people's lives."

She waved to the men in the departing police car, partly so any neighbors who were still up might think the detectives were friends. "So you picked up on that 'lunatic' business too," she said under her voice.

Jack nodded. He also chuckled so the haunt, if it was watching, would assume they were continuing to feel in a holiday mood. "Nothing to be gained trying to persuade those birds 'the professor' was actually Howell—or that he seems to have known what he was doing, however weird his 'project' was."

Rachel also faked a laugh, edged back into the house with the door ajar, unable to tolerate the wintry night air another moment. Hugging Jack and placing her lips just under his ear, she asked, "So you think it's definitely Howell's haunt who's been behind everything—including my friend Craig?"

"Nope." Jack slipped his hands under her sweater and, cupping her bra-clad breasts, leaned his face forward to kiss her lightly—and to answer her. He had learned from the hate-haunt's impersonation of the thing's preoccupation with the female chest. "I think it's more likely Howell himself than his ghost."

"You're kidding," Rachel said full voice, pushing the door all the way shut. Then she removed her sweater and, unbuckling Jack's belt, stepped into his embrace. "Wouldn't he be a century and a half years old now?" she asked very softly, grinding against him. "At least?"

He broke away from their covert conversation long enough to raise her brassiere, expose her breasts, and admire them with his eyes and fingers. Then he drew Rachel to a chair and pulled her, carefully, onto his lap. Face pushed between her breasts, he told her as briefly and succinctly as possible about meeting Dr. Andre Jordan. "Can't expect more help from Ms. Ryce," he said, the side of his face resting on the outside of Rachel's left breast. "But after what happened to her, I know no man should have to watch what he says in his own house."

"Or any woman," she said as she lowered her face for a kiss. "In addition to Craig, don't forget the threat to Trish. Or how I'll probably outlive my use-

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fulness if I ever have another child." She shuddered. "He hasn't done anything to me, directly. But something happened earlier today to N-Nick, and I c-can't bear it when my children are—"

"I'm going to go phone Dr. Jordan now," Jack interrupted her, hearing her voice begin to rise. He just held her close to say the rest in her ear. "Maybe he can . . . well, exorcise the house or something. Tomorrow. I'll ask him to come then."

Rachel pulled her bra down into place, then grabbed his hand after she'd stood and as he began to rise. To make things appear normal in case they were being observed, she stroked a half-tumescent Jack for a few seconds, then rebuckled his belt. "Tomorrow's New Year's Day. He may be off playing golf somewhere or something."

Jack laughed his honest laugh and went toward the phone. "I can't even picture *this* doctor doing anything frivolous."

Rachel found her sweater, then headed in the direction of the bath and their bedroom. "I'll get ready for bed," she called. "Maybe we can pick up where we left off."

"I certainly hope so," Jack said, locating Andre Jordan's business card. He hadn't felt so physically uncomfortable and left hanging since their honeymoon—before they'd consummated things.

Jack dialed the paranormal heuristician's number, at first sure he would get an answering machine, then wondering what he dared tell the man if he answered. Jack imagined a situation in which he was asked to state his name and the nature of his business, then sat there wondering how he could conceivably confide either piece of information.

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There was another ringing sound, and Jack felt sure Rache's remark about the holiday was fundamentally right. And if psychics had New Year's Eve parties, did they ask Napoleon? Marilyn Monroe and Elvis?

"Happy New Year, Mr. Kidd," Jordan's voice said—amazingly—in his ear.

"And the same to y-you, Doctor," Jack said when he could speak. He attempted to keep from saying what leapt to mind, failed. "How could you know it would be me?"

There was a slightly derisive snort. "Well, I *could* boast that the clients who have already engaged me are snuggled serenely in their beds, dreaming of sugarplums. But that was the preceding holiday and it's rather self-serving, don't you think?"

Jack grinned. "I still can't understand the way you—"

"And you need not, Jack," Andre retorted, "any more than you need to know how a flu shot prevents you from getting the flu—if you *don't*, that is." Jordan's tone of voice changed, shifted to an even more imperious range. "Say nothing more at this time. You wanted to know if I would help you and your family, and I shall. Good night."

"Wait!" Jack cried. "When do we get together? Where?"

"I said I will be of assistance," Andre rushed on, annoyed, "and I shall be. However, it will be done in *my* way." He hesitated, but not for long. When he spoke again he sounded as if he was trying to relieve Jack's mind by telling him something it was almost impossible for Andre to know. "Jack, I know

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about your wife hiring Craig Ryce, and I know precisely what happened to her."

Jack was astounded. "Even I hadn't heard of Craig when I met you. So you couldn't have used telepathy to find out from me."

"Your family and you should arise tomorrow morning in your usual way, doing whatever is customary for each of you. Do so before noon, please. And now there is nothing more to be said except to advise you to be alert at all times and to exercise considerable caution."

The connection was broken, and Jack just held the phone, for a moment, midway between his ear and the cradle.

"It's as if somebody called for Superman while he was falling from a plane," Jack muttered aloud, "and Superman shouted that he'd take care of it—while you went on falling."

He stood, drained both by the phone conversation and the midnight visit of the homicide detectives, and went to tell Rachel that help—somehow, sometime!—was on its way. It was doubtful now that they'd have sex; it was getting late, and they didn't dare risk sleeping late in the morning.

Rachel was clad only in panties when he entered the bedroom, her gaze was averted, and her breasts had never looked lovelier to him. Feeling physically renewed in many ways, he walked toward her with sweet purpose in mind.

But he finally noticed three or four snapshot-size photos in her left hand, a sheet of school notebook paper beside Rachel's right—and closest—hip, on the bed, and an expression on Rachel's beloved face

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that was so wan and glum she was clearly near tears.

"The bastard!" she swore, her surge of anger beating back tears. "The gutless, malicious son of a *bitch!*"

Jack knew whom—or what—she was referring to, picked up the note (*no, letter, must be Nick's*), and read it.

It told of "Angus," the "neighbor boy," and Jack got angrier and angrier as he read. "I decided you should know, with that nice Cragge dead and the cops here. I'll put this note on your bed and may as well show you the wedding pix and how he ruined them. Like every thing. Your son with love."

Jack smoothed back his wife's hair and reached for the four photographs she held in her other hand, as if they might somehow simply have never existed. Rachel relinquished the pictures in a gesture filled with contempt—and possibly, Jack saw, with fear.

He sat down next to Rachel to get some illumination from their bed lamp, and in the hope that his own presence would comfort her.

There was a well-focused "keeper" Nick took of the bride and groom. *Got to lose some weight*, Jack thought, moving on to the next picture.

Rachel's lovely profile drew Jack's attention—*Great work, Nick*, he thought—until his eyes saw her lips . . . as a shade no lipstick that had ever been sold—the color of *flame*! Then the shrieking red intensified as Harold Dunning, Jack's best man, received the thank-you kiss, and Harold's entire face and head appeared to be nothing but a fireball, perhaps a *nova*.

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Jack threw the snapshot to the floor and identified his own face and arms at the moment he had taken Harold's wife Ruthie into his arms for a similar appreciative and not remotely sensual kiss.

And while Jack looked like himself in Nick's shot, pretty and pleasant Ruthie's face and bustline, too, were a furious and bloody scarlet splash. *It's almost as if her head had imploded*, Jack thought with horror, *her brain and the roots of her teeth and the sockets holding her eyes.*

There was a fourth snapshot that resembled nothing, for a second. Then Jack realized Nick must have exposed the film just as he was dropping the camera; a portion of Reverend Blowers's hand and sleeve, of Rachel's foot and ankle—

And a tight close-up of many yellowed teeth frozen in a smile so malicious, so cruel in the way it reveled in the unhappiness it could bring others, Jack was sure history's *worst* men—not the “best” ones Howell Kidd had cited—had possessed just such smiles.

“Andre will help,” he told Rachel, turning to her as she shivered and slid under the blankets. Then she pulled them over her head. “He called me by name when he picked up the phone, and he *will* help.” He set their alarm clock.

“No, he won't,” her voice seeped out to him. “It'll kill him too.”

Jack undressed in the bathroom, utterly forlorn.

When he returned to the bedroom and climbed quietly into bed, however, Rachel snuggled against him, and she was naked. “We'll never let that thing defeat us,” she said with a heat Jack found nearly overwhelming. She began to do things that aroused

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another level of his senses; her frantic passion defied either of their bodies not to respond. "That dead goddamned freak, with all his tricks," Rachel gasped, "can't even *hope* to do what we're doing."

Jack was glad to know he'd set the clock before going to bed.

2

Although the haunt had never been comfortable in the restricted space where his physical self was strangely obliged to remain, mentally he stretched out for the night with a feeling as close to satiation as any he had known.

There was also a queer kind of contentment in knowing how much fun he'd had with young Nick, and the success he'd known in posing as a child; peace of mind from bringing a measure of grief to the Rachel-bitch both due to her son's confession *and* (this one was a surprise to the haunt) the actual death of the female detective; the interruption of the family's juvenile noisemaking by those ridiculous policemen; and especially the confrontation soon to be joined with the mentalist, Jordan (or whatever the arrogant fool believed himself to be).

He recalled the efforts made by the women, Jack's wife and the detective, to prevent him from learning Ryce's whereabouts and attempted a soft chuckle. Once the blonde had married into the family, he had been able to look wherever *she* looked and to accompany Rachel as he pleased. Then it was simple to follow the brunette to her office and utilize his exceptional gift of improvisation when

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she acquired her harmless little paper cut. How *well* his powers of suggestion had worked then!

He had, the haunt recalled, abandoned "Angus" in order to follow Ryce. He'd arrived at the restaurant in time to hear the dark-haired whore call Howell Kidd brilliant and he had briefly thought of not disciplining her for prying into the past, especially when her research included the reference to Howell Kidd's amazing *post*-death brain functioning. It was the first clue the haunt had heard to his own existence. But she dropped the subject after that and, far worse, dared to describe Howell as unstable and weird, adjectives that instantly demanded her terror and destruction!

The reappearance of the masterwork had left him indecisive. What would Howell himself prefer—that cretins such as the homicide detectives, men without the intellectual capacity to grasp its life-extending genius, read snatches of it, or to destroy the Novel and deprive mankind of its thrills, insights, and perhaps an immortality such as his own? He still could not decide.

But what he *had* proceeded to do to the brunette-bitch had not found him remotely uncertain, the first good opportunity he had enjoyed to explore her anatomy thoroughly, just as Jack continued to do with his wife—though the haunt, in all honesty, did not understand why a male would repeat the examination, whether with the same female or a second. Perhaps ordinary human males had poor memories or lacked the eye for detail. Or perhaps it made a difference if the female was still alive. He couldn't imagine why that might be, since relatively

little deterioration occurred for some time. Of course, he hadn't tried to do anything more with his specifically masculine replication than elongate and fatten it as he had with Ray's bitch, Caitlin. In time, perhaps, with the passage of another few hundred years, he might succeed in improving that organ to the point that it functioned in the manner of the Kidd males, whatever that precisely might be.

For now, he would have the memories of what he had done and learned—

Except his own thoughts had wrecked both his satiated and contented feelings. Out *there* were the police people who had said awful things about Howell and scoffed at him, and nothing whatever had punished them for their crimes.

So he, who'd seen them closely when Jack and Rachel Kidd did as well, would repay their ignorant rudeness. Eyelids squeezed together, he found the detectives riding in their car and knew he was looking at Van Hatter from the vantage point of Garing behind the wheel. It took the haunt only another few minutes to project himself out of the vehicle, two blocks ahead, with the head-to-toe appearance of Craig Ryce moments before the beginning of her fatal heart attack, except he was not naked.

"Look," the lieutenant shouted, pointing. "Doesn't that look *exactly* like Ryce?"

Lanky Garing saw the beautiful brunette on the corner, too, and agreed with his superior for once. Almost past the woman, Garing believed for a fraction of a second that she wore a completely see-through blouse—despite the bitterly cold late-night temperatures, despite the fact that the coroner had

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pronounced Craig Ryce dead, despite the fact that Craig had been gainfully self-employed in a reputable business. In Detective Garing's bigoted little brain, women were all hookers, and he'd busted but not booked dozens of them in exchange for doing what he felt like to them.

The haunt had learned a lot about men as well as women recently. He did not have to manipulate Garing to whip the steering wheel around or to mash his foot down on the brake. He had done all he needed to cause the police vehicle to turn over on the icy street merely by communicating the image he had imagined to young Garing. . . .

How vain they are, how invulnerable they all believe they are! the haunt decided, some of his contentment restored. Even Jack, with the telephone call he had been brazen enough to make to that conceited Jordan a short while earlier. All that was required of Jack and his woman was that they continue to pleasure themselves as he had allowed them and, in time, those sweaty delights would please *him*. But now Jack gave indications that he might become as rebellious as the brother he had watched die.

Tomorrow, it appeared, the vainglorious Dr. Jordan would instigate his program of direct challenge, and the notion of that seemed hilarious to the haunt. How was it even thinkable when audacious Andre could not even *find* him!

Well, I'll let him try, the haunt thought indulgently. *Until he becomes boring.*

And when all that—and Jordan himself—was over and done, Jack and the bitch Rachel would just have to be castigated, taught a lesson that would *last*.

For now he believed the trusting female child, Tricia, would be the focus of that lesson. Just as soon as Jack's whore brought a *new* Kidd into the house . . .

3

Having not told Rachel or anyone else that Andre's cautionary remarks probably meant he would show up at the house during the noon hour, Jack was inclined to stay inside and tolerate boredom the next day until the paranormal heuristicsian did something.

But New Year's Day had always struck Jack as a holiday to which many people had agreed, where-upon the inventor of the occasion—amazed anyone liked it—promptly dropped dead before he'd had a chance to say what folks were supposed to *do* on the first of the year.

Then the guy who had invented football—the ball, *not* the game—claimed he could devise a game for the year's initial day. Nobody would play it, except some oversize experts he would personally train; folks would just *watch* it. Americans were still full after Thanksgiving and Christmas, and hungover from the night before, so they liked everything about the holiday and also the sport. As on Labor Day, they didn't actually have to do a thing in order to remain acceptably traditional!

Jack and the other Kidds were engaged in the conversational nothing much, grown-ups in the front room and children in the dining room, when he glanced over at Rachel to murmur, questioningly, "Hmm?"

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“ ‘Hmmm’ what?” Rache inquired. The last thing she had said, six or seven minutes before, had pertained to whether or not she would take down the Christmas tree that night or wait until the next day when Nick went back to school. She hoped Jack was volunteering to help her, but doubted he would.

“Look out your front window,” the voice said again to Jack.

It was the imperious tone that told Jack he heard it in his head, and who it was.

He made an unspoken, eyes-wide gesture to Rachel, reached for a jacket and scarf he had thought to keep close at hand, and went soundlessly to a front window to do what he had been told.

A late-model white four-door Oldsmobile was parked at the curb, nearer to the neighbor's front door than their own. Andre Jordan was at the wheel, the fingers of one hand lifted, motioning Jack to come out. Jack turned from the window and saw that Rachel was already slipping into her coat.

“Your dad and I,” she called casually to Nick and Trish, “are just going out front for a short while. But we won't leave unless we tell you about it first.”

Jack heard no protests or questions and opened the door for Rachel. *Next time we come back in,* he thought, *we may finally be taking action instead of running from it.*

Chapter XVI

1

"Get into the car quickly," Andre urged Jack and Rachel after throwing both right-side passenger doors wide. Eager to obey and make progress, Jack automatically went up front, and that left the back-seat to Rachel. Andre was smiling as widely as if they were all old friends and pumping Jack's right hand as he turned to speak to Rachel. "Hi," he added, "I thought it might help if it appears that we've known each other for years. Hopefully, if your uninvited roomer sees no reason to make an appearance out here, he won't recognize me."

"How could he recognize you in any case?" Jack asked, puzzled.

Andre kept his face turned toward Rachel in the back, to minimize the harm if their adversary read

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lips. "He projected himself to me just as I was going to pay *him* an out-of-body visit. But despite my efforts to make him show himself as he appears, he presented a rich variety of fabrications—from a giant arm and hand to a singularly hostile and ugly little boy."

Jack was about to mention that the haunt had used the enormous hand to do almost crippling harm to his brother Ray, but Rachel reached forward to the front seat to grasp his shoulder. "I'll bet the boy Dr. Jordan saw was the same 'little creep' who tried to get Nick in trouble. Remember the note he left us with the wedding pictures?" She was so angered by that and the murder of Craig Ryce, who would be alive today had Rachel not involved her, she was more inclined to be impetuous than she could remember. "Are you going to exorcise him today, Doctor?"

"Not as you take the word to mean, Mrs. Kidd," Andre said hastily, "which I take it means the sort of complex and ritualistic practice portrayed in the novel or film called *The Exorcist*. I am neither Catholic nor a priest, though I am a believer. There are other reasons the practice is not for me. For example, I'm among those who are concerned that an exorcism may inadvertently summon supernatural entities even if effective in the case at hand. We know rather little about their associations, but one would not be surprised if an angel was attacked and additional angels came to its defense."

"I can see that," Rachel answered, looking nonetheless disappointed.

"My central reason for ruling out exorcism," Andre continued, "is that I see no reason for com-

bating an entity that is *not* dead and *not* specifically demonic with rites that are rather specifically religious."

"Then you've completely ruled out the notion that the—presence—is a ghost?" Jack demanded, recalling when he had begun to do the same thing.

Andre nodded briskly. "My spirit guide, Eight, did so before I was visited by your brother Ray before he departed. Candidly, in the case of most apparitions, there is a certain confusion about them, and when they become earthbound they seem purposeless, even unaware their present lives were ended. *Your* permanent visitor, on the other hand, clearly has many ongoing and deadly purposes. There's a certain mad logic and consistency in this case. Yet I could not determine what it is until Ms. Craig Ryce called upon me after her murder—at the suggestion of Eight, my guide—and shared the benefits of her research into Howell Kidd."

"Craig went to you," Rachel said, astonished, "*after* she died?"

"Well, Mrs. Kidd," Andre replied, "she could scarcely have contacted me while she was alive. We hadn't heard of each other, partly because Jack hadn't yet seen fit to accept my services. She asked to be remembered to you, by the way. Even though she had just sold a book she wrote, she had no intention of leaving you or her other clients to fend for yourselves."

Rachel found tears in her eyes, and knew Dr. Jordan was telling the truth. A report of Craig's sudden death was in the morning newspaper, but nothing had been said about Craig having sold a book. She

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and Jack knew of it only because the homicide detectives had mentioned it.

"What the late Ms. Ryce told me," Andre continued, his left arm on his steering wheel to conceal his moving lips from the view of those within the Kidd mansion, "coupled with a visit to my own office, largely completed the picture. As I have noted, my friends, I, and others have seen your haunt in numerous guises."

Rachel nodded. "Trish, my daughter, has encountered a huge old man. My son Nick met the little boy you saw."

"My brother Ray also saw the mammoth hand and arm," Jack added, "while with me it pretended to be my father, Eugene Kidd." He frowned. "Once, at least, it looked like me."

"It is neither young nor old," Jordan announced with all his great confidence, "because—never having been born, as we use the word, and not having died—we may say that it has never in fact *existed*."

Jack frowned, glanced back at Rachel behind him. "That isn't much damn help, Doc. Those policemen who visited us would doubtless have said the same thing—or our neighbors, my boss, all the adults at our wedding!" He struck his fist on the heuristician's dashboard. "Dammit, *you're* the guy who *has* to believe us and *help* us!"

"Jack, I said I will," Andre said softly. He inhaled deeply. "All I was saying was that your haunt has experienced *no* life as we know it; it possesses no divine spark or what many of us call a soul."

"Then," both Kidds asked almost simultaneously, "what is it?"

Andre's round eyes opened wide as he peered from Jack to Rachel. "It is a product of imagination, it is a *construct*. It is the partly conscious creation of a miserably unhappy and lonely man of great genius named Howell Kidd." Jordan drew in another breath. "It is, perhaps to a lesser extent than he invented in his imagination at the time he began to write his novel, a proof that his project for immortality was workable."

"My relative wanted to create an evil monster," Jack began, "that nevertheless was *him* in many ways?"

"Do you remember," Rachel cut in, "reading from Howell's novel how he compiled a list of *all* his characteristics? Bad ones as well as good ones?"

"Sure," Jack said, puzzled. "Go on."

"Well," she said, "in astrology there are twelve basic types of individual, one for each sun sign. If that was all there is to us, astrologers could predict everything accurately. But the moon, governing emotions, may be in *any* of those same signs at birth, and some of them are helpful to our basic selves but others make us our own worst enemies. Then there's the influence each of us has of the sign rising on the eastern horizon at the moment of birth. *That* rising sign influences our *personalities*—and they may be harmonious to our sun signs and our moon positions, or not!" Rachel lifted her index finger. "So nobody is *just* an Aquarian or Taurean or Leo, we're all *combinations* of influences."

"She is entirely correct, Jack," Andre said admiringly. "Go on."

"That means," Rachel proceeded, leaning forward from the backseat, "any individual who is

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Capricorn-born may have very stern principles based on standards of the past, and consider them wonderful because they're his very own. But did the past standards come from a really *good* parent or a bad one, and from our Founding Fathers—or Nazi Germany?" She studied their faces to see if Jack and Andre followed her. "I think the haunt, in the way he's like Howell Kidd, *is* a Capricornian: disciplined and disciplining; always insisting upon tradition and conventional ways; property conscious; persistent."

Andre Jordan held his hands high on his chest and crossed, then burst into quiet but honest applause. "Bravo, Mrs. Kidd, bravo!" he exulted. "What you have said further supports my contention!"

"Which," Jack burst in, excited but also frustrated, "is *what*, exactly?"

"That, in a way," said Andre, gazing toward the Kidd house now as if defying the hate-haunt to appear, "your family—since Howell Kidd perished—has been plagued by Professor Moriarty, Frankenstein's monster, Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Dr. Moreau, and Dr. Lecter, and any or all of the murderous creatures of greatest darkness dwelling in the ruined and evil brain of 'the professor,' Doctor Howell Kidd."

"But those creatures were made up by *writers*," Jack argued.

He realized, as soon as he'd said it, that his great-great-grandfather had also been a writer—one who had first been a scientist who was ahead of his times, one who had integrated his theories of immortality with the plot of his novel and, when his

dearest creation was regarded as “unnatural,” had gone mad with loneliness, bitter resentment, and no further opportunity to develop or express his genius—

Except for some really bizarre and truly unnatural method both Andre Jordan and Rachel herself seemed to be suggesting.

“No other explanation appears to fit the facts,” Jordan told them, lowering the drivers-side window a bit more than an inch. “It isn’t a spirit, it isn’t a demon, and it isn’t alive in any sense science understands, although it is science’s responsibility in many ways. Howell had tremendous creative powers, but he was not restrained by thoughts of basic decency, by a *conscience*, if you will. In the scientist’s pursuit of knowledge and the passion of experimentation with new possibilities, Howell simply overlooked or overrode them.”

“Or they just became secondary to him,” Rachel said, nodding.

“I don’t know if the haunt was Howell’s intentional creation,” Andre went on. “But as Mrs. Kidd’s explanation implies, Jack, he failed to give sufficient weight to each and every facet of his intellect and personality so that his construct is imbalanced and incomplete. It probably began to have a ‘life’ of its own while he was crafting it for his novel. Then he suffered massive rejection and disappointment driving him into a hermit’s existence, and the haunt acquired not only each of Howell’s animosities but saw itself as isolated and confined—to whatever nook of this huge house where it remained. Remained to this day.”

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"But it's been *seen*," Jack blurted, "by many people! It's *slaughtered* my family, remember? It's killed as well as told us what to do for decades! How can you say it's 'confined,' Andre?"

"Untrue," Jordan said, shaking his head. "No one," he said forcefully, "has seen . . . it." He smiled almost boyishly. "When it called on me, I demanded that it stop putting up constructs, those projected by its own partly independent intellect—*which stayed right in this house*. And then I realized it does not *know* what it is, or what it looks like. However, it can convey *substantial constructs* because that is how *it* came into being. So long as a member of the Kidd family has seen someone, or has gone somewhere, this hateful thing possesses the same knowledge."

"Imagine the brilliance of that man!" Rachel told Jack.

Jack snorted. "Imagine his evil, his vanity and narrowness." He turned to Andre. "Or is there a possibility, actually, that Howell didn't know what he was doing?"

"Since 'project immortality' was the theme of his novel," Jordan said with typical candor, "he had to know that his unconscious mind might well be creating another version of himself." Andre drummed the dashboard. "I hypothesize that the haunt did not become physically independent of your relative until, dying, his brain waves continued to generate for an exceptional period of time." He glanced at Rachel. "Your detective friend mentioned the fact to me during her visit." Andre tapped his accelerator and glared at the second-floor windows of the

Kidd house. "By some means not even learned by science perhaps more than a century later, Howell used literally the last activity of his brain to devise a nexus to the ego-construct he judged to be a replica of himself."

"But even aside from his failure to weigh his own traits with accuracy," Jack said, "and whether or not he wanted it to be evil, how could the haunt fulfill Howell's desire for immortality—if his consciousness, his *selfhood*, hasn't survived?"

"Perhaps it has, Jack," Andre commented, "if it has his intellect. And if it remembers . . . *enough* . . . of Doctor Kidd's life, work, principles."

Rachel shuddered. "I don't think so. Because the haunt—maybe we should stop calling it that, or use Ray's term, the 'hate-haunt'—obviously doesn't have an immortal soul."

"I think it's a haunt," Andre Jordan said quietly. "I know it *has* acted as a ghost to generations of Kidds—and I *suspect* it haunts the soul of Howell Kidd."

"An invention from the past, come alive, filled with detestation for humanity, able to deceive and kill us without ever leaving its hiding place," Jack said. He felt awed and terrified by the work of his long-dead relative.

"Doctor?" Rachel whispered.

"I am Andre, if I may call you 'Rachel.' What is it?"

She nodded her assent to his request and met his cool, extraordinary eyes with her beautiful ones. "How do we go about destroying a monster basically created in the mind of a novelist? A *make-believe* monster?"

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2

"To begin with," Andre said, "it should be noticed that our chances of expunging it have been vastly improved today. All of us automatically think of a ghost as something ephemeral, invisible—beings who can be nowhere and yet anywhere in the blink of an eye. Your haunt clearly has substance, bulk, and can't even project an illusion of itself—one sometimes quite large and weighty—until it has mustered its imagination and thought forces. We also know now that it is concealed, *hidden but visible*, somewhere in that house." Jordan paused. "It seems inhuman and separate from mankind because it is. That was, I think, exactly as Howell came to see himself."

"You said that you and Ray haven't been in every room of the house for years," Rachel reminded Jack. "*Think* about those rooms," she urged him, "try to come up with the most reasonable places for the haunt to hide. We may have only one opportunity to surprise it!"

He nodded, began to picture the interior of the mansion plan as he realized, with surprise and some fear, that she and Andre Jordan fully intended to *find* the haunt—and somehow destroy it for all time! But—*how?*

Without warning, there were sounds of galloping feet and whoops of youthful excitement and apprehension, then a young fist hammering on the windows on the curbside. Nick, face fitting his racket, peered in at his parents. In his wake Tricia was also heading toward the car, but just walking unhur-

riedly down the walkway. Andre rolled down the passenger windows electrically.

"I *saw* him!" Nick screamed, and shoved his glasses higher up his nose with an index finger. "*I saw the haunt!* It was heading toward the stairs—to come *down*—and he's as humongous as Trish said, his back and shoulders all bent over against the ceiling! I guess he overheard you guys talking, because he said, '*I won't stand being discussed* this way!' It told me he is, too, real, then turned around and went back the way he'd come 'cause he was too humongous to go down the stairs!"

While Rachel was letting her son into the back-seat of the Oldsmobile with her, Andre got out from behind the wheel and went around the front, at an almost languid pace, to intercept the unruffled Tricia. "Come here, little girl," the autocratic psychic called, tempering his tone with a smile. Jack got out and joined them. "Did you see it, too, as your brother did?"

The little blonde nodded. "Uh-huh," she said, raising her arms to Jack, not in fear of Jordan, a stranger to her, but because she had come outside without her coat.

"Yet you aren't making a lot of noise about it as Nick is," Andre pointed out. He exaggerated an expression indicating how impressed he was. "Why is that?"

Trish was snuggling under Jack's coat, which he had wrapped around her, and she was aware Rachel and Nick were also listening for her explanation. "Because," Tricia said solemnly, "my daddy told it never, ever, to hurt me. Besides, I think it's

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funny how it can't get downstairs." She giggled. "I kind of like him now."

Andre turned to the grown-ups. "Did you hear what she said? You have a very rational daughter."

"I guess so," Rachel said, letting an embarrassed Nick scramble out of the car. "I'm surprised, because she used to have nightmares about him constantly."

"Because, asleep," Jordan explained, "she was anticipating elements of the future. I daresay the child is somewhat clairvoyant."

Rachel, who remained in the Olds, fell silent a moment. Seeing her face, Jack realized she was deep in thought. "The important thing Trish said," Rache said in a voice of growing certainty, "is that she *likes* the haunt now."

Jack and Andre exchanged glances, the former the first to grasp a part of what his wife meant. "Tricia has complete faith in my ability to protect her," he said slowly. "So it stopped picking on her and switched to frightening Nick."

"That's it," Rachel said, nodding. She climbed out on the snowy sidewalk with the rest. "It's a thing of hatred, and it *expects* both to be hated—and feared. It knows no way to discipline and be obeyed except through loathing and terrorizing others! That's how we can fight back, and make it leave us alone!"

Andre rubbed his beardless jaw between his thumb and index fingers. "You may be right," he said with an admiring nod. "All those who think they saw the haunt were reacting to such powerful and compelling mental commands that they achieved a certain substance"—he paused, eyes brightening when he saw another log-

ical connection—"exactly as Howell Kidd endowed it with a form of artificial life!"

"We don't actually know *what* it looks like, then," Jack said. He passed Tricia to her mother, found a scrap of paper in his pocket, and accepted a pen from the paranormal heuristician. He printed three words on the paper. "There's one place Ray and I never went," he whispered as Rachel, Andre, and Nick gathered around to read his note. "Do you really believe we can confront and stop it, darling?"

Rachel kissed his cheek. "I believe so with all my heart," she said, "if each of us does his or her part."

Jack peered questioningly at Andre Jordan. Andre patted their backs and smiled. "If I understood Rachel, I certainly believe so too."

Jack glanced again at the note he had scribbled, partly in tribute to his dead brother. "Then let's do it!" he exclaimed softly, sticking the scrap of paper into his coat pocket.

The three words he had printed were "THE ATTIC ROOM."

3

They were just inside the foyer of the house when Jack caught Nick by the biceps and said, with great earnestness, "After the haunt scared your sister in her room upstairs, you took her downstairs at my request and fixed some ice cream for her. If you didn't hear me threaten this damn thing for *both* of you kids but can trust me that I *did*, you can come upstairs with us. Otherwise, stay here by the front door. We need a united front."

"I'm fine with you, Dad," Nick said, a bit taken

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aback. Spontaneously, he reached up and hugged his stepdad. "And I think the whole family ought to be there to do—well, whatever Mom cooked up."

"I have taken the liberty," Andre said, after peeking into an empty living room, "of exploring your thoughts further, Rachel, and I want to clarify our mission before proceeding. First, I came here today with a method I believe will protect us if my talents are required. Second, there is the construct's high intelligence: More than once it has projected a gigantic version of itself, and, added to the fact that most of us have considered it a flimsy ghost, that has kept generations of Kidds from imagining they might locate it in an actual room of the house. Finally, I believe we need to make sure you, Jack, *can* approach the haunt with love—at least the tolerant liking your daughter admitted to feeling."

About to lead the way into the front room and on to the stairs, Jack sagged on the nearest wall. "Maybe I haven't thought this through," he admitted huskily. He stared into space. "The haunt killed my mother and father. It took *Ray* from me!"

Rachel held him, seeking eye contact. "But it's also, simultaneously and however brilliant it may be, a different edition of your family member Howell Kidd—and dumb, incomplete. Like a cat or dog that was never properly trained, never housebroken. The hatred it's filled with is *human*, passed along to it—like genes—from a true, fallible, unfairly neglected human being. You *read* some of Howell's writing; today he might just be a guy writing horror novels, and doing well at it."

"That's true," Jack confessed, straightening. "All of it."

J. N. Williamson

"I just remembered, outside in Andre's car, that what has always chased bitterness, loneliness, and hatred away *is* love. Nothing else will do so but God Himself." She made a little family circle by holding Jack's hand and Nick's while Nick took Trish's, and Tricia gripped her daddy's other hand. "Lastly, darling, we can *do* this because nothing else may ever enable us to live in peace. *Can't* we?"

"Yes," Jack said, taking a breath and heading across the living room. "Oh, yes!"

At the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor, he, Rachel, and Andre saw—above them—the hate-haunt for the first time. Rachel cried out, instinctively hid behind the men, and pulled her children close to her.

It seemed to have attempted to take a barefoot step down toward them, and the toes of the exposed foot were shaped like an ape's and clawed with nails a full three inches in length. Clad in some kind of hair suit, its bulk was the width of the second story and its shoulders did, indeed, touch the ceiling. The haunt's head came forward vulturelike with foul white hair that dripped toward the floor; the eyes were crimson-rimmed and baleful; the nose was the blade of an ax; and its drooling mouth, scowling, revealed jagged shark's teeth between which drool poured freely and made hissing sounds of acrid heat when it splattered on the top step.

"Please," Rachel called up the stairs, "we've just come for a visit. Besides, sir—I *carry* your grandchild, the newest Kidd of all."

The haunt stared in silence down at her. Something in the awful eyes changed. Jack and Andre

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took two steps up toward it, and it spun around with incredible alacrity. By the time they had reached the landing and were clustered in the creature's own territory where it came and left at will, only a dwindling glimpse of the monstrosity remained at the end of the long hallway.

"Look," Rachel said, pointing downward. "Wouldn't that be the first family photograph," she asked Jack, "therefore the likeness of your great-great-great-grandfather?"

Jack glanced down at the shattered frame, an aging man with a high-domed head, rounded shoulders, and a pair of smoldering eyes. "Yeah, that was Howell. Did you mean—?"

"It's the only family picture that creature knocked off. You see, he probably hates himself most of all." She patted Jack's cheek. "All I can say now is that I'm sure we'll have a third child very, very soon."

Andre realized she had raised her voice to be overheard by the presence, and caught Jack's elbow before he could pursue the subject. "Allow me to take the lead, Jack."

"No problem there," Jack said. They had all been walking forward, up the hallway, warily but briskly. Now Jack pointed ahead and upward. A small door was visible in the ceiling. Jack lowered his voice, asked in a hush, "Can it become invisible?"

"I know no reason to believe so," Jordan replied from a pace ahead of the others. "It would be well, I think, to come up with no further helpful hints, however."

Rachel laughed despite herself and hugged Jack, who flushed with embarrassment.

Then they stood below the door to the attic room.

Jack reached up, opened the door with additional effort toward soundlessness from Andre and a jumping Nick—

And a short, rather narrow ladder was in readiness for a climb into darkness.

Nobody, not Andre Jordan with his experience and knowledge, not Rachel with her love-based confidence and ability to think quickly, rushed to the next step of their quest, finding and encountering the haunt on its own ground. The enormous size and rage of the monster they had seen at the top of the steps was daunting.

"We're forgetting that what we just saw was a thought projection," Jack said suddenly, pointing. "If it couldn't go down the stairs, it certainly couldn't climb this ladder, or force itself back into the attic room—its *shoulders* wouldn't even fit!"

"Excellent!" Andre told him. "But observe how intelligent the presence is: It remembered to have the illusion dash away from us, just in case we might have discovered its place of concealment. If we did not know what it is, we wouldn't even take the time to do . . . *this!*" And Andre leaped lightly onto the first rung of the ladder and started to climb.

Jack saw the heuristician's feet dangle for a moment, then disappear. He followed with his heart thudding loudly, Rachel—keeping Trish slung over one shoulder—third, and Nick bringing up the rear. When he had solid flooring under his feet, Jack reached down, in turn, to haul up his family.

"It's just a bunch of junk up here," Nick declared, sweeping the little attic room with his gaze and seeing furniture, an old-fashioned tricycle, boxes marked and unmarked, closed and open, with

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dresses, trousers, corsets, and paper items such as records of many kinds. He also saw Andre, peering over the top of a cobweb-strewn dresser. "Where the heck did it go?"

Andre, frozen in place, was staring beyond the view-blocking dresser into a corner of the all but deserted room—motioning to the others with an upraised arm and faintly wagging fingers. "Over here, I believe," he said as they joined him, circling around the big dresser. "Each of you, remember what Rachel suggested to us outside."

Towering above a once-exquisite, now clearly damaged dollhouse, Andre reached down to lock his fingertips under the roof and lift it quietly and easily from the remainder of the small structure.

In a single room of the dollhouse a miniature man stretched to his full height for the first time.

For Jack, the effect was curiously as if he had looked into a hat box and seen a curled-up pet cat roused from sleep. The cat was merely unexpected in that location and not remotely dangerous to see, but surprise enabled one to recognize its alien or unhuman nature and outlook on the world—its different-from-us way of wanting to hide, and its ability to do so almost anywhere.

But *this* concealed creature had the domed head, round shoulders, and angrily resentful eyes of the photographed Howell Kidd and the long beard and sharp, clawlike nails of the gigantic horror seen on the landing. And it was naked, unpleasantly enough that Jack tried to smile down at it and then turned away.

"You poor little man," Rachel said from beside Jack. She sounded amazingly sincere.

"*I'm not little!*" the haunt shrilled, moving in tiny circles as he stared up at them. "You have seen me in my many forms, and *all* are as I wished to be seen—except the child, 'Angus,' when I desired to play with Nick!" His voice, largely unused, would have been reedy and frail except for his attempt to shout and bluster. "What did you *do* to yourselves to appear even larger than I?" He turned his pale head in swift little jerks to gaze from one to the other of them. Then he settled upon Andre. "Is this *your* doing, whatever you are? Tell me before I punish you for your ignorant intrusion!"

"I know precisely who and what I am," Andre said with a tight smile, "which is more than you can say." He hesitated. "What does the name 'Howell Kidd' mean to you?"

"Everything!" the construct snapped. His red-rimmed eyes narrowed in thought.

"Are you happy that I'll be giving birth to another Kidd?" Rachel asked. Before anyone saw what she intended, she stretched a hand down and stroked the haunt's bald pate. Rachel had seen the thing beginning to project another killing illusion. "Perhaps, when the time comes, we could take you from your—room—and allow you, yourself, to see the baby."

Blinking, nearly overcome by her idea—by the notion, also, of physical freedom—the haunt's terrible mental image disintegrated. It had not occurred to him more than a few moments in his existence that such liberty was conceivable, except through the annihilative images he created after real human beings inadvertently presented him with the opportunity. *This Rachel*, he thought, *is it possible she*

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might set me free? But what did it say of human women, and men, if they were not only much more powerful of size but would treat him with kindness despite the many people he had disciplined? *Does it mean they are very stupid?* he wondered.

No, it means we are highly intelligent. Andre, feeling contaminated as he did it, had managed to read the construct's thoughts telepathically. He saw the haunt stare up at him in astonishment as he conveyed his own thoughts to it. *An individual who spends most of his existence checking on others, correcting or punishing them, has no real life of his own.*

The ugly being was both so shocked and so eager to think over what Andre Jordan had said that—able to do so, at last—it tore apart a partition in the dollhouse and sat down.

Stretching, Tricia reached down and patted his head. "I still like you," she said. The haunt ignored her.

That miserable little egotistical nothing has wrecked the lives of my family! Jack thought with a shake of his head. Then he saw, to his surprise, that the construct suddenly looked smaller. *Maybe we cooperated with it, too,* he reflected. *It's often easier to give the decision making to others.* And Jack realized one of its eyes was peering through a dollhouse window at him, and that the eye was not angry.

"I guess, in a way," Jack said to it, "we have some family traits in common—thanks to Grandfather Howell." And Jack tapped a finger on the side of the child's toy house as he might have a window on a dog's cage in a pet store. "Maybe we could retrain you and—"

Infuriated, the haunt was on its feet and, beneath the feet of the human beings, the floor of the attic room began to vibrate. The walls, too, quaked, as did the dollhouse—and the adults realized as a unit what the haunt had summoned with an outpouring of sheer hatred so immense it could not be restrained or deflected. *If its house and the mansion fall, Jack thought as he and Rachel tried to save the children, it won't be hurt—and it'll be free to inflict itself on the world!*

"Eight!" Andre Jordan called, contacting his spirit guide as they had arranged. *"Let him through now!"*

Above the heaving floor, a form materialized without touching any surface for balance. It was a male form, the head dome-pated, the black eyes smoldering as they focused on the haunt. *My novel burned in that police car, Howell Kidd shouted above the noise, the last copy of it. It is time for you to be disciplined. Come!*

The attic room righted itself so abruptly, Jack and Tricia sat down on the floor, hard.

Tricia was unharmed, and laughed.

The others were staring at the collapsed dollhouse—

And neither the haunt nor the shade of Dr. Kidd was anywhere to be seen.

Rachel and Jack, unsure whether to laugh or cry, just held each other tightly.

"I must try to persuade Eight to let that Dr. Kidd come by occasionally for a chat," Andre said to Nick, smoothing down his hair. "There's a no-nonsense quality to that man I cannot help but admire."

Tricia reached up, pulled Andre's head down, and gave him a wet kiss on the cheek.

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"Or possibly I'll stop by here now and then," Andre said with a raised brow, accepting Nick's hearty handshake. "It's just an outside chance that I need somewhat more contact with the living."

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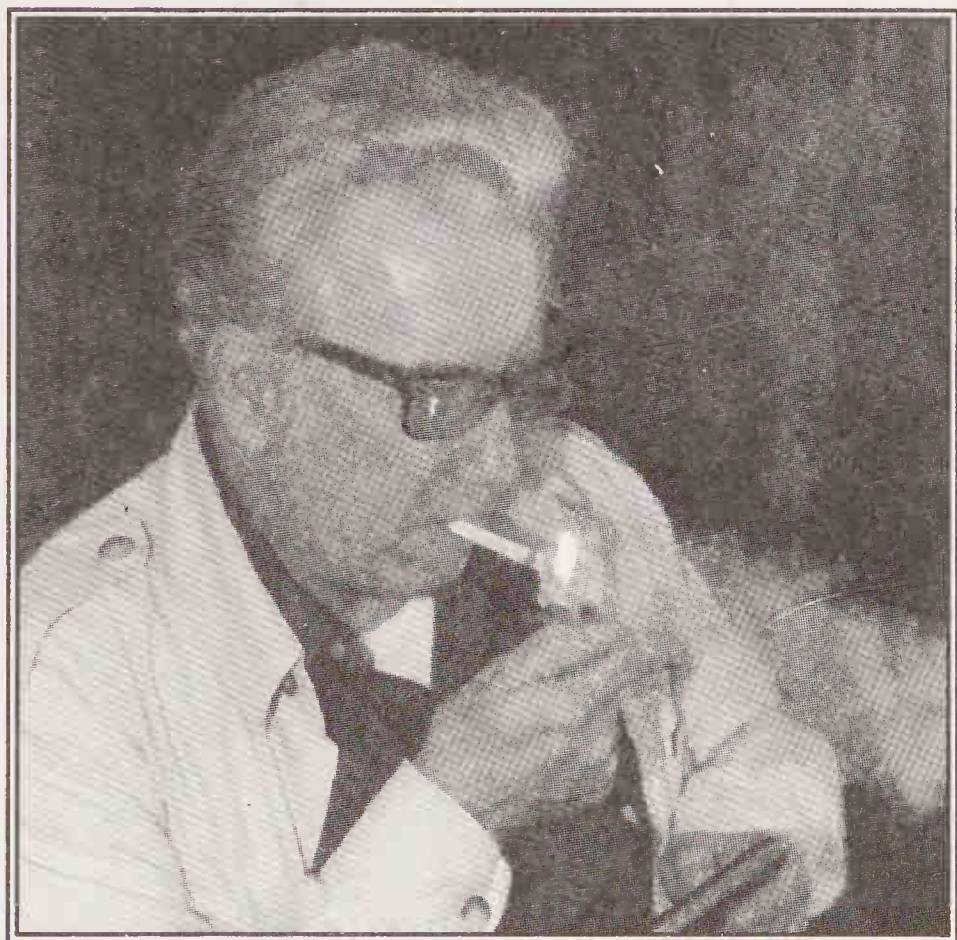
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Native Hoosiers, Williamson and wife Mary raised six kids and, with their grandchildren, may soon compose the city of Indianapolis. When Jerry isn't writing and Mary typing his manuscripts in final form, they spend much of their winters following Indiana University and Indiana Pacers basketball.

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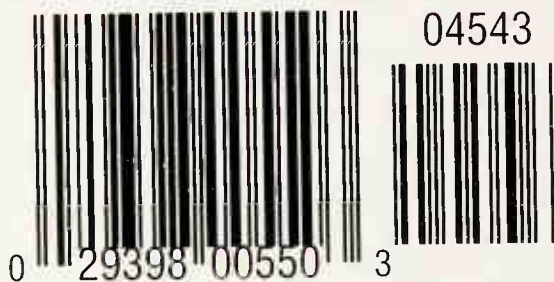
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