

This Madness of the Heart

A Miranda Lamden Mystery

*“There is no passion
more spectral or fantastical than hate;
not even its opposite, love, so peoples air
with phantoms, as this madness of the heart.”*

~ Lord Byron, The Two Foscari

by

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(excerpt)

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1 ~ *Contrary Lady Professor*

Broomsedge Branch, West Virginia
Sunday, October 26

The large woman beside me slid to the plank floor with surprising grace, twitching and jerking on her back, eyes glittering sightlessly under half-closed lids. Worshippers stepped around her with hardly a thought. Her lips fluttered in prayer, inaudible amidst the tumbling chaos of sound rolling through the tiny church.

“Hallelujer! Hallelujer! Thank you, Lord! Thank you, Jesus! Praise-a the Lord! Oooooooooohhh, glory be to God, honey! Praise-a his *holy* name!” The preacher’s voice roared over the babble.

“Yeah, Lord! Hallelujer! Amen! Praise the Lord! Yes, yes, yes! Hey, God! Lordy, Lordy! Ah know it! Aiiiiieee!” The people yelled in response, shaking the floor with their stomping feet, clapping in rhythm to the wailing of guitar and accordion.

I rocked contentedly in the midst of a storm of joy. Ecstasy beat against me like a rising spring tide. A teenage girl started spinning in her dance, knocking against her neighbors, reeling against the older folk seated along the walls. People good-naturedly pushed her upright again, sending her careening back on course like a silver ball in a pinball machine.

“Holy, holy, *HOLY!*” shouted the minister as he stepped away from the pulpit and joined the dancers.

I loved my work. No matter how many hours I spent observing people celebrating their faith, their joy always lifted me up—perhaps bearing me on the wings of their prayers. And Appalachian Holiness congregations had to be among my favorites. I loved their lack of pretense, their tolerance of diversity, their unselfconscious enthusiasm. I envied how easily they gave themselves up to spiritual ecstasy. Comparatively, I was a clam, tightly sealed in a riotous bed of wave-swept anemones.

I really didn't need to be here tonight. My research on these congregations had been completed long since. This trip was dedicated solely to collecting mountain superstition and magic. I could have headed out of West Virginia this afternoon after the last of the day's interviews and been home by now—or better still, smiling with Jack Crisp over the latest nuggets of folklore I'd unearthed in the week's study. But it felt downright ungrateful to refuse these friends' repeated invitations to worship.

Maybe next trip I could talk Crisp into joining me. I'd known most of my hosts for years, off and on, but sure as the hawk stooped on the ground squirrel, these old patriarchs were holding out on me—maybe volumes of material, no doubt because they thought it unfit for women's ears. How frustrating to find sexism among people so open-hearted in other ways!

Loud knocking pulled me out of my musings, and looking down, I saw that the woman at my feet was beating her head against the floor, battering her neat bun into straying ropes of graying hair. A young man stepped in quickly, kneeling beside her to cushion her head with his hands, patiently waiting for some gentler rapture to overtake her.

For a moment the congregation stilled, and then flung itself into the chant-like singing of a simple song, over and over again:

He's a-comin'
He's a-comin'
He's a-comin' in that day!
It's alright!

No more sufferin'
No more sufferin'
No more sufferin' in that day!
It's alright!

Glory glory
Glory glory
Glory GLORY in that day!
IT'S ALRIGHT!

Several white-shirted men carried cardboard boxes into the center of the floor while the worshippers danced close around. A middle-aged man, dripping with sweat, his shirt soaked through, skipped in and out of the crowd like a little child. A solemn-faced old grandfather hopped in place on invisible springs. One by one, two by two, three by three, coiling copperheads, cottonmouths, and rattlesnakes were scooped from the boxes and passed from dancer to dancer, man or woman, whoever held out a willing hand.

Panic knocked the breath from my body like an adder's sudden strike. My gut clenched, writhing with the coiling snakes. Tremors shook my hands. Shadow threatened to overwhelm my sight.

I let my breath out in a long quiet stream. "Breathe, Miranda," I muttered, dropping my gaze to the floor, visualizing sunlit rooms sealed against squirming reptiles.

I'd forgotten myself, relaxed my guard, let slip the rigorous discipline I wore like a second skin in my field studies of religious phenomena. And now, here I was, stumbling unprepared into this moment. My mind had wandered inexcusably. All I needed was for the people around me to sense my anxiety. One moment's terror could undermine years of hard-won trust and acceptance. Everything rested on my ability to set aside personal prejudices and open myself to their world.

Come on, Miranda, let go the fear. Let the panic sink away. Feel the joy! Celebrate with them. Share their confidence, move into their faith, dance with them. Forget yourself. See with their eyes. Who you are outside this room matters less than a johnny house paper roll!

It wasn't as if they expected me to take part in the actual snake handling. Only those who felt the tingling, burning breath of the Spirit were called to that, or to the poison or the fire. But snakes unnerved me, especially in a coiling, hissing mass.

Rattlers shook their rattles in warning, cottonmouths bared their fangs, but the dancers swayed on oblivious, twinning snakes around their shoulders, their waists, up their arms, inside their clothing. I prayed to whatever deity might be that this night wouldn't end, as others had, in snakebite and pain.

"*Breathe, Miranda,*" I repeated, forcing myself to join in the swaying rhythm of the bodies around me as men started tossing snakes to each other across the room. I moved carefully toward the back. Hissing

reptiles passed in flight, erect, writhing, deadly, yet always caught up again by waiting hands. The dance went on, and the snakes held their venom.

A young woman, thirty-something, with long stringing hair and a gaunt equine face, stepped up to the microphone, speaking into the melee of shouting and singing in breathy erratic sentences: “Glory be to God-a! Hallelujer! Praise God who saved my sinful soul-a! Praise God-a, he done set me free! He washed my sins away in the precious blood-a, hallelujer! He walks with me ever’whar I go, glory be!”

Her head and body jerked with a sudden hiccup. She paused for a moment in her speech, and with a quick dip of her head, she continued in an ecstatic tongue meaningful only to herself and her God.

“Hallelujer! Ha! Glory be! Ha! *Hala matami tomo halama mahama tano shala dela shando mashisamana ma!* Ha! Glory be! His voice speaks truth! *Shando malashami sho!*”

Her head and body shook, as if in punctuation, and she continued again in common speech. “*Lost* in sins I war ere my precious Jesus called me t’ th’ Holiness way. My soul black as death-a, my heart sunk low as *low!*”

She rushed on, but I lost the thread of her testimony as the snake handling started winding down. At last, the snakes were disappearing back into their boxes. I watched one of the white-shirted elders emerge from a back room holding a plastic jug of strychnine, while others lit kerosene-soaked rags dangling from pop bottles, and the congregation came together in a wide circle, preparing to celebrate their God-given immunity to both poison and flame.

Suddenly I swayed and nearly fell. Nausea threatened. I’d reached my limit . . . end of the road. Only it wasn’t. A vision of the long drive home to Canaan Wells rose to taunt me. Time to go home where I belonged. I’d fulfilled whatever social and religious obligations I had to these good people.



The winding road seemed to coil through the mountains like the snakes in their dark boxes, and I struggled against the temptation to close my eyes on it and just drift. God, I was tired!

Tired like the child I'd once been after a day picking raspberries behind my grandmother's house in the tick-infested brambles of southern Virginia. Odd that childhood memories of my Grandmother Lamden should be most vivid. Surely I'd spent most of my early years on the lawns of the mock-Georgian mansion my father had designed for my lady mother. But I'd broken away from their suburban idyll with hardly a backward glance as soon as I was old enough for boarding school. No, I remembered best the high ceilings and gleaming hardwood floors of my grandmother's rambling old house—like her, a relict of a vanished age doomed to extinction. It sat alone in the center of the Lamdens' ancestral land grant, slowly crumbling beneath the onslaught of Virginia's unquiet greenery.

Thin and frail as a wraith, my grandmother had been little more than a rustle of faded silk drifting through those shadowy rooms, yet somehow she remained more real to me than my elegant parents. I recalled humid nights troubled by childish illness, waking to find her sitting upright beside me in a straight-backed rocker, eyes closed in uneasy sleep, clasped hands glowing in the circle of light cast by a small bedside lamp.

Many long miles stretched between my grandmother's disintegrating plantation house and my present career as a phenomenologist of religion—miles of rough and rutted roads. Not only my early marriage, but also my relationship with my parents had fallen away, casualties of years of rancorous disagreement and disillusionment.

The Jeep's wheels turned on the invisible pavement, their hum blending with the remembered song of cicadas and spinning ceiling fans. I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair to clear my thoughts, grasping for one small piece of physical reality that might anchor me to consciousness. *Stay awake, Miranda!* My vegetarian belly seemed to offer the best distraction: it was rumbling in bitter protest at the pork fat in my recent diet, lurking in every bread, every vegetable, even innocent-looking piecrusts. I would pay, no doubt. But it was no use. Rumbblings or no, the song of the Cherokee's tires on the dark pavement threatened to soothe me into a torpor again.

I opened the window, letting the chill must of autumn leaves buffet my face. Kaleidoscopic colors were blazing across these hills beneath the night's heavy shadow, if only I could see. Never mind, I'd see them from Crisp's window in the morning . . . morning in his big loft bed, warm

against his long body, warm under the quilt I'd made for him last Christmas . . . *Wake up, Miranda!* You'll never see the morning if you don't hold this road.

I could see it now: Dr. Miranda Lamden, contrary lady-professor of world religions and anthropology at Obadiah Durham College, Canaan Wells, Kentucky, dead at 38. Known to her close friends as Mir, Mira, or Andi, she was discovered several hours after death in a remote mountain holler, car wedged under a moldering coal tippie hidden by a heavy stand of mountain laurel. Survived by grieving kin in the Virginia tidewater. Her West Virginia hosts say they warned her that she'd come to grief if she took to bathing with the moon rising toward the full. She should've listened. Mourned by students, uppity female friends, and Jack Crispen, significant other and local craftsman hunk. No, not hunk: her students' word was "hotty," wasn't it? Disgusting word! Freud would have been enchanted by their potty-mouth slang. Who knows? Maybe Siggy himself was the tasteless muse behind the word's evolution.

God, what *nonsense*. Wake up!

Oh, well, at least the coal trucks weren't on the road on a Sunday night, belching their black exhaust, clogging the highways, hurling anthracite bullets at unsuspecting windshields. Only another hour or so, and you'll be there, Miranda. You can make it. Surely advanced age hasn't set in so hard that you can't hold your eyes open past midnight.

As all things do, my trip came to an end—safely, if numbly, at Jack's door. The sprawl of his hand-built cabin lay hidden beneath mountain darkness so heavy it all but swallowed the glow of the mudroom light. Jack hadn't waited up for me, but the dim bulb acknowledged my expected arrival. I abandoned my week's research, luggage, and the Jeep to the night and slipped into the cabin. Jack roused enough to pull me gently down into sleep beside him, warm and musky and deep.

2 ~ Purposes Steeped in Boredom

*Canaan Wells, Kentucky
Monday, October 27*

At 7:30 the next morning I was peering owlishly at an invisible world as I drove the five foggy miles from Jack's cabin to an unexpected faculty meeting, feeling hostile toward bureaucracies everywhere, no matter how benign. I was on sabbatical, dammit, supposedly exempt from tedious college chores. The Jeep jounced in and out of potholes, skittered over bedrock, and descended into the holler where the blacktop highway ran beneath Possum Knob's long ridge. Between bumps I brushed snarls out of my unruly hair and tried to smooth the wrinkles from the flannel shirt and jeans I'd perversely chosen from my stash in Jack's closet.

Neither autumn foliage nor clearing skies touched me. The old coal mine with its derelict equipment and black slag spilling into the holler below suited my mood nicely. I had no eyes for the quaint college town of Canaan Wells, sheltering in its long mountain saddle . . . not even a caustic observation on the fast-moving construction project undertaken by our local bible college.

Once the Jeep was parked, I scuffed through the mulched leaves, scanning the college quad for other late arrivals, half hoping to run into Marinja Baude, my one kindred spirit in a mostly conservative faculty. Assistant professor of art, woman of color and an uprooted urbanite, Djinn was an even more eccentric addition to Obadiah Durham College than I. Like most of ODC's faculty, her specialties overlapped several fields of study. Not only did she oversee the college's entire two-dimensional fine arts curriculum, from oil painting to printmaking; she also taught textile arts and ceramics. But the quad was empty of all human life—not surprising on an early Monday morning.

Paying no particular attention to where I put my feet, I suddenly found myself within a feather's breadth of stepping on a dead mockingbird. My flesh tingling in sudden reaction, I pulled myself up

short and I knelt beside the small body. He was still warm and pliable, head hanging limp, black beak closed on his song, grey and white feathers mangled by the blades of the now-distant leaf-shredder. How many times had I heard this mockingbird fling his territorial exuberance across the quad? How often had I paused for the pleasure of listening to him sing from the top of his holly tree?

If I were the sort of person who believed in omens—and mostly I didn't, in spite of my interest in superstition—I might find this small tragedy alarming . . . *It's a sin to kill a mockingbird—they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us!* . . . I might even forecast dire happenings for the college. But holding the bird in my hand, I felt only sad. I shook my head. Accept it and let it go, Miranda. Impermanence is the essence of life.

I paused and allowed myself to feel the fleeting warmth of the autumn sun on my face.

Looking at my watch, I saw that I was now well and truly late. On an impulse I folded a piece of legal paper around the bird's body, dug an old lunch sack out of my briefcase grab-bag, and took him with me to the long-since-convened faculty meeting.

Walking briskly up the steps to the yellow brick building, I smiled to see Djinn running across from the painting loft, even later than I.

"Hey, Djinn! I'm on sabbatical. What's your excuse?"

"La, sassy gal, I don' need no excuse! I be Djinn!"

Jamaica must be her flavor of the week, I decided, judging from the accent and carefully beaded dreadlocks. Bounding up the stairs toward me, hand-screened dress fluttering around her long legs in a sudden wind, she was exotic, beautiful. She grabbed me in a huge hug and then paused, sniffing my neck.

"Coo, ma fren, I scent a mon, a musky mon, juicy an' full o' sugah! Who he be, um? Yo tell ole Djinn so she tak' a taste, too, hey?"

I laughed and pushed her away. "Give it up, Djinn! You don't smell anything, and you wouldn't have Jack if you found him under your Kwanzaa tree! Come on, I don't want to be in Probeck's hot seat today. Let's get this over with."

¹ from *To Kill A Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, 1960.

She leered and swished her skirts at me, and then minced through the doors and up the narrow staircase in a too-perfect parody of President Probeck's fastidious secretary. I followed, struggling to straighten my face into more professional lines as I climbed. Djinn had almost redeemed the day.

The meeting room was a favorite of mine, taking up half the upper floor, its narrow-paned windows reaching from baseboard to twelve-foot ceiling and marching closely along three sides of the room. Set aside for purposes steeped in boredom and heavy with tedium, at least the room welcomed in a view of the real world for the duration. A hundred or so faculty and staff had already assembled in ragged rows, and President Garrett Probeck was in full spate, dressed as always in an elegant suit more appropriate to Harvard's august halls than the in-house doings of a small Appalachian college. He hardly bothered to scowl at us as we entered.

Odd, I thought, as Djinn and I looked for empty chairs. What could draw so many to a Monday morning meeting, called or not? What had distracted Garrett from the easy cheap shot he should have taken at our late arrival? I settled into an empty front-row seat to gather the gist of his remarks, placing my case with its tiny corpse beside my chair.

"We find ourselves at a perilous crossroads," he intoned solemnly, letting his blue eyes sweep the uncharacteristically attentive faces, pausing for dramatic effect. "The clandestine machinations of this religious mountebank have threatened the very existence of our institution in the years to come!"

I had it now: he must be talking about the Rev. Dr. Jasper Jarboe, president of once-tiny Grace and Glory Bible College, soon to be rechristened, with true Christian humility, Jasper Jarboe Christian Apostolic University. Appalling man. What had the oily reverend done now?

"We have failed!" Probeck reproached us in mournful tones. "We have betrayed the memory of Obadiah Durham! What will become of the gifted children of these hills if our light goes out? Who of you can say he or she bears no blame for this catastrophe?"

I quirked my eyebrows at Djinn, but she merely shrugged. What possessed Garrett?

He glared down his long nose at the two of us. "If you ladies [ladies underscored, sweeping his eyes pointedly over my clothing] included

punctuality among your priorities, you would *understand* our agenda. According to absolutely reliable sources, Jasper Jarboe boasted to his deacon board only this evening past that our founder's only daughter has promised to alter her will in his favor! The last surviving scion of Obadiah himself has abandoned his legacy, and gone over to the side of the Philistines. [Really, he was getting quite biblical.] She has committed *all* of our founder's forested land, 12,000 acres in case you fail to recall, to this mongrel institution. 12,000 acres of priceless virgin forest, *adjoining our campus!*"

His secretary leaned forward from behind him and laid her hand on his arm. "Blood pressure!" she whispered, and sat back again.

Garrett took a deep breath and returned to his accustomed reasoned tones. "That man has proposed a giant lighted cross on the ridge above us, opposite Indian Bluff."

My mouth dropped open in consternation. Overlooking Indian Bluff meant overlooking Obadiah's old chapel, and my home!

"Yes," he grimaced, acknowledging the effect of his news, "AND a forty-foot statue of Jesus as well. Not to mention a place of worship best described as a coliseum. *And,*" he growled, "as any fundraiser knows, once a major benefactor makes a large donation, the next will surely follow."

I sat in shock, unbelieving. Viola Ricketts wouldn't do this! I'd known the grande dame of the autocratic Durhams for ten years now. She'd sold me my land and her father's chapel with it. Yes, she was getting more conservative as she got older, people did (she had to be nearly a hundred by now). But Jasper Jarboe? She was too canny an old woman to be taken in by such a slick huckster.

Probeck scrutinized his audience, judging our reactions. The low murmur of comment crested toward a roar, and he raised his hands for silence, tapping impatiently on his microphone.

"Anything you have to say should be shared with us all, in orderly fashion, if you please."

I tuned out the pandemonium and sank into my own thoughts. God, what a disaster! Little Grace and Glory Bible College! Who'd have thought it? They'd been lucky to enroll forty students a year before JJ took over. Retired founder Elmus Rooksby was a profoundly good man, dedicated to the school he'd founded, but he was neither an administrator nor a mega-fundraiser. He was a pastor at heart, and a

good one, even if he did worry that ODC was losing sight of Obadiah's principles. Now that I thought of it, he was Viola Rickett's pastor.

Maybe Elmus was right, and ODC was straying. Our charter spoke clearly of Obadiah's desire for us to tend the students' specifically Christian souls along with their intellects. And to a certain extent we did. But today we were more apt to nurture in our students a tendency toward tolerant spiritual openness than exclusive Christian piety: thus Elmus' original founding of G & G in the late 60's, to raise up pastors who embraced the purity of Christian faith in the face of ODC's encroaching syncretism.

"Dr. Lamden! Are you with us?" Garrett's ironic tones broke into my reverie. "If you would be so good as to remain for a few moments, now that the meeting is concluded, I would like you to serve on the committee forming to address this crisis. Your relationship with Mrs. Ricketts might possibly be of help."

I nodded: in this, his request was my command.

"Dr. Baude!" he called out.

Djinn paused at the stair-head and turned back, following him reluctantly toward the room's corner, apparently for private conversation. Probeck spoke at length, towering over her, solemn and pontifical. Her face remained impassive, but I could sense her distress. She must be in trouble. I edged closer, trying to catch the words, but heard only his parting remark about speaking further. She left the room quickly, without a backward glance.

Damn! What a time to be summoned into one of the Great Man's piffling committee meetings.

"Gentlemen . . . and lady," Probeck called out, spreading his arms in a broad gesture of gathering-in. "Let us put our heads together and plan our strategy. *Tempus fugit!*"



Noon came and went before I escaped into the sunlight again. Gad! Few men could talk longer and say less than Garrett Probeck . . . and in the college world that was saying something. No doubt it served him well as a fund-raiser. Directness was no virtue when stalking the wary greenback.

I waggled my shoulders, arching my back like my marmalade cat, and took a deep breath. The sky was a brilliant autumn blue—the bluest of the whole Kentucky year. Yellow maples in the quad stood like mirror images, fallen leaves pooling around dark trunks in golden mimicry of their boughs. From our pseudo-gothic chapel tower, bells chimed the half hour, and suddenly my bag weighed heavy in my hand. I glanced down, remembering the small body awaiting its last rites. It wouldn't be getting any fresher. Unfortunate as it was, he'd just have to wait: I couldn't very well dig a grave in the college common.

If I were a superstitious woman I'd certainly see this morning's calamity echoed in the mockingbird's death. And who could say it wasn't? What was the word Carl Jung liked to use for happenings with no causal connections, yet related by more than coincidence? *Synchronicity*, that was it . . . the non-rational interconnectedness of universal consciousness. Alas, a difficult concept to prove.

Well, much as I might like to head home and philosophize with my cats over lunch, first I needed to find Djinn. Her tenure evaluation was due this spring, and now of all times she couldn't afford to be ruffling Probeck's feathers.

"Mira!" Her voice rang out across the quad, and there she was, running out the door of the art studio.

"Well, speak of the dark goddess, Djinn! I was just about to mount an expedition in search of you."

"No need, Mir, I'm not lost yet. But if old Probity doesn't grow some balls, I could be. Join me for lunch, friend of my bosom, and let me cry into your beer," she added with a flicker of her earlier warmth.

3 ~ *Da Vinci in the Rough*

Canaan Wells, Kentucky
Monday, October 27

We caught a lull in the noontime rush at the College Inn and grabbed a dark corner booth. My church-going forebears could hardly have been more secluded in their snug box pews, screened from all but the eyes of the thundering clergy. Leaving our menus unopened on the worn oak table, we turned back to the woes of the day.

“Mira, the whole damned sky is falling,” Djinn muttered, slumping against the paneled wall at her back, “and I’m no twitchy Chicken Little. You know that. But even as I speak, the Grace and Glory *Evangel* is proclaiming to the waiting world that Assistant Professor Marinja Baude is in actuality the infamous Whore of Babylon.”

Then she sat up straight and leaned across the table toward me, her words dropping into a furious hissing undertone.

“My classes are pornographic peepshows, and my textbooks are how-to’s in mysterious African perversions. My nickname is a demon’s honorific, and my own paintings satanic cryptographs! I seduce innocent children into debauchery and worse. I’m an abomination before the face of the Lord and a refugee from Sodom and Gomorrah, Lordy ha’ mercy!

“There’s no end to it, Mira! Either I’m feeling up their bony-ass daughters, or enticing their pimply punk sons to burn in unnatural lust for each other.”

I started to speak, but she forestalled me with her raised hand.

“Oh, there’s more, Mira! I’m possessed body and soul by the spirit of that old mambo who murdered Obadiah’s family a hundred and fifty years ago when she torched the ancestral manse. Apparently most nights I can be found in my cellar crypt brewing bubbling cauldrons of voodoo bile!

“Mira, have I ever hung out my private business to offend their noses? What did I ever do to them, besides putting a black face in a white

job? You *know* I live looking over my shoulder. I try damned hard to be cool with their silly-ass sensibilities, if only to preserve my own hide! Damn that sneaking pustule of a spying, white-arsed . . .”

“Djinn, keep your voice *down!*” I warned her as her volume rose.

The raucous noontime hubbub of the inn rolled around us undiminished. If anyone had been eavesdropping they weren’t letting on.

“*That’s* why Garrett cornered you? He thinks it’s all true?”

“True? What does truth *ever* have to do with character assassination? Mira, I went over to the P.O. where Glib and Garbled always leaves a stack of its holier-than-thou hate mail, and there it was, in the rev’s own private column, ”With God on my Side”: big black letters hyping Canaan Wells’ first annual heretic and witch hunt. They could burn you next year, if you don’t manage a sex change between now and then . . . maybe it wouldn’t’ve been such a bad idea for me either.”

A sudden grin won out over the horror on my face. “That’s it, Djinn! Salvation for us both! I have it on the irrefutable authority of old Gran’paw Lihew Catron, over to Cockle Hole Trace, that if a body really sets her mind to doin’ it, she can manage to kiss her own elbow. And as soon as ever that’s done . . . well, bing, bang, bung—she’s a man. Or a woman if it be a man. He couldn’t rightly say if he’d ever seen it happen, but fer sartin sure it’s a true fact.”

For a moment, Djinn looked at me like I’d lost my mind. But then the corners of her mouth twitched and she stretched her chin toward her elbow, craning her neck, crushing her arm against her face, wagging her lips wildly. I joined in a split second later—after all, empirical research was the touchstone of true science. The two of us were whooping loudly, hiccupping with suppressed glee, tears streaming down our cheeks, elbows jerking up and down like grotesque chicken wings, when the tentative voice of our young waiter broke through in mid-guffaw.

“Hidee, Dr. Baude, ma’am. What kin I git fer you-uns today?”

Djinn glanced at me, choking. I gasped for breath and met her eye, and laughter took us again, rolling over us like an elemental force of nature, sweeping our last shreds of decorum before it.

Sometimes, in the face of disaster, laughter is the only recourse from despair.

When I got myself under control at last, fearing for the young man’s discomfort, I saw that Djinn had grasped his hand in hers.

“Mira,” she gasped, “meet Welby Bayless, Rembrandt of the Appalachians. How’re they treating you over at the old Grudge and Grumble, Welby?”

The young man colored like a girl, ducking his head, his pale hair falling down to screen his face. But his eyes were shining when he looked up again.

“I reckon things is purt fair, Dr. Baude. I hain’t much a fool ‘bout it. But I bin a-fixin’ to thank ye fer gittin’ me this here job. It’s lak a li’l piece o’ heaben fer me—new folks, new vittles, new ways o’ bein’!” Then he blushed again, obviously afraid he’d overstepped the proprieties.

I looked at Djinn with amazement, but she just laughed, and turned back to Welby. “Welby Bayless, this is my friend, Dr. Lamden. She teaches religion at the college.”

“Howd’do, ma’am,” he grinned at me, obviously reassured, and extended a pale, thin hand. “Mightily pleased t’ make yer ‘quaintance. Dr. Baude’s bin purt nigh lak fambly fer me here. I was plumb downhearted durin’ th’ first spell arter I come. She’s bin a-learnin’ me ‘bout drawin’ an’ paintin’ an’ sech—an’ a-studyin’ ‘bout how I mought start in at Ob’diah Durham come spring.”

Welby turned back to Djinn, animation lighting up his face. “I found me some right kindly friends here, too, Dr. Baude. I never knowed they was folks in the world I could lak as much as them! Ever since I got up ary size I bin usen to bein’ lonesome and differnt. Law me, Dr. Baude, hain’t I bin havin’ a big-eyed time!”

This time he clammed up for good, coloring again, hunching his thin shoulders in embarrassment and taking out his pencil. “The chicken salat eats good t’day, ladies. An’ thar’s a good lot o’ eatin’ on thet catfish platter. Iffen yar not jes’ plumb partic’lar, we kin surely find sommat t’ please ye!”

Once our order was complete and our solicitous waiter gone, I turned to Djinn. “Where did you find that boy? Is he for real? He’s got to be from waaaaay back in the deep hollers somewhere. Those manners, that speech! Is he really a student at Grace and Glory? And you’re tutoring him?”

“Since last year, she grinned. “One of my students hauled me over to the coffee house in the spring, raving about a pencil sketch I had to see—you know how these kids stick up everything from phone-pad doodles to senior projects, hoping to make a little cash on the side.”

Her mouth twisted in a wry grin.

“Although Goddess knows, the same pieces have been gathering dust there forever. Anyway, there was this page torn out of a cheap sketchbook, stuck up with a couple of tacks, with an astonishingly sensitive pencil sketch of a young girl. I grabbed it down off the wall, paid for it at the cash register, and got the boy’s info. Persuading him to trust me was a bit toilsome, but once he followed the *mountain* of breadcrumbs I laid out enticing him to the art building, the studio did the rest. A kid in a candy shop doesn’t begin to cover it.”

She laughed easily at the memory, the day’s cares momentarily forgotten.

“He’s the kind of student I always dreamed of, you know? I throw him a few scraps of straw, and damned if he doesn’t spin them into gold! Mira, the boy’s a prodigy! He’s hiding world-class talent under that bumbling hayseed charm. He draws like a da Vinci in the rough, and he paints better than any of my senior painting majors, after only a couple of months’ experience with the feel of a proper brush. And he’s musical, too.

“He’s a sad case, really. His daddy’s one of those stern patriarchs out of a crazy time warp, with a long beard and overalls, a tyrant ruling his own little piece of dirt. Comes from the deep dark hills of West Virginia, some tiny backwater that time forgot, called Snakewater of all things. Grew up in the Holiness tradition, like those people in your book. Old Bayless apparently wore out three wives having his children, and Welby’s the youngest child of the last wife. She made the old man promise her on her deathbed that he’d send this boy to college, get him off that old hardscrabble farm. So how does he keep his promise? He locates the cheapest, pitifulest excuse for a college he can find, and sends Welby to our own Gross and Gruesome.

“Welby’s spending most of his time with G & G’s music teacher; he’s got no craving to preach. In the year he’s been in Canaan Wells, he’s already leading the choir, almost by himself. He’s even in JJ’s private army—you know, JJ’s Journeymen. I know he doesn’t like JJ, though. You’d never catch him dissing JJ or anybody else, but his eyes can’t mask the lie. At least he’s found some ODC boys to run with here. He deserves some fun in his life.”

“Will he really be starting classes here?”

“Oh there’ll be no trouble on our end; he’s too damned good. I have a full work-study scholarship all but lined up for him already, and Viola

Ricketts is interested in meeting him. The joker in the deck is his daddy. He's almost certain to forbid it, and I can't say for sure that Welby's tough enough to go up against him. We'll just have to see."

She glanced across to the stairway climbing up through the inn's low-hanging beams, where Welby sat laughing with several other boys. "It'll break his heart if he has to go back to that holler," she added.

"The boy's too thin and pale," I remarked. "How's his health?"

"Who knows? He's probably never been to a doctor in his life. I guess they'll look into it at student health if he ever comes to us . . ."

Djinn's voice tapered off into silence as we both turned to watch a young woman in a skintight orange-ruffled mini-dress stroll through the thinning lunch crowd to a table at the raised railing around the soda counter.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Djinn muttered, her jaw clenching tight.

I had no ready answer for that: Colleen Jarboe, JJ's baby girl, 26, divorced . . . no, annulled, ripe, ready for action, and definitely not a regular.

"Maybe her soap operas are in reruns," I shrugged. "Maybe Pumpkin shooed her out of the house and told her to get some fresh air. Canaan Wells doesn't offer much in the way of entertainment, after all. It's not as if the colleges are rival gangs feuding over territory.

"Yeah, I guess . . . Oh, shit, Mir, she's seen Welby!"

"Take it easy, Djinn. What if she has? Are there so many jobs in this town that he'll be nailed for working at the inn? So he's got a job here. So what? The kid needs money."

We both watched Colleen in silence.

"I don't like it, Mira," Djinn said at last. "She hasn't taken her eyes off him. She's like a snake willing some poor bird to meet her eye. I swear, there's something seriously off with that girl . . . can't you feel it? She has as much warmth as a sewer rat slinking through a ditch glazed with ice."

"Don't you think your imagination is just a little over-wound, Djinn? You're feeling paranoid about JJ's malice, and no wonder. But what can she do?"

"Yeah, that's my concern. What could she do?"

“Stay out of it, Djinn. You won’t do him any favors taking his side, whatever that might be. You’re already in their sights; don’t draw attention to him.”

Djinn turned back around to face me across the table. “You talk about not wanting to draw attention to something, Mir, you’re not going to believe the rumors I heard buzzing around the hall after Probeck’s little bomb.”

“Don’t tell me. Garrett has invited JJ to deliver a chapel address on ‘Man’s Dominion Over Nature.’”

“Close, but no Chiquita, girl. The grapevine creeping out of the gents’ can claims that JJ and good ole boy Hankins Turpen have an under-the-table deal for the lumber rights on those 12,000 acres.”

My shock must have registered clearly on my face. “No shit, Mir,” Djinn added. “Gospel.”

“Lumber rights? Djinn, do you realize what you’re saying? That forest has never been cut! All these years, all the sharp operators, all the shysters, all the devastation and loss, and still Obadiah guarded that forest like his wife’s honor. No one has ever laid a saw to it. Viola would never stand for it. She’ll write it into her will, just like she wrote it into the purchase agreement when I bought my land from her: the forest protected in perpetuity.

“You sure about that?”

“I know Viola. She might be getting a little vague, but some things are engraved in her bones, and that forest’s one of them. If Turpen thinks he’s going to get his pudgy fingers around that timber, he’s in for a nasty surprise, and I’m going to make sure of it. I’ll speak to Viola. Probeck’s counting on it anyway.

“But what did Probeck say to you, Djinn? You didn’t tell me. The college will stand behind you, won’t it?”

“Who knows, Mira? He’ll swing with the prevailing wind. PR makes his world go round, you know that. He’ll back me up until it pinches his pocket, or his projected endowments. You can bet he won’t take a fall for me. He’ll just say nothing and hope it goes away. A weasel to the bone.”

“Djinn, I’m so sorry! What can I do to help?”

I reached out to take her hand, but she pulled it back to her lap, her face a smooth mask, hardened against anything that smacked of pity. She leaned her head back against the worn patina of the old high-backed corner booth and closed her eyes.

I wouldn't make the mistake again. She needed a strong wall between herself and the ugliness just beginning to emerge in JJ's campaign of innuendo. Anger could provide that wall. She might let me watch her back while she fought her battles, but not hold her hand.

"Come on, my friend, time's a-wasting," I said, rising from my seat and sidling out of the booth. "I've got a funeral to plan and a zoo to feed."

After a pause, Djinn followed. I was in the midst of explaining the mockingbird's death as we emerged under the inn's creaking sign and almost ran into Welby and a pretty young woman rounding the building's corner from the side entrance.

"Why, Cassie! It's a pleasure to see you," I exclaimed. "It's been a while, hasn't it? Do you know young Welby here?"

"Hidee, Dr. Lamden," Cassie answered softly. "Yes'm, Welby an' I are in choir together. We're tol'able good friends."

Cassie looked at Welby fondly and squeezed his hand. He seemed ill at ease and eager to be gone.

"Cassie, when are you going to come visit me again?" I asked. "You know you're always welcome, at home or school."

"Yes'm," she barely whispered.

"Come 'long down now, Cassie," Welby said. "We bin a-layin' off t' git gone way long a'ready. I reckon we're purt' nigh late as 'tis."

They both smiled politely and hurried off.

"Did we forget to shower this morning?" Djinn asked.

We watched as the two teenagers moved off, blond heads together, slim bodies almost indistinguishable in size and gait.

I looked at Djinn and remarked, "Cassie Heck's one of Viola's projects, you know. She writes short stories, little mountain gems. Viola's been trying to get Cassie's father to enroll her at ODC, but you can imagine his response: What does a young girl fixin' to marry need with the foolishness we'd put in her head?"

"Something between those two, you think?" I wondered aloud as they turned a corner and disappeared behind the boughs of a crimson sugar maple. "If there is, I'd be willing to bet young Cam Chasteen doesn't know about it. He's a possessive suitor, and to his mind, Cassie was sworn to him long since; they were already together three years ago when I hired them on to help with remodeling the chapel."

"I'd be very surprised," Djinn murmured cryptically, and turned away.

Ω

4 ~ Place of Ill Omen

*Canaan Wells, Kentucky
Monday, October 27*

Obadiah Durham himself had chiseled the rough stone cross in the clearing by the limestone chapel I called home. The chapel building had been too much for his skills alone, but he'd overseen its construction closely, hiring master craftsmen from as far away as Roanoke and Lynchburg. Every morning as I left my bedroom and walked through the hall into the original chapel, I thanked him for the love he'd lavished there.

Exterior stone showed in the clean arches of the windows and in the curving entryway and vestibule. Elsewhere comfort had taken precedence over tradition, and Crisp had hidden the stone surface beneath rived and weathered wood from old outbuildings. The carved rafters he'd preserved with a second roof. Altar and fretwork were gone long since, torn out by vandals and souvenir seekers, but the hardwood floor remained, though scarred and pitted, its lovely inlaid borders largely intact.

I loved my home. Maybe even more than the man whose hands had reclaimed it from crumbling ruin. But I'd never pressed the comparison. It wasn't like the two were competing for my affection.

I rose from the tiny mound of fresh dirt at the base of Obadiah's cross, and watched Shiva and Shakti as they sniffed around the mockingbird's grave. Like the others, it would have to be covered with a good-sized slab of creekstone if I didn't want the little beasts digging it up again as soon as my back was turned, or worse, using it as a handy new litter box.

My little cemetery was growing. Death was a commonplace in these hills, and I encountered it often enough, mostly giving it little more thought than a fallen tree. Yet every now and again, the pathos of some wild creature's end touched me. Or in some cases, the creature was dear to me, like the small bird lying now in the freshly turned earth, and the

young red-tailed hawk I had followed from fledging to untimely death on the highway, his striped tail never warming to the ruddy orange of breeding maturity. I'd also buried a young fawn I'd found tangled in rusty barbed wire, too traumatized and torn to follow its mother to safety when the dogs attacked. And a hummingbird I'd found dead on the chapel floor. I liked to think something of their spirits remained with me here.

Death was no stranger to this chapel, I mused, as I settled the stone in place and turned to go inside. Perhaps no human cemetery lay in the chapel's shadow, but, as all the country round knew well, where Obadiah had gone, death had always followed . . . beginning with the catastrophic blaze a hundred and fifty years ago that had consumed all the Durhams save the infant Obadiah.

If the old tales could be believed, a woman brought as a house slave from the dark plantations of the Caribbean had laid a vodun curse on Augustus Durham and all his seed, a curse seemingly destined to work its malice unto the last generation. Based on the stories I'd heard, that long-dead slave had had good cause for seeking vengeance: Obadiah's father Augustus had raped her child—his own fourteen-year-old daughter—and the girl had died eight months later birthing his stillborn baby.

As soon as the young Obadiah had reached adulthood, he'd left his mother's kin, put his lowland holdings in the hands of lawyers, and moved to the mountains. His great-grandfather had claimed huge stretches of Kentucky highlands under an old land grant, and Obadiah took up that land, buying more wherever he could, trying to insulate himself with land-power against his childhood terrors. In his mind, the tangled virgin forest sheltered him from the curse, surrounding him with a living maze, dense and broad enough to confuse the malice of a dozen witches.

Obadiah was a clever man; no one questioned that. He was the first man of these mountains to see the promise of coal early enough to steal a march on big business. When he opened his first mine he couldn't have been more than twenty-five. He bought mineral rights across county after county, dug mines, built trolley lines, and married Claire Brainard, a second cousin on his mother's side, and his first love.

The same year that he married Claire, he opened the Canaan Wells mine and built small miners' cabins along the creek bed north of the tiny town. The next year he celebrated Obadiah Jr.'s birth by breaking ground for the Victorian fortress Viola still called home today.

But the good times ended there. One child after another died—at birth, from bizarre accidents, from childhood diseases. In 1891 Obadiah Jr. died in a mine explosion at the age of 6, and overwhelmed by grief, Obadiah fell ill. In the midst of his fevered dreams he was blessed with a heavenly vision—of exactly what, he never said (except perhaps to Claire), although folk spoke confidently of hosts of angels and the risen Christ descending on clouds of glory. But less than a year later—a year taken up with extravagant displays of piety—Obadiah founded the college. Some said it was the fulfillment of a promise made in the ecstasy of his vision, others said it was a blood debt for the miners who'd died in his mines, still others claimed he was trying to bribe God to have pity on his accursed family. Whatever his motives, Obadiah's charter required the college to seek out bright and deserving children born into Appalachia's bleak mining towns and offer them the best possible education in both liberal arts and Christian devotion.

But when Claire died in childbirth ten years later, leaving only two of their ten children still living, Obadiah turned his back on both children and empire and began work on his forest chapel, even camping there during its construction. Eventually he holed up inside the heavy stone walls entirely, ranting and praying and grieving, cared for by an old family servant. He was found dead of a stroke at the chapel altar in the summer of 1926, not long after Elliot, his last surviving son, died in the Great War. Some say he died cursing God.

Little wonder that hill folk shunned the chapel, imagining it a place of evil and ill omen. As years passed and it fell into ruin, its derelict shell inspired ever more fantastic tales. Viola, her own sons dead in World War II, and herself the last of Obadiah's blood, had been happy to part with it, no doubt feeling that she was finally exorcising a family ghost in doing so. But old Obadiah held no terrors for me, and no wailing spirit had ever disturbed my rest.

The burnt out ruins of the plantation house at Blackoak Manor still stood in one of western Virginia's broad valleys, not far south and east of the mountains of Canaan Wells. Sightings of ghosts and spirits had plagued the property ever since the fire, and the land had never been cleared to rebuild. Tenant farmers ploughed and harvested the fields, but folk kept their distance from the wooded grove surrounding the crumbling walls. The old vodun curse had gathered Obadiah's whole clan

in its dark harvest, and local wisewomen agreed that the witch's spirit would never rest until the last of Augustus Durham's progeny died.

So now G & G's bottom-feeding apostle to the smugly self-righteous was dredging up all that whispered hate and buried fear, reanimating old legends and giving them vicious new life in a witch-hunt aimed at Djinn! Would people really believe she had some occult connection to the long-dead black woman blamed for that antebellum blaze? God in heaven, I hoped not! But who could say what destructive power lay in the dark legends surrounding the college's birth?

Whatever happened, no good could come of JJ's reviving the specters of those ancient sins. Miners had long memories for the cruelties of the coal barons. With JJ fanning the embers, the whole community could reach flash point overnight.

What did he hope to gain by all this? He'd already milked \$10 million in pledges out of regional benefactors selling snake oil, damnation, and self-serving piety. Why the bed sheets and burning crosses all of a sudden? His sprawling new "university" was an assured fact. He styled himself Evangelical, but if today's newspaper column was a sample of his *good news*, he was sowing dragon's teeth rather than a gospel of peace.

A deep sigh worked its way up from the roots of my being. "Now, Miranda," I chided myself with a smile, "every sigh that escapes your lips leaks a drop of blood from your heart. Pernicious anemia can't be far behind."

I sighed again. JJ's brand of fundamentalism was one of the few religious phenomena I found myself judging—primarily because judgment squatted so stubbornly in its own heart. Believers of JJ's ilk refused to allow for the possibility that God might speak to others in words they didn't hear.

But ultimately doctrine wasn't the issue. Many religions believed they had a corner on truth. No, problems arose when people determined to force their own beliefs on anyone who disagreed with them—or destroy unbelievers if they resisted. And when missionary fervor lost the power to inspire, fear of the vast universe outside their own rigid system took up the slack. JJ's militaristic logo, with its hawk-like dove and Crusader's shield, said it all. Actual violence might be rare among today's Christian fundamentalists, but the seeds were there—and so was the hate.

Even among these believers' own ranks, theological bloodbaths seemed the rule rather than the exception. Churches split, ministers lost their livelihoods, hearts were broken, enemies raised up where friends once stood, and faith destroyed—all in the wake of men like JJ.

Another sigh, even deeper this time. I thought I'd left all this old pain behind, buried deep, drowned in the dark waters of forgetfulness with all my other adolescent miseries.

Southern Protestants had a proud tradition of independence, even when they gathered into denominations. The "first" church of this and the "second" church of that were often no more than memorials to bickering factions within congregations, who, unable to make peace, simply walked out and started new churches. It was the inalienable right of Protestant fellowships to split over anything from the style of communion vessels to the interpretation of a single verse of scripture. Sometimes they just ran the pastor out of town—pastors were easy to replace. Other times the church split and created two churches, and then four, like crumbling amoebas with red brick walls.

But somewhere in my growing-up years, somebody had upped the ante. Infighting within congregations went regional. An angry minority decided that they didn't want to walk away and start again: they wanted to *win*—and take control of the whole denomination, regardless of how many disagreed with them. So secret plans were laid, long-term goals set, orthodox belief and heresy defined, propaganda and smear campaigns begun . . . and unsuspecting churchgoers who attended church at worst out of habit, and at best out of a desire to worship a God of love, found themselves caught up in bitter campaigns of vilification. Neutrality was no longer an option.

Busloads of simple people from tiny churches arrived at national conventions, their expenses paid, their votes committed. The peaceful little denominational college in my hometown became a battleground in a war waged by fundamentalists who insisted that the bible was the literal and inerrant word of God. They trained the big guns on their more tolerant brethren who sought a middle ground where faith and reason might coexist. And slowly the balance began to shift in the fundamentalists' favor, as it often will in a contest between voices of blame and exclusion, and voices seeking paths of peace.

Fundamentalists replaced moderate college trustees. Spies infiltrated the classrooms of professors suspected of liberal heresies,

bearing hidden tape recorders. Administrators summoned faculty members to answer questions about their purity of doctrine. Confidences shared among friends became damning evidence as a number of (junior) faculty members saw their main chance and experienced sudden conversions to the fundamentalist cause. And before long, professors found themselves faced with a choice: sign a creedal statement supporting the fundamentalist agenda . . . or leave.

The women left first. How could they sign a document proclaiming their own inferiority? In any case, they weren't often given the option.

My family's church was shattered and never recovered. I watched aghast while church deacons and teachers I'd known all my short life—generous men and women whose goodness shone like beacons in the encroaching dark—were driven from their college positions by this new Inquisition. They had no choice but to seek employment elsewhere, among folk who held a wider view of God's mercy. In my mind's eye I could still see one beloved professor standing up in his last prayer meeting at our church, white hair floating around his head like a halo, ruddy cheeks aflame with indignation, crying, "Creeds are for singing, not for signing!" I never saw him again. The college sank quickly into academic oblivion, while the victors warmed their hands and hearts at the imagined glow of a world consigned to hell.

I drifted away from the Church soon after, eventually leaving it entirely. And now JJ's cant was rousing that old anger all over again—along with my fiercest protective instincts for this small community where I had made my home.

I ought to speak to Elmus Rooksby. He might have stepped aside when JJ took over, but he was still a respected leader in the community—and a good man, almost an embodiment of Christian charity. His compassion spilled over to include just about everybody in God's grace. I knew he grieved over acquaintances who appeared to fall short of the mark (like me), but he responded with love rather than judgment, and he left us to God, and, I suspected, to his own prayers.

Surely JJ's heavy-handed strategies were anathema to him! This was nothing like the dream he had dreamed when he first opened his small storefront bible school to four eager students. Nor was it like his vision of an accredited junior college, which had led to his own retirement and the hiring of Jasper Jarboe. Perhaps he could still claim some authority with the board of deacon overseers. Certainly he must have influence with

Viola. And the presence of her substantial fortune in this equation only made me more suspicious of JJ's motives. I needed to speak to her as well.

I checked the clock and looked out the window. The sun still warmed the yellow forest of tulip poplars and giant beeches around the chapel. Here and there clumps of spruce stood like dark sentinels, a sugar maple flared into hungry flame, and everywhere mountain laurel shadowed the forest floor with glossy green foliage. The afternoon's peace was palpable, but I couldn't gather up any enthusiasm for my work. The assortment of memory cards awaiting transcription on my desk hummed with tedium. My concentration was shot.

My thoughts skittered from JJ to Djinn to Elmus to Viola. I quaked at the possibility of Hankins Turpen, clear-cut king of southern Appalachia, getting his saws into my forest. I shuddered at the prospect of JJ's neon cross and giant Jesus looming over my home. I might find the study of religion fascinating, but I had no wish to welcome its worst excesses onto my own doorstep.

I rose to my feet and stretched. Shiva scowled up at me with his sleepy green eyes, his thoughts needing no translation: "Leaving again so soon?" he grouched. I walked past him, running a hand down his orange back, and he hooked a claw into my finger in response.

"Monster!" I growled. "You need an attitude adjustment."

That's what I got for naming a tomcat after a god whose most conspicuous activity was dancing the universe into bloody chaos and destruction.

Shakti looked on unconcerned, only curling more tightly into her stripy grey ball. At least when she was in a bad mood she kept it to herself.

I pulled my fleece jacket off the hook by the door and walked outside. Neither cat followed. Which way to go? Elmus or Viola? Or neither one?

Neither it was. My own anger was too close to the surface for me to function as an ambassador of peace. I'd go see Jack. He and I had an unfinished morning to attend to, in any case.

5 ~ Mean-Dog Drunk

Canaan Wells, Kentucky
Monday, October 27

No sounds of carpentry, no clinking of glass echoed downslope from Jack's workshop as I scuffed through the fallen leaves along the trail. Either he was somewhere else, or engaged in the more delicate stages of his craft. Jack made hardwood furniture—and stained glass: beautiful, numinous stained glass. I kicked the leaves loudly and called his name as I approached the edge of the trees. Once I'd sneaked up on him, and he'd dropped an almost-finished window and nearly sent me crashing through another in his reflexive attack. It had been a stupid thing to do.

Years of never-mentioned military service had taken their toll on both his flesh and spirit. Out here in the back of beyond he'd escaped the crowding bodies, the unrelenting noise, the sudden violence of the city that had aggravated his nightmares and triggered his panic. Apart from myself and Viola, only the mountains and their creatures (and a few contacts in retail trade) made it past his guard. The mountains were healing him in their own time. I'd learned from their example to tread lightly.

My calls finally elicited a grunt from the workshop. I found him bent over a stained glass window in a wooden frame, his long hair caught back in a ponytail, carefully applying wet plaster to the remains of the tarry concrete he had wiped into the crevices around the lead binding. Like magic, the plaster bonded with the concrete, and the whole mess wiped away together, leaving the window clear and glowing in the fading light.

He looked up and smiled. Mutt thumped his scraggly tail in greeting.

“Good timing, Andi. I'm just finishing up.”

His voice was deep and slow—dark honey in a bee tree.

Picking up the window, Jack slid it carefully into one of a row of narrow slots built along the wall. He rarely asked my opinion: his craft

was his private preserve; I might look, but unless solicited, my comments were unwelcome, as was any conversation while he worked. God knows how long I'd persevered to earn even these few privileges. But it was my own choice. I could take him as he was or leave him be.

I smiled at him as he straightened and turned to face me. He returned my smile, stretching out a long arm in invitation, and we walked together toward the house.

I sighed with delight as the world around me suddenly took on the glowing colors of a stained glass window. Every leaf and branch, every patch of blue sky, shone with translucent magic, beckoning me to follow whatever being set the forest aflame with living fire. Such moments came to me from time to time, though rarely, and always in Jack's company. In them, I was transported into the heart of his windows, a place where he himself resembled a pre-Raphaelite hero, sad and pale, full of inexpressible depths, blessed with wisdom that penetrated my darkest secrets. But these moments vanished as suddenly as they appeared, slipping from my grasp like dreams . . . just as this one did now. I struggled to hold it, freeze its magic like a snow globe in my hand, but its mystery would not be bound. We stepped into the house, and it was gone.

From the first time our paths had crossed, I'd known I would pursue this man: wounded warrior, lover of wild places, explorer of dank limestone caves, passionate artist, poet with haunted eyes. Of course, I hadn't seen all that in one chance meeting on a trail, but townspeople had been loading me with scraps of information ever since word got out that I was buying Obadiah's chapel. Crazy Jack Crispin would be my nearest neighbor, people kept telling me, as if a couple of miles' distance on crisscrossing deer tracks would lead inevitably to unwelcome intimacy.

I'd put my own spin on descriptions like, "thet crazy artist fellar livin' out in them hills sayin' nuthin' t' nobody . . . ha'ry fool what must figger hisself some kinder ground-pig critter, seein' as how he's allus a-rootin' around in dark holes 'n caves with nary bitty sense . . . yon poor boy hain't never bin right sence he kem back from th' army, jest a-sittin' out thar by hisself in them woods . . . thet mean-dog drunk what gits roused int' th' tank ever' month or so . . ."

Maybe not everyone's portrait of Prince Charming, but close enough as made no difference to me. Persistence and the contract to renovate my

chapel had given me all the leverage I needed to insinuate myself into his life, first as friend, and finally as lover.

Fifteen years ago now, seeking a place to practice his craft and shake off his nightmares, Jack had bought land from Viola: in fact, he was the first person ever to succeed in buying a piece of Durham Forest. Viola had sensed his pain and recognized in it the suffering her sons might have endured if they'd survived their war.

I was the second person ever to buy Durham Forest land, but I'd merely stumbled in at an opportune moment. So the two of us had the forest to ourselves, all 12,000 acres of it . . . at least until now.

I looked up at him as we entered the cabin, his face relaxed, the lines of pain around his eyes hardly visible, the aura of faerie faded. Had I been wise to come? I could shatter that calm as surely as a shotgun blast: I had only to open my mouth.

"Cats get your tongue?" he smiled, as he moved into the kitchen for a beer. "Want one?" he asked, holding up a bottle with an unfamiliar micro-brewery label. "Or do you crave your usual pickled grape squeezings?"

"Wine, please, Jack. I need more than ale tonight."

"Bad day?" he asked, drawing a glass of sauvignon blanc from the wine box in the refrigerator. "Probeck get to you? Or did deserting my bed this morning and canceling our caving trip just sour everything that came after?"

Given the choice between a faculty meeting and squirming on my belly through dripping holes slimed with bat guano, I'd've picked him (and the cave) in a heartbeat—and he knew it. I tried to smile, but only managed a death's head grimace. I accepted the wine and raised it quickly to my lips, hoping he hadn't noticed.

"A real bad day, Jack. I don't even know where to start." This time I managed to smile, hoping somehow to keep it light.

I sat down on his sofa and watched him sort through the wood piled beside the creekstone fireplace. He often ranged through the forest in search of deadwood rather than laying his axe to a living tree. He was especially partial to the scent of red cedar and spruce, but they were sturdy, long-lived trees and seldom fell prey to disease. He was probably hoping to find some buried in his pile now.

Flames licked up from the kindling and sparked as they bit into the dry logs. Jack remained squatting in front of the hearth, immobile, caught up in the celebration of a rite older than human memory.

How often had I watched him slouched in the deep chair by the sofa, just staring into the fire? In those early days a silent, peaceful presence was the only gift he'd accept from me, and when he'd finally accepted that, I'd felt honored. But I was never quite sure if the flames reflected in his eyes burned from within or without. I had no doubt that the fires of hell often danced in his thoughts, even though they remained closed to me.

Stay here with me, Jack! I spoke the words in silence, watching the fire's aureole flicker around his body like the leading edge of a dry brushfire. *Don't go back to that dark place, not now.*

Almost as if he'd heard, he rose and joined me on the sofa.

"Now, tell me about this bad day," he smiled.

I didn't want to lose the solace of his presence, his concern. So I waffled.

"I found a dead mockingbird in the quad this morning, probably caught by the tractor when they mulched the leaves. I brought him home and buried him in the churchyard with the hawk. Shiva and Shakti were chief mourners."

His brow creased with concern at my words. I loved the way he never failed to hear me, never blew me off.

"Well, Andi, it's sad, but I don't know that I'd let it spoil my whole day. Creatures live in an uneasy truce with our machines their whole lives, and death is the price they sometimes pay for easy hunting on our short lawns and tilled fields. A glass of wine and a bit of comfort should help put it behind you."

"Oh, I know, Jack . . . but there's more. And I'm not sure I want to go into it."

"Sure you do. It's why you came over tonight."

"Actually, no. I came over for the wine and comfort."

"No extra charge, ma'am. Unburden yourself."

I turned to study his face, now in shadow as he watched me, dark eyes unreadable, waiting for my response. I kissed him lightly and smiled again.

"Let's just let it be, Jack."

“Coon crap, Miranda! If something’s on your mind I want to hear it!”

Exasperating man. He wasn’t going to let me protect him from himself. If I tried to hold out on him, the whole thing would just escalate into an argument anyway. Damn. I could see the signs. Disaster unavoidable.

But hadn’t some part of me seen this coming from the moment I’d walked out my door? Could I really be selfish enough to knowingly sacrifice Jack’s hard-won equilibrium for the sake of a moment’s comfort?

Come on, Miranda, don’t be such a drama queen! I chided myself. He’ll have to hear it sometime. Better from you than that old lech at the liquor store.

So I offered him the truth.

“Things got worse after the mockingbird,” I began. “Djinn’s in trouble: JJ has singled her out and launched a hate campaign targeting her personally—with a frigging shitload of filth and bigotry. His whole column in that weekly G & G rag ranted on about her corrupting influence on our youth and her immoral lifestyle. He even dragged up the old story about the vodun curse on the Durhams and put Djinn right in the middle.

“I’m worried for her, Jack. Probeck is already hovering. He called her on it this morning. If I know my man, he’s likely to grab the easy way out and find some excuse to refuse her tenure if JJ starts any real trouble.”

“*Bigoted* son of a BITCH *Jarboe!*” Jack rumbled, his mood shifting rapidly. “Why couldn’t he keep his sanctimonious hate-mongering ass back in that miserable Ozark holler he came from? Goddamn, I hate these small-time messiahs, thinking they can rule the world! God’s anointed prophets to the heathen and the shameless backslidden—God’s thoughts to their tongues, direct line!”

Well, that’d torn it. Jack was winding his JJ tape for automatic replay. I might as well spill it all, get it over with.

“There’s more, Jack.”

He looked up from his careful scrutiny of the label on his beer bottle and scowled at me.

“JJ’s claiming that Viola has promised to leave the whole forest to G & G in her will. He’s drawing up plans for a huge worship complex—

including a five-story neon cross on top of Possum's Knob, and a forty-foot statue of Jesus. We'll be the evangelical Mecca of the Appalachians."

I paused before adding the worst of the news. "And . . . rumor has it that Hankins Turpen has already cut a deal with JJ for lumbering rights, but I don't see Viola letting that happen. I'll be speaking to her about it."

There. I'd said it. He had to know. Better from me than town gossip. That's what I told myself, anyhow.

He sat still for a moment, then surged to his feet with a roar and flung the bottle in his hand against the fireplace, sending a shower of beery brown glass over us both. He turned toward the door, oblivious to my presence now, jerked his jacket off the hook and slammed out through the mudroom, Mutt close on his heels. The whole house vibrated with his anger, releasing it only reluctantly as his footsteps died away in the forest.

God, what a mess. I should've stayed home with the cats. At least they only took it out on the mice when I rubbed them the wrong way. Jack would get drunk now, end up in a brawl most likely, and maybe spend the night in Lyle's drunk tank. Shit, shit, *shit*, just *shit*. Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?

I picked the glass out of my clothes, blotted the beer, retrieved my own jacket, turned out the lights, and headed back home through the deepening twilight, followed by the wailing cries of a lonely screech owl, warning anyone who cared to listen of some impending death.



With an abyss of self-recrimination and despair opening at my feet, I held the image of my nearly finished quilt firmly before me as I walked, yearning toward its promise of awareness narrowed to a single needle pulling thread. Once home, I strode through the chapel to the quilting room, rolled the frame down from the ceiling and picked up where I'd left off the week before, sewing tiny stitches in broad concentric circles across and through the patchwork surface, binding the layers together.

In and out, up and down, quilt fabric and needle wove their spell. Time passed, and I relaxed, bit by bit, into a quilter's trance. Maybe one day, with time and patience, I could reach the quilter's goal of seventeen stitches per inch, but not tonight. If I reached ten I'd be lucky. My mind traveled lightly among the baby blocks of the pattern, enjoying the optical

illusion of three-dimensional space they created. I was proud of this quilt, as pleased with it as any I'd ever made. This was my first real adventure into unique personal design: at its center three redtailed hawks soared, creating a kind of abstract star, the baby blocks of their bodies pulsing in and out of the cloud-flecked sky above them. Here my young red-tail flew with his siblings forever, as if death had never met him on that mountain road.

Hours passed, my eyes and hands grew tired, and I finally laid my needle down. Morning was the best time for quilting, not midnight. Then light would filter in through the glass doors from the deck, and I would float in it like the hawks floating in their quilted sky. But the forest's darkness had worked its way into my heart tonight, as well as into my eyes. I had nothing left for anyone or anything. Time to sleep.

Ω

6 ~ Dreams and Small Animal Carcasses

*Canaan Wells, Kentucky
Tuesday, October 28*

I slept badly when I finally went to bed. Maybe it was Shiva and Shakti bickering over who would sleep on my face. Maybe it was the nearly full moon shining in through the skylight. Maybe it was my anxiety over Djinn. Or Jack. Or the forest. But when I awoke for the last time, with the first cold hint of dawn just paling the eastern sky, it was from a violent nightmare, so real that awakening did little to dilute its power. Both cats lay pressed against me, one on each side, heads at point, huge black pupils staring at me through the darkness as if they too had walked the shadowed paths of my dream.

In my dreamscape I stood looking down at an old stone cross that had stood sentinel over its sunken grave for more than a hundred years. Under the faint light of a moonless sky it rose crookedly from the soft earth, tipped forward over brittle leaves and dying grass, as if bowing in grief over its nameless dead.

The dark-skinned woman standing beside the marker was breathing heavily after climbing to the small cemetery with her bundle. Her eyes swept the stars beyond the mountains' shadow and then turned to the bulk of the big house below her; no glimmer of light showed anywhere, not in the master bedroom, not in the study. Only in the slaves' quarters could she see candles set to keep the dark spirits at bay. She need fear no interference this night.

"La," she whispered. "Time a-whistlin' down di wind. Me a-heer it cryin'. Loas not a-waitin' fo' I all di night."

She dropped the heavy bundle to the ground, letting the ragged blanket fall open. The two black cocks she lifted to one side, ignoring their struggles to free themselves from the cords binding their feet. I could see her hands hesitate over the familiar objects of the spirit-calling as if they seemed alien to her now that the moment had come. But

images of her beautiful Haitian mother and the firelit ceremonies of her childhood fluttered close around the edges of her consciousness, quickening memory, summoning art. Her full lips pressed together into a grim line, and she bent to her task.

Humming and nodding, now and again she let her breath flow out on a gusty sigh. “Tch-tch-tch-tch-tch-tch,” she breathed, no more than an insect, a snake singing in the night, a mere whispering sibilance, the clicking consonants of long dead African slaves.

A human skull discolored with age and earth the woman set on top of the cross. Then she tied bits of colored string, paper, and rags to the cold stone, sank metal candleholders into the ground in front of it, and arranged her candles. Small shapeless bundles tied with string she leaned against the base. Then, kneeling to face her altar, she lit the candles and placed a metal bowl among them. Carefully, letting the coffee grounds and pepper dribble through her fingers, she drew an intricate design on the cold ground. The sweet scent of dark rum made her nose twitch with pleasure as she poured a small amount from the bottle. She set a bowl of chopped fruit and vegetables aside in readiness beside the cocks. At last she picked up a small crudely made drum, her finger caressing the stretched hide. She was ready to begin.

“Ago-e, Papa Legba! Ago-e!” she cried aloud to the darkness, recalling the rituals of her youth. “Open di gate fo’ I, Papa Legba! Open di gate! Open di gate fo’ mi a-go in! Open di gate, Papa Legba! I needs fo’ a-go past! My baby’s blood a-cryin’ out t’ I fo’ blood, Papa Legba! Open di gate fo’ mi a-go in! I swear, when I return I gi all th’ loas fittin’ respect! Ago-e, Papa Legba! Let I a-go past!”

Some flicker of my own consciousness struggled to break the thrall of the vision, screaming with the rasping whimper of a voice drowned in dreams. But the sheets were serpents imprisoning my body, chains that bound me fast to my dream, a horrified witness to the birth of the curse that had devoured the Durhams.

The woman breathed deeply, eyes closed, and rocked slowly on her knees as she beat a steady rhythm on the drum. The candles flickered and then streamed up into the darkness. Her body moved, now slow, now fast, now imploring, beseeching, humble. Her hands moved among the offerings, the altar. The night turned around her, until, in the darkest watches before dawn, she rose from her knees, abandoning the now-bloody altar with its guttering candles.

A queen entranced, like the mambo her mother, she paced slowly down the hill toward the sleeping house, her eyes blind with visions. I followed, full of dread, invisible like one of the spirits she called. Through the front door she walked, into the hall's center, to the foot of the great staircase. There she raised her bloody hands and cried aloud in a high-pitched wail, sinking at last to a low hissing hum.

“Guede-z-araignee! Guede-z-araignee! Guede-z-araignee! Come a-angered! Come a-hungered! Drink di lifeblood o’ dis evil man! Drink he mem’ry away! Tak he woman int’ di night, Tak’ he chillun, tak’ dem all! Tak’ dem int’ di darkness, out o’ di light! Tak’ dem all—tak’ dey lives, tak’ dey bodies, tak’ dey souls! Gi di blood o’ di murderer no rest, no peace, nuh in dis life, nuh in di next. Spill dey blood on dis bloody land! Come, Guede-z-araignee! Come to I now! Come fi drink!”

Like a snake swaying on its coils, a tendril of smoke emerged from the darkness, swelling and growing, rising and twisting toward the upper floors of the plantation house. Tiny rainbow-hued flames licked at the polished floor. Then, with a screaming roar, fire like a spider’s bloated body engulfed the great hall, swallowing the keening woman and gathering the curving staircase to its tumid breast. A billowing inferno exploded into the long upper halls, curling and crisping the fine imported wood, sealing bedroom doors with sucking flame, feeding on the agonized cries within: a holocaust offered to a vengeful deity, sated at last with the charring bodies of the landowner’s family . . . the whole family, save one, a tiny boychild, carried sleeping from his father’s house by an old black nurse, terrified by the fiery havoc she had witnessed in her dreams.



I reached out for the comfort of the cats’ furry bodies, but they slunk from my touch to sit aloof against the growing light in the French doors. Shivering uncontrollably, I grabbed my moon-phase quilt off the chair, threw it around my shoulders, and shuffled into the chapel’s open kitchen, flipping every light switch as I passed. I concentrated on the water running into the kettle, ran my hand over the familiar tiles, focused on the textures of weathered wood paneling, cans on a shelf, ripe fruit in its basket. Here was reality. Here was truth. Not that dark world where dreams seemed more real than waking.

No one had to tell me the source of my dream. I'd gone to sleep fearing for Djinn, remembering the only other African woman well known to this town: that nameless nanny, the infamous witch who had called her fiery vengeance down on the autocratic Durhams.

So I'd dreamed of her and that terrible night 150 years ago. And I knew I'd dreamed true—a true seeing of that strange ritual and those alien words alive with dark magic. A daylight trip to Blackoak Manor would settle the question, but I knew with instinctive certainty that the land would mirror my dream. Later, once the sun rose high and burned the heavy fog off the chapel lawn I would doubt myself; but not in this instant, teetering between night and day, trembling on the verge of the great crack running between the dreamtime and waking worlds.

I took my chamomile tea across the chapel and set it down on the old pot-bellied stove. With the damper opened, small flames licked up from the buried coals, warming the kindling to reluctant life, filling the stove with swirling smoke and the promise of heat to come. Jack's big rocker welcomed me like an old friend. Drawing my feet up inside the quilt for warmth, I sat and sipped my tea. Beyond the chapel's thick walls, the sun struggled to clear the mists. I rocked, traced the quilted moons with my fingers, and watched the day grow, struggling for emptiness of mind, for calm sufficient to meet the day's demands.



I pulled up in front of Agnes Heavrin's white frame house at 8:30, half an hour late for our monthly women's group. The quiet street could have been set down in almost any Eastern college town. Neat old houses, mostly small, sat back from the tree-lined street on lawns adrift with leaves. Some, like this one, faced the street with small columns, wrap-around porches, and elegant details. Others showed sharply pointed gables and meandering rooflines from every angle. Still others stood as small outposts of Victoriana, painted ladies with their candy-colored fish scales, fretwork, and turrets.

I liked Agnes' house. It reminded me of my mother's childhood home in Lynchburg: long single paned windows, dark shutters, understated classical detailing of porch and eaves, cool dim rooms with polished wooden floors. It looked like the kind of house a college dean might own.

Agnes cheerfully assumed that her function as academic dean would never conflict with the loyalties that had grown up among this group of college women. I hoped she was right. I hoped Djinn wouldn't be the one to test her assumptions.

As I entered, five women looked up from the dining room table where they sat drinking coffee, called out hellos, and immediately returned to a conversation already begun.

"Do they know how the fire started, Marybeth?" Jesse's voice sounded curiously low. A stentorian mistress of games, she usually pitched her voice to carry across a playing field.

"I heard the boy was smoking in bed," Marybeth replied with a snort of disapproval. "His bedroom was completely destroyed, but the firemen managed to save most of the rest of the building." She paused and reached across the table for a warm scone.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and slid into an empty chair, trying to pick up the thread of their conversation.

"I'm surprised they got there in time to save anything at all," Agnes remarked. "Those old miners' cabins would burn like dry tinder. I wonder who called the fire department?"

"Probably one of the other boys in the house. There were three or four of them, you know," Marybeth continued, her words muffled by the scone in her mouth.

"Do you suppose the boy was already dead when they discovered the fire? Why didn't they get him out themselves?" Rachel asked.

The room had taken on a curious clarity. Even the dust motes floating in the morning sun seemed to possess peculiar solidity. The gentle clink of silver against china beat against my head with the tinny rattle of a snare drum. A lash of burning cold whipped my spine and settled in my belly. Fire. Death.

"What are you all talking about?" I managed at last.

"Oh, Miranda, haven't you heard?" Agnes exclaimed. "A young student from Grace and Glory died in a fire in one of their little dorm buildings last night. It was late, around 2 AM or so. I guess you wouldn't have heard the sirens, living out over the ridge like you do. Half the town turned out in their nightclothes to watch."

I shuddered at the images forming in my mind. Horrible. Burning to death. Maybe he'd died from the smoke before he'd ever felt the flames.

He must have, if they found him still in his bed. Most fire victims did die that way, didn't they?

"Do you know who the boy was, Agnes?" I asked.

"I *do*, Miranda," she said, with a lilt of puzzlement in her voice, as if the admission had caught her by surprise. "I was just about to explain when you came in. We were all set to admit this boy to ODC next spring with a full scholarship: Marinja had taken him under her wing; she's been raving to me about his talent for months."

"You don't mean Welby Bayless!" I cried, dread sweeping over me, certain of her answer. All eyes turned toward me curiously.

"Why, yes, Miranda. Did you know him?"

"I met him at the inn just yesterday with Djinn. God, Agnes, he was such a sweet kid! Where is Djinn, anyway? Isn't she here?"

"We thought maybe you were together when neither of you showed up earlier. Probably she just doesn't feel like company today with Welby's death so fresh. She cared a lot for the boy."

The humming of the women's voices, soft with concern and curiosity, flowed over me like deep water. I struggled to free myself from its numbing chill. Too much, too much! My mind staggered in the rising tide of pain and trauma drowning my small world. Too intense, too short a time! There was no reason that any of the past day's disasters should connect to each other, but gut logic stubbornly insisted that so much trouble, each thing building from the last, must be erupting from a common malignancy. Would the evil continue to spread? How could it be stopped if no one understood its source? Still, what could Welby's death have to do with JJ's attack on Djinn, or the whole impossible disaster of the forest? And how strange that I should have had such a violent nightmare of death by fire . . . when Welby had been dying the same way! I shuddered at the shadowy images haunting the fringes of my clouded vision.

Djinn must really be coming unglued. Yesterday's newspaper attack was more than enough to fill her plate, without this tragic, senseless death. And smoking in bed? Somehow that seemed unlike the gawky mountain boy who had served us lunch. He didn't strike me as a smoker. In fact, he hadn't looked healthy enough even to consider the habit.

The sudden movement of bodies and chairs around me signaled the end of our hour. Not much woman-to-woman bonding for me today. The others made their exits, but I sat on, frowning at the old mahogany

sideboard. Absentmindedly I picked up a pumpkin muffin and took a bite.

“Are you alright, Miranda?” Agnes asked as she walked back into the dining room and began clearing away the clutter.

“Sure, I guess so, Agnes, but so much has happened these last two days. I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed, that’s all.” I stared unseeing at the bright morning outside the windows. “You know, yesterday morning before the faculty meeting I found a dead mockingbird in the quad, and the thought crossed my mind then that it might be an omen of impending tragedy. And then came Probeck’s news about Viola’s will, and Djinn’s trouble with JJ, which I assume you’ve heard about, and now poor Welby. On top of a hellish dream I had this morning where I watched the old slave woman cursing the Durham plantation and burning it down. Not to mention the screech owl in the woods last night. I’m reeling.”

“Miranda Lamden, I should wash your mouth out with soap, and maybe your brain as well! There’s enough magical thinking in these hills already without one of our own stooping to such folly. You’re not starting to believe those superstitions you’ve been collecting, are you? I can’t say the college would be pleased to discover a faculty member claiming she had the Sight, prophesying death and destruction from dreams and small animal carcasses.”

I was so taken aback, I just stared. No words formed in the silence. It seemed that I had just blown my cover in the enemy camp. I hastened to blot out my gaffe and laughed it off.

“Let me assure you, Dean Heavrin, if I didn’t succumb to African spirits during my dissertation research, I’m not going to fall prey to Appalachian superstitions now.”

She smiled, and I said a careful goodbye. Fundamentalists weren’t the only ones out to define the limits of human reality.

I sat in the Jeep and stared down the slope of the street toward the college. Was my defensive claim true? Or had I in fact succumbed to Africa long years before? Had I stepped across a line, opened myself to some realm of spirit I could no longer refuse? Were my dreams—and even my waking consciousness—no longer my own? If so, then what safe place remained to me? I cringed away from the thought, as if physical shrinking might render me invisible to that inner presence.

Suddenly, like images from the still surface of a scrying pool, memories of Africa exploded into my mind, carrying me helpless in their

wake. I felt the humid air again, motionless, sodden with heat. Even though the sun hung low, it burned unbearably through my cotton dress, forcing runnels of sweat from every pore. Yet the dancers in the street procession moved through the torrid afternoon oblivious to everything but their own joy. White robes and brilliant crosses, beaded ornaments and golden jewelry, turbans and hats and umbrellas, staffs and banners and incense, drums and horns and rattles: all the sabbath finery of the strange sect brought a festival gaiety to the small West African suburb. I was entranced in spite of myself.

Forget my young husband, forget the melancholy droning of European hymns in the small mission church with the steeple and pews. These people were alive! I could feel it like electricity running up into the soles of my feet, almost as if their jubilant spirit traveled right through the sunbaked street, seeking out earth-bound souls like mine.

I watched their faces, saw their eyes close in the midst of their dancing, eyes overflowing with ecstasy, afire with fierce joy, lost in praise more palpable than any I had known, even though I couldn't understand the words. In that instant, I too was lost. One moment I was a wide-eyed missionary intern suffering from equatorial heat, a newly-wedded college graduate, a well-meaning teacher's aide in a mission school, on her way to Saturday market: and the next I was yearning toward a conversion to something so profoundly different from everything I'd ever known that the very texture of the physical world pulsed with new light.

Once back in the mission compound, I spoke rapturously of the vitality I'd felt in the African dancers—and was met by my husband's stony rejection: all African churches were heretical nonsense. Peter went on to chide me for my credulity, and then read Paul's sermon to the Athenians to me at bedtime. What was I, an errant child? That was the beginning of the end for our marriage.

I soon leapt the cultural abyss to bond with a middle-aged deaconess who became my spiritual mentor for a brief time. Peter harassed me about my neglect of God-given opportunities to witness to these lost souls; I countered with glowing accounts of the Africans' Christian witness. And so it went: weeks of Peter's resentful homilies on wives' yielding to their husbands' authority . . . and on my own stubborn willfulness. But then one day the mission pastor saw me trying out a few tentative dance steps with the African women in one of their informal

outdoor gatherings—and Peter and I were sent home to Virginia in disgrace.

Divorce was the inevitable next step. It'd been coming, anyway. Why I'd married Peter in the first place I couldn't remember. Maybe just because that's what Southern girls did after college: they married and raised bright, well-groomed children. But Peter's clueless attacks on my budding independence, those gentle African women so uncharitably shunned by the mission staff, and the rising tide of Southern fundamentalism had all conspired to make me a devout believer in women's rights. And although I never became an activist, I vigorously supported any woman struggling to escape the smothering trap of Southern gentility. *Gentility*: that didn't begin to cover it! You couldn't call it hypocrisy . . . It was more like entombment in a rat's maze of roles as narrow and crippling as the binding of women's feet in China.

Graduate school eventually followed divorce—with a dissertation on African independent churches, and two wildly disorienting years on the African subcontinent while I did my research.

What had I brought back with me, besides the raw data for my first book? A respect for dreams, certainly, and a growing belief in alternate realities that spoke with their own unique voices. Even the New Testament acknowledged the continuing presence of the dead with its "great cloud of witnesses." More importantly, I had experienced the living presence of non-human Nature: she was aware, and always had been. I knew this as simple fact. If we did not hear the voice of Creation, it was because we had closed our ears.

I had *seen* the Holy Spirit move where and how she would among humanity's troubled masses, the messenger of God's unconditional love and the fulfillment of Jesus' witness—regardless of medieval straitjackets imposed by Church fathers. I had returned to my native soil with a vision of a world inextricably entwined with spirit. Could you separate a butterfly from its flight? A gem from its brilliance? The human soul from its yearning? No more could human "wisdom" sever Deity from Creation, or Love from the Beloved.

I *knew* that truth appeared to humankind in as many guises as Creation had faces. Narrow-minded religion, like holier-than-thou legalism, imprisoned believers in a twilight house of mirrors, where their own distorted reflections became the only truth.

Did these convictions make me a woman who laid claim to the Sight? One who prophesied from dreams and corpses? Maybe it did. How many others saw me like that, I wondered? Maybe Djinn was right. Maybe I'd better start watching my back.

Ω

