

TERROR AT OCTAGON HOUSE

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Prologue

The hand that smashed into the black girl's face was huge, calloused and covered with curly, red hair. Red Tobbler was proud of his hands. They're the hands of a working man he often told himself.

He relished the feel when his hand came in contact with the soft, brown face. It scratched some inner itch that was a permanent part of him.

And he was just doing his job, he thought with satisfaction, as he grinned down at the defiant girl. As leader of a gang of bounty hunters, he was hired by slave owners to find and return their property. He'd be well paid when he returned her to Missouri.

If he could force her to tell where they were, he'd find her parents as well.

Tobbler raised his hand to strike again. He held it high above his head so she could see it coming. The bleeding face looked up at him, still defiant. He wished she'd beg, or better yet, cry. This one hadn't cried—not yet.

"Once more, Rainy. We know your Ma and Pa are in that Octagon house 'cause we tracked 'em. Now, where they hidin'?"

The girl's brown eyes searched the barge, but there was no chance of escape. The makeshift craft, loaded with empty boxes, was moored at a deserted landing. To the west was a wilderness of forest, to the east, a mile of deserted river.

Moonlight shining through the elms made shadow patterns on the faces of the bulky Tobbler and his son, a mulatto boy, about her own age.

For a moment she thought she might have an ally in the boy. He spoke to her once in Bantu, the language of her parents' native Congo. But his eyes were gray glass, a copy of his white father's dead eyes. There was no help there.

"Where are they, Rainy?" Tobbler snarled again.

He grabbed her long braid, forcing her head back. His fat, red face was a foot above her black one. His breath made her gag.

"I'm asking you a question, nigger. Where are they?" He pulled hard on her hair.

The girl stared into his swollen face, her eyes narrowing with scorn. Spit flew from her mouth, landing next to Tobbler's red-veined nose.

Tobbler roared. He hit the girl so hard her frail body seemed to float before it fell again to the log floor of the barge.

She tried to crawl toward the safety of the water a few feet away. Tobbler kicked her in the center of the chest. The girl cried out for the first time as the snap of her broken ribs sounded in the stillness.

She gasped for breath as a severed bone ruptured her lung.

"Lyangombe, Lyangome," the girl coughed. Then, she muttered something in Bantu just before the blood poured from her mouth. She was dead.

"What did she say?" the girl's killer shouted to the boy. There was no need to shout. He stood only a foot away.

"She called for Lyangombe, the nigger god," the youth replied. "She begged him to curse you and your kin. She vowed not to rest 'til you pay for what you done."

The boy walked to the edge of the barge and stared down into the swirling, black water.

The dead girl's fist unclenched and something dropped with a clatter to the rough floor. It was a bone from a goat leg, highly polished and carved to resemble a crocodile.

Chapter 1

At the start, there was a warning.

Had Beth Davis believed in premonitions, ghostly signs, she'd have fled Riverbend as fast as the old station wagon could carry her. And that might have been the end of it. Perhaps. It's hard to say what might have been.

But Beth was no mystic, no child to be frightened by whispers in the night. She was thirty-two years old. Sensible. Mature. She did not dread the dark—not then.

At the start, good fortune walked with her arm in arm. An unhappy marriage was behind her. Ahead of her was a new life in Octagon House, a tumbled down mansion she'd loved since childhood. The winter sun shone bright in her sky.

It happened—the warning—the day she signed the purchase agreement for Octagon House.

Through the afternoon, snow clouds had gathered over the Mississippi River. At dusk, the blizzard struck. The sky blackened in minutes and snowflakes filled the air.

Beth found her way back to the motel with difficulty, relying more on memory than sight. When she edged the station wagon into what she hoped was her parking spot, the headlights showed a world of gray forms and snowflakes. A bitter wind blew from the north.

She handed her daughter, Autumn, the key to their temporary home and the girl and her brother disappeared into the dark through the swirling snow.

Turning her collar up against the wind, Beth lowered her head and made her way to the rear of the car where she struggled to open the sprung tailgate and remove two bags of groceries.

As she tried to slam the door, she found herself at the center of a whirlwind. Walls of white surrounded her and the blast of the wind cut off all other sounds.

Something touched her shoulder. She jumped and the wind roared past her ear. Deep inside the howl was another sound, a faint echo of a voice.

"No, Bets, no."

Nobody called her Bets anymore, not since her parents were killed. She'd almost forgotten the family name coined by younger brothers and sisters before they could speak clearly.

"Danger ... danger at that house, Bets."

The wind swirled on, carrying away the wall of snow and the parking lot reappeared. The door of a motel room slammed. A woman giggled as she slipped on the snowy walk. Beth picked up the grocery bags and ran to the safety of the room, leaving the car's rear door gaping in the dark.

The motel room was shabby, but it was light and warm. By the time she'd cooked their meal in the tiny kitchenette, she'd decided the voice in the parking lot was imagined. By morning it was forgotten. Almost. Only the open tailgate and trunk full of snow reminded her of her fright.

But by morning there were other things to think about. Her ad for boarders appeared in the Riverbend Journal and she received her first call.

When the phone rang, Beth was brushing her twelve-year-old daughter's hair and thinking how nice it looked in its frizzy natural. Twenty years ago, her aunt, now deceased, spent a fortune straightening red kinky hair like Autumn's. Now girls spent hours in the beauty shop trying to achieve the look members of her family often inherited.

She set down the hairbrush and picked up the ringing phone. The masculine voice on the line was low, self-assured, with a slight accent Beth couldn't place.

"I'm looking for the person who ran an ad for boarders."

"I'm Beth Davis. I ran the ad."

"My name is David Vale. I'd like to look at the room."

"I'm sorry," Beth said. "I'm not yet in possession of the house. I'll be moving my family in on Monday. You'd be welcome to come then and look around."

"Perhaps we could meet and discuss it today," he suggested. "I'm anxious to complete my living arrangements. My business here allows me little free time."

Less than fifteen minutes later, he appeared at the motel door, a tall man in jeans and an Army parka. His eyes were gray and serious in a narrow face. His dark hair was long, neatly trimmed.

Beth led her visitor through the cluttered motel bedroom to the kitchenette. She put the teakettle on the stove and spooned instant coffee for each of them while he seated himself at the miniature table.

"I couldn't believe my luck when I saw your ad," he said. "I'm on sabbatical from the University of Canada, researching pre-Civil War river towns. Octagon House is in the thick of my research. It's an ideal place to stay while I work."

"I feel pretty lucky to get the house at a price I can afford," Beth said. "The last of the Vandergeld line was a nephew with heavy debts. He needed cash and I had an inheritance. The house was mine before I knew what happened."

"What do you know about the history of the place?" he asked.

"Nothing really. Just that I've always been fascinated by it. I grew up in Riverbend, although I've been away for quite a few years."

"Its past is as unique as its looks. It was built in about 1855 by Emil Vandergeld the first. He'd made a fortune as a brickmaker and the house was his showpiece. No one has ever been able to duplicate the red brick he used."

"It is an odd color."

"There was a construction boom in the ten years before the war. Old Vandergeld made so much money he was at a loss to spend it all."

"I knew they were one of the richest families in the state."

David nodded. "If Emil had been poor, he would have been called crazy, but being a millionaire, he was 'eccentric.' Believed in reincarnation, spirit possession, numerology, all that freak stuff that's back in vogue."

"Sounds unlikely for a bricklayer."

"He was an unlikely character all the way around. Came from Holland by himself when he was fourteen, traveled across the country 'til he found clay that suited him. He'd been apprenticed to a bricklayer so he knew what he was looking for."

"You seem to know a great deal about him."

"Uh-huh," he said, sipping from his cup. "He fascinates me. Built that house in the shape of an octagon because eight is the symbol of new beginnings and he made a new beginning in this country."

"I've never heard that before—about eight."

"The origin is pagan, but it shows up in both Jewish and Christian rites. Baptismal fonts, for instance, are eight sided. Jewish boys are named eight days after birth. You know that an eight on its side is the symbol for eternity. Believers in reincarnation use it because it indicates a crossing from life to death and back again without end."

His solemn gray eyes came to life as he talked, taking on a deep green hue. I'll bet his female students never miss his class, Beth thought. Those eyes might distract a girl away from history though—to fantasies of more current events.

"Why should eight have special significance?" she asked.

He sipped at his coffee, looking at her over the rim of the cup.

"It probably came about," he said, "when ancient man discovered there are seven openings in a man's body and eight in a woman's and it is through the eighth that new life comes into the world."

"Now just a minute," Beth interrupted, counting on her fingers. "Isn't that nine with a woman? Eight with a man?"

"They counted nose as one. I don't know why."

"Thank God. I was afraid my memory failed me."

He laughed. "I assume there is no Mr. Davis?"

"There is. He lives in Chicago. We're divorced."

"If you like, I'll show you some clippings I have about Emil Vandergeld I. There were three of them. Interesting codger. Most people in the river towns avoided taking sides on the slavery issue. Their business depended on North-South trade. But not Vandergeld. I've a newspaper account of a speech he made on abolition. It's a tear jerker."

"I'd like to read it."

"There's some evidence," he continued, "that Octagon House was a stop on the underground railroad. It would have been an ideal place to hide runaway slaves on the way upriver to freedom in Canada. Wish I could prove that."

"Maybe you'll find the proof you need while you're staying at the house," Beth said, mentally raising the price she planned to ask.

The conversation shifted to the present. He quickly agreed to the price she suggested. Claiming he had an appointment he must keep, David stood and shook her hand. Beth walked with him through the cluttered room to the door of the motel.

"Are you going to live at our house?" nine-year-old Brian asked from the bed where he and Autumn watched television.

"I sure am," David replied.

Autumn looked up at him flashing the best seductive smile her twelve-year-old pixy face could manage. "I'm really awfully glad," she purred. "I think we'll be very good friends."

Oh-oh, Beth said to herself. Here we go again. I'd better make sure she meets some kids her own age. Soon.

David stepped out into the falling snow and a blast of cold air entered, causing Beth to shiver.

"We'll expect you Monday," she said, crossing her arms to ward off the chill. "Maybe old Emil Vandergeld's ghost will be there to welcome us."

\ David turned, regarding her for a moment with gray, thoughtful eyes.

"I wouldn't make too light of that, Mrs. Davis," he said. "There are stories about these old farm houses along the river that ... well, it's not the sort of thing you talk about in front of kids." He nodded toward Autumn and Brian, who had joined them at the door.

"See you Monday."

Long strides took him off into the mist.

Beth stood in the doorway for a long time staring out into the snow, willing the freezing wind to blow away the dark foreboding growing inside her.

Chapter 2

Points of snow exploded in wet puffs on the windshield of the car. At the side of the road, snow banks towered so high the station wagon seemed to be passing through a tunnel.

Beth knew the icy highway was dangerous, but she could not postpone this trip. She had to see Miss Dorcas, the housekeeper, before the old woman moved out of Octagon House.

The purchase agreement said she, as buyer, kept drapes, curtains, some furniture and dishes. The late Miss Vandergeld's will left everything else in the house to Miss Dorcas.

Beth hoped the terms had been explained to the housekeeper. The woman seemed senile the day Beth looked at the house. It could be difficult if she made a scene. To open a rooming house, Beth would have to have furniture. Buying anything was impossible. Every cent she could scrape together went for the down payment on the house.

The end of a snow chain worked loose from the tire and began a clanking tattoo on the inside of a wheel well. What a time she'd had getting those chains on this morning. Lying in the slush of the motel parking lot, trying to swing a rusty chain over a muddy tire, she'd almost wished for a moment her former husband was there to handle the filthy job. At least he took care of the car, she thought with a trace of bitterness.

"Before long, Dad will be president of his company," Autumn said from the back seat of the car. "That's what he really wants."

Damn, Beth thought. There she goes again, reading my mind. Usually she tried to ignore it, this ability of Autumn's. The thing made no sense and Beth was a great believer in sense.

At the girl's birth, Beth was told the baby had a caul over her face. A superstitious nurse suggested the child would have second sight. Another nurse chided her for frightening the new mother. The caul was just the afterbirth, she insisted.

But there was something about Autumn. She knew when the phone was going to ring and who was on the line. She knew other things, too. When she was three, she led her mother to a neighbor's garage, crying and insisting "we have to go" until Beth complied.

Inside, in an old freezer, was a nearly suffocated boy, who had picked the death trap as a hiding place in a game. Autumn saved his life, but she didn't know his name. He was not a playmate.

And there was that morning two months ago when Autumn woke Beth from a sound sleep:

"Mom, Grandma was in my room. She wants me to tell you not to be sad. She and Grandpa are happy they're together."

Hours later, Beth learned her parents were killed in an early morning auto accident. A coincidence, of course. The child was dreaming. Or was she?

The wheels skidded on a patch of ice jerking Beth away from thoughts she seldom allowed herself to pursue. Steadying the swerving car demanded all her concentration. When she looked up from the road, Octagon House was ahead, a huge gray form dimly visible through the falling snow.

"Look there." She said to Brian and Autumn, "our new home."

"Looks creepy," said Brian.

Beth slowed the car and made a left turn between two brick pillars, all that was left of a wall that at one time separated the estate from the road for miles. Portions of the structure were still visible as snow covered mounds of rubble. Attached to the pillars was a rusting iron gate decorated with a "V" and a series of interwoven eights. It stood open.

The road to the house was unplowed. Beth traveled only a few hundred yards before the station wagon lost momentum and the wheels began to spin. She allowed the car to slip back and rock forward, but the spinning continued.

"I think we're stuck," she said at last. "We'll have to walk."

They tied scarves, pulled on mittens and set off through the snow in the direction of Octagon House, which now took on a pinkish hue in the white mist.

When they'd walked a quarter of a mile, the shape ahead assumed solid lines. The house was brick of a deep, shiny red, dimmed by the mist of white separating them from it. Three sides of the eight-sided building faced them as they approached.

To the rear, they could make out other buildings, a stable, two barns and several sheds, also constructed of the unusual brick.

A few more yards and the house loomed above them, three stories straight up. A screened porch enclosed the first floor as far as they could see. Above the porch, blackened window eyes stared down, broken panes giving the house a sinister expression. On the roof, almost hidden by the falling snow, was a widow's walk.

The Vandergelds climbed up there to look out at the river, Beth thought. What did they look for? Perhaps a barge loaded with hay concealing a human cargo of runaways below deck?

She must warn the children to stay away from the walk. Many of the iron spikes of the fence were rusted away. If they leaned against one, it could break, sending them plunging three stories to the ground.

Beth mounted the snow covered steps to the screen door and was surprised to see that the porch furniture was still in place. Snow blew in through the screen weaving lace patterns on the wooden deck. An ancient porch swing moved back and forth in the wind, its white dust cover like ghost feet, rearranging the snow designs as it swung.

Octagon House waited in silence in the midst of the falling snow. For whom does wait, Beth wondered. For what?

None of that, Beth Davis, she chided herself. Leave that to your imaginative son.

"I don't like this house," Brian said as if in answer to her thought.

"You haven't seen the inside yet," Beth said, opening the screen door.

"It looks like a horror movie," the boy insisted.

Lace curtains at the window moved aside as someone peered out. There was the sound of a bolt unlatching and the carved oak door of Octagon House swung open.

Chapter 3

The woman in the doorway was straight, slender and imposing. Her silver hair was tied in a neat bun and she wore a paisley housedress as if it were a robe of office. There was no welcome in her stern face.

"You have come to see the house," she said to Beth in a tone that expressed her displeasure.

"If we may, please, Miss Dorcas. I want to ask you about a few things before you leave."

"I'm very busy," the woman said. "The movers were to come today, but they were delayed by the storm. It is inconvenient."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd let us come in. My car is stuck in the drive and we've had a long walk through the snow."

"The mistress did not approve of children in Octagon House," the housekeeper said, looking at Brian and Autumn as if there were a vile form of insect. "But I suppose you can't stay out in the cold."

She moved from the doorway, sweeping her dress to the side as if it were a hoop skirt, and indicated they were to enter.

"But you youngsters take off those galoshes," she warned.

The children pulled off their overshoes and shook snow from their clothes. The trio stepped into the entrance hall waiting a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The hallway smelled of vinegar and beeswax polish. The shine on the wooden floor was so high it reflected the curved staircase as water would.

If the exterior of Octagon House had been neglected in recent years, the interior had not. A red Persian rug ran down the center of the hall. It looked new. On the wall, the glass chimneys over the gaslights sparkled. Colorful tapestries, depicting stories from

Roman mythology, hung on the walls. A silver tray, ready for ladies' calling cards, lay on an antique table beneath a matching framed mirror.

"Wow," said Autumn. "Just like Tara in 'Gone with the Wind.' "

The housekeeper frowned at her.

"How about you kids exploring upstairs while Miss Dorcas and I talk," Beth said. "Maybe you can pick out your rooms."

"Oh, dear me, I don't think they should do that," said Miss Dorcas.

"Why not?" Beth asked.

"Not safe really," said the old woman.

"I thought everything was moved out up there except the beds and dressers," Beth said, trying to keep the irritation she felt out of her voice. "It doesn't sound dangerous to me."

"As you wish. They're your children," she shrugged.

Brian and Autumn clamored up the curved staircase, happy to have something to do. To Beth's relief, Miss Dorcas understood the details of the purchase agreement. She did not object. They walked through the downstairs rooms, the housekeeper pointing out which pieces would remain.

"I don't like strangers using the mistress's things," she said at one point. "But I had no choice. Moving costs were so high I had to sell some of the furniture."

"Someday I'd like to open a hotel and restaurant here," Beth ventured. "When I can afford it, would you consider selling me some of the original furniture?"

The housekeeper scowled at her and Beth knew she'd erred.

"I think not, Mrs. Davis. Since I came to this house as a young girl, I've looked after the mistress's things. In the years left to me I shall continue to do so."

"Mom."

There was a faint cry from somewhere outside the room. Beth opened the double doors into the entrance hall and the sound magnified.

"Mom, come up here. We got to show you something," Brian yelled from the staircase.

Beth followed her son up the steps and down a hall where Autumn waited near a dormer window looking out over the roof.

"It's cold," Brian said, pointing to a spot several feet in front of the window.

"Probably a draft from the window," Beth said.

"No, it isn't, Mom," said Autumn. "It goes from the floor straight up. It's just like a square of cold was set down in the middle of the hall."

Beth ran her hand from the floor to as high as she could reach. Autumn was right. Stepping through the freezing zone, she ran her hand down the other side. It was the same. She stood on tiptoes feeling the cold above her. Its boundaries were square and exact.

"This is strange," Beth said, "but there must be some explanation."

I wish the Canadian professor were here, she thought. I wonder what he'd make of this? Well, best not to say too much, she decided, turning to her daughter.

"Did you pick out a room you like?"

Autumn nodded. "Want to see it?"

"Sure."

Autumn led her to a corner room with a four-poster bed of light finished wood. The dresser and wardrobe were of the same design. It was a sunny, cheerful room—or at least it would be in better weather.

"Good choice," Beth said.

She walked to the window and looked out. For a moment the snow cleared and the yard below them was visible. Beth blinked her eyes in disbelief.

Below, standing in the snow, was a black woman looking up at the window. Her face was painted with white theatrical make-up. She wore a light summer wrapping that left her arms and shoulders bare, but she gave no indication she felt the cold. A string of beads was wrapped around her head and neck.

"Autumn, come here," Beth said. "Do you see that?"

The girl joined her mother at the window and looked out. When the black woman saw her, she smiled and nodded as if she'd been waiting for her.

"Do you know that woman?" Beth asked.

Autumn turned to her mother, an odd little half smile on her face. Her deep blue eyes were opaque.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mother. There's nobody out there."

Beth looked out the window again, but a curtain of white mist closed tight beyond the pane.

Chapter 4

The furnace was a huge gray Buddha with dozens of arms stretching to the far corners of Octagon House. For the third time that morning, Beth made her sacrifice of coal. Placing the shovel against the wall, she slammed the metal door and waited.

A viewing window was set in the furnace door. She slid it open and looked in on an inferno of leaping flames.

That should do it, she said as she rubbed the small of her back, leaving a trail of coal dust across her pink sweater.

She looked at the depleted coal bin and shook her head. At this rate, every cent she took in went for fuel and they were still living in an ice house.

The first two days in her new home had not been easy. By the time the sun set the first night, Brian was paralyzed with fear. He was unable to say why the house terrified him. At last, Beth took him into her bed so he would sleep.

Autumn was sullen and silent, worrying, Beth thought, about starting school in a new place where she's a stranger.

And then, there was the unending, fiendish cold plaguing them night and day.

She climbed the cellar steps noting two loose boards and a wobbly railing. When would she get to all the tasks this house presented? If only she could afford help.

A large packing box filled with Autumn's clothes sat on a counter in the kitchen. Beth picked it up and carried it upstairs. Holding the carton in both arms, she backed into Autumn's room, using her shoulders to force open the door.

The bedroom was even colder than the rest of the frigid house. Beth set the carton down and put her hand over the hot-air register in the floor. The blast of heat made her jump. It was like reaching into a bonfire. Why doesn't it warm this room, she wondered. Should be a hundred degrees in here, at least.

Pulling back the faded chintz curtains, she checked the edges of the window for draft. Odd that Autumn, never shy about complaining, said nothing about the bitter chill.

Out in the yard, a movement two stories below caught her attention. Autumn was there up to her hips in snow. She wore her green ski jacket and her arms were full of wood. She seemed to be talking to someone.

Beth leaned her cheek against the cold glass in order to see along the side of the building. The black woman was there again, standing in the shadow of the house. It was no trick of the weather this time. The storm had passed. The day was clear and sunny.

Who is she, Beth wondered, and how can she stand the cold dressed that way? It's not more than ten degrees above zero, but she's ready for a summer picnic. The woman turned and Beth saw the white face coated on over black skin. Sinister. She wanted Autumn away from that apparition.

She worked to open the window so she could shout to the girl to come in, but a hundred years of paint sealed it tight. She banged on the glass with her fist until she was afraid it would shatter. The pair below either didn't hear or ignored her.

Cursing, Beth turned and bolted down the stairs, through the parlor and dining room. Half skidding across the kitchen linoleum, she grabbed the back door and jerked it open.

Autumn, her arms full of wood, was reaching for the doorknob.

"Oh, you scared me," she said, starting.

"Who is that woman?" Beth demanded, out of breath.

"What woman?"

"Autumn Davis, I've had enough of this. I saw you talking to that black woman and I want to know what she's doing here."

Beth shoved her daughter aside and stepped out into the snow. Autumn's prints to and from the woodpile stood out clearly. There were no other tracks.

"Ah swan, Mama, y'all seein' things. What you think a colo' lady be dooin' out theah in the snow?" Autumn drawled.

Beth checked her impulse to slap her daughter. The southern accent she'd affected off and on for the last two days was irritating beyond bearing.

"Cut it out, Autumn. I've had enough of the minstrel show."

Autumn glared at her mother and stomped across the kitchen, dropping her load of logs next to the stove. The wood landed with a crash, pouring across the floor and ramming into the wall.

"What do you want from me?" she screamed. "You told me to get the wood. I got the damn wood."

She ran from the room. There was the sound of her feet pounding up the stairs and the faraway crash of a door slamming.

As Beth stood staring after her daughter, David Vale walked into the kitchen.

"What's all the shouting about?"

Beth rubbed her lower lip with the tip of a broken fingernail. "Strange thing. Twice now I've seen a black woman out in the yard. A few minutes ago, I saw her talking to Autumn, but she swears there was nobody out there."

"Could you have imagined it? Bright sunlight on snow causes illusions sometimes."-

"Don't give me that illusion bull," Beth snapped. She was immediately sorry and softened her voice. "It was a black woman with white paint on her face. I'm sure of it. Weirdest damn thing I've ever seen."

David looked doubtful. "I don't know how she'd get here. The snow's too deep to walk across country and we'd hear a car pull into the drive."

"I don't know," Beth shook her head. "Now if it was a boy she was meeting...I'm used to those things."

"She's precocious—about the opposite sex?"

Beth laughed. "Somewhat, although no different than her friends. Girls grow up too early in the city. Somehow I figured I'd get my kids back to Riverbend and my troubles would be over. I guess I traded for a different set of problems."

"Speaking of problems, I have one. I'm freezing. Can't you turn up the heat in here?"

"I sure have tried," Beth sighed, "I've shoveled more coal than Casey Jones this morning. By my reckoning, it should be a hot house in here."

"Americans just can't deal with a furnace." David sighed a mock sigh. "Better let a Canadian have a look at it."

The smug expression on his face made Beth grin. "Be my guest," she said, bowing and gesturing in the direction of the basement door.

By dinner the house was still frigid in spite of David's ministrations. Beth found an old washtub in the cellar and, filled it with boiling water heated on the stove. Placed under the table, the steaming liquid provided comfort for their evening meal.

Autumn appeared at the table in make-up so heavy it would have been suitable for the stage.

"You tryin' out for KISS?" Brian asked when she sat down.

Autumn batted mascaraed eyes at David. "Children can be so exasperating," she gushed, pulling her chair in close to his.

"You, I take it, have left all that behind you?"

"Well, I'm almost thirteen."

"You just turned twelve two months ago," said Brian snatching a bun from a napkin covered basket.

Beth carried a steaming casserole and spinach salad to the table.

"Yuck," said Autumn. "Spinach is for rabbits."

"Better eat it," counseled David. "You need your vitamins to grow up to be as pretty as your mother."

Autumn looked as if she'd been stung. Her mother wasn't pretty. She was old. She glared down at her plate.

"Look, young lady, can you move that chair a bit? You're so close to me, I've hardly room to use my arm," David said.

Autumn scrunched her chair away from his with more noise than necessary. She pouted into her salad.

Nicely done, Beth silently complimented him. He's experienced at handling adolescent crushes.

There was an ear-splitting crash overhead. Beth's first thought was that the upper stories of the house were ripped away. She grabbed the children and pushed them against the dining room wall just as a boulder crashed through the bay window, scattering glass across the table.

"Stay against the wall," she shouted at them as she ran to the front of the house. Pulling open the door to the porch, she stopped, frozen.

Boulders, rocks, pebbles rained down out of the sky, smashing windows, breaking holes through the roof of the porch.

"Holy Jesus," Beth breathed.

A rock the size of a grapefruit crashed through the porch roof a foot away from her. She jumped backward, colliding with Autumn, who had followed her out.

Beth opened her mouth to berate the girl for failing to stay where she was told. Then, she saw her face and the words evaporated.

Her daughter glared at her, an evil grin contorting her young features, making them something ancient and foul.

"You pay, white lady," she said in a strange voice. "You pay for what he done."

Beth grabbed her daughter, shaking her, oblivious to the racket around them.

"Autumn, what's the matter with you?" she shouted above the noise.

The contorted face relaxed. The eyes softened. She put her arms around her mother.

"Mom, help me. I'm scared," she sobbed.

Beth caught the girl in her arms and was pulled to the floor with her when she fainted.

There was a sudden, awesome quiet. The rain of rocks stopped as if a spigot were turned.

Chapter 5

"Brian, get a damp cloth." Beth pressed her cool hand against her daughter's warm cheek.

"We'd better get her inside," David said, coming through the open door and looking down at them. "It's freezing out here."

He carried the unconscious girl into the parlor and placed her on the sofa. Autumn's lashes fluttered when her mother touched the cloth to her forehead. She opened her eyes. "It's all right," Beth said. "You fainted." Autumn swallowed and looked around the parlor. She seemed confused. "How did I get here?" she mumbled.

"Mr. Vale carried you in from the porch."

"The porch?" Autumn's voice was far-away. "But I was at the table."

"There were rocks falling on the house. Maybe it frightened you so much you forgot."

"No, Mom," Autumn shook her head. "There's something wrong with me."

"Painting's not so serious."

"I don't mean that." Tears formed at the corners of her blue eyes. "I'm forgetting all the time. I was outside getting wood...and then, I was in my room. I don't know how I got there."

Beth remembered the morning, the woman in the shadow of the house. A knot tightened inside her.

"This move has us all upset," she said, forcing a cheerful tone. "By tomorrow everything will be fine."

"No, it won't. I don't think it ever will be fine again." Autumn turned her face to the back of the couch. Her body shook with sobs.

Beth was shoveling coal in the basement when the doorbell rang. For a moment, she couldn't place the far off tinkly sound. Then, she bolted up the stairs two at a time hoping the caller wouldn't leave. She didn't want to lose a potential roomer. The dwindling coal supply made it obvious she needed more income.

A woman stood on the screen porch in front of the door. Beth was unable to stop herself from staring. Her visitor was almost as wide as she was tall. She wore an embroidered scarlet cape that brushed the snow at her feet. Her hair was dyed an inky black and tortured into Shirley Temple sausage curls.

"You have a room for rent?" she asked.

"Yes."

The woman opened the screen door and waved at the taxi driver parked in the drive.

"Yoo hoo, driver. This is the place," she trilled. "I'll just be a minute."

The driver nodded and dragged on his cigarette.

The woman swept into the hall behind Beth, her cape swirling snow onto the red Persian rug.

"Goodness, what a beautiful old house."

She rummaged through pockets in the scarlet cape, finally fishing out a dog-eared business card which she handed to Beth.

"Madam Goldora Zora," it read. "Palms read, horoscopes cast. The future is in the stars and in your hands. Cheap rates."

"How do you do, Madam Zora," said Beth, extending her hand.

Instead of shaking it, the woman turned the hand palm up.

"Much strength of character here," she said. "When were you born?"

"November 15."

"Ah, a Scorpio. I'm compatible with Scorpio. I'm a Pisces, you know."

"You're looking for a room?" Beth moved the conversation to more comfortable grounds.

"Yes. I am, but the vibrations must be right. I can't work in negative surroundings." Her foolish curls bobbed up and down.

Crazy, but not dangerous, Beth concluded.

"Now, in addition to a room," said the woman, "I shall require a place to conduct my readings."

Madam Zora looked around the empty hallway with approval.

"Just delightful," she said. "I know this elegant house will bring in clients by the bunches. It's perfect for my line of work."

"For an additional \$100 a month, I could let you use the music room. There's no furniture in there now, but I think we could find something."

Beth opened the double doors leading from the hall and indicated with a nod that Madam Zora should enter the music room.

The stage had once held a grand piano and the room had been filled with rows of needlepoint folding chairs. Now it looked vacant and forlorn, but Madam Zora seemed pleased.

"Wonderful, just wonderful," she exclaimed, clasping her pudgy hands in front of her. "Such elegance. A music room for Sunday afternoon recitals. They certainly knew how to live in those days, didn't they, dear?"

There was a knock on the double doors and David entered,

"Ah, Beth, here you are," he said.

So, it's Beth now, she noted. Apparently I've graduated from Mrs. Davis.

"Madam Zora, this is our resident expert on the history of Riverbend, David Vale."

The woman extended a hand dripping with rings and tipped with plum-colored polish.

"How do you do?" she toned. "I'm Madam Goldora Zora."

"Interesting name," David said, taking her hand.

The woman laughed a little girl laugh and shook her curls. "Legally, it's Gladys Swartz, but, of course, that name had to go when I entered my profession."

"Which is?"

"I read palms and do astrology charts."

"Interesting," David repeated. Laughter lurked just below the surface of his gray eyes. He turned his attention to Beth.

"I'll be gone for a couple of days," he said. "Please keep my mail for me."

Beth considered asking where he was going and thought better of it. You're not his mother, she reminded herself, nor his wife.

"Keep cool," he quipped as he went out the door.

"Very funny," Beth called after him. "We're having a little problem with the heating," she explained to Madam Zora.

The woman was frowning at her. "How long have you known him?"

"Couple of weeks. He's my first boarder. Moved in the second day I was here."

"Bad ears."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He has bad ears. No earlobes. That's a sign of deceitful character."

"I hadn't noticed," Beth said.

What kind of psycho have I got here, she wondered. Hopefully one who pays the rent, she cautioned herself.

"Never trust a man with no earlobes," Madam Zora warned. "Never met one who wasn't a liar."

"Ah, maybe you'd like to see the rooms upstairs," said Beth, eager to change the subject.

"Yes, yes, of course, but you be careful of that man." She shook a jeweled finger. "Don't you go getting involved with him. He's trouble."

"I don't intend to get involved with any man."

"Ummm. I'd better have a look at your left hand."

"What?"

"Your left hand, your left hand."

Beth extended her hand and Madam Zora stared at it for a long time.

"Mmmm," she said, frowning. "Tst-tst."

"What's the matter?"

"Don't like the look of this."

"What?" asked Beth, looking at her hand. It was red and chapped from the cold.

"You have children, yes?"

"A daughter and a son."

"I see trouble here. Danger. Maybe death. Something to do with a child."

"Maybe, if I'd try a little Jergen's lotion," Beth laughed.

"Young woman, I am telling you something important. Don't be flippant. Someone close to you, a child, is in peril. You must be very very careful."

"Look, Madam Zora, I appreciate your concern, but I really don't put much stock..."

Madam Zora stopped her with a wave of a jeweled hand.

"You think I'm a foolish old woman. Perhaps I am. Much of the time I'm a fraud. But sometimes, *sometimes*, I know things, and I know this. You are in trouble, young woman. It is so, but we will speak no more of it."

“I’d appreciate that,” Beth said.
In the weeks to come, she’d wonder how Madam Zora knew.

Chapter 6

She moved down the carpeted hall toward Autumn and Brian's rooms, the lantern making eerie shadows on the flowered wallpaper.

Brian opened the door and looked out, his dark, tousled hair hanging in his sleepy face.

"Somebody knocked at my door, Mom," he said.

"It's all right, Brian. Go back to sleep."

The knocking seemed to come from Autumn's room. Beth entered and held her lantern above the girl's face. She slept soundly, unaffected by the noise.

There was a "thunk" as if a ball were bounced against the headboard of the bed. Beth placed her hand on the bed and it vibrated as if electricity ran through it. A scratching noise came from behind the wall.

Beth watched in horror as the chest of drawers raised off the floor, and with a jerking motion, moved out from the wall.

Madam Zora puffed into the room. She screamed when she saw the rocking bureau.

The noise wakened Autumn. She sat up in bed. Movement and sound ceased.

"What's the matter?" she asked opening her eyes.

"The dresser," said Goldora Zora in a shaking voice. She pointed unable to say more.

"It's okay," Beth said. "We thought we heard a noise in here."

"Oh, dear," said Goldora, "I think I shall faint."

"You're not going to faint," Beth ordered.

"What's the matter with her?" Autumn asked.

"Nothing. Something scared her. It was nothing."

"That's right," Goldora followed Beth's lead. "Don't worry your pretty head about it. It was nothing."

"Can I have my candle lit?" Autumn asked.

"Go ahead, light it," Beth replied, despite her earlier warning that it might start a fire.

She walked a shaken Goldora back to her room and then looked in on Brian. In the gleam of his battery operated night light, she saw he slept soundly.

She pulled the covers tight around his neck and kissed his forehead. Mother of two, she thought. I'm responsible for these two young lives. Why do I feel like a frightened child myself? Maybe it was wrong to move here, to leave their father?

Then she straightened her back. That's enough, Beth. One minute a day of feeling sorry for yourself is all you're allowed and you've used up your minute for this day.

Returning to her bed, she set the lantern on the table. But she did not extinguish it. The sun was a rosy glow in the east before she slept

Less than two hours' sleep did little for Beth's disposition in the morning. She looked down at the woodpile in anger. Brian had forgotten to bring in wood before going to bed. Starting the stove was difficult enough with dry wood.

She yanked her coat from the hook next to the door and stomped out into the frosty morning. She froze in her tracks.

Standing outside the door was an elderly black man in a lumber jacket.

"What are you doing on my property?" she demanded.

"Good mornin', Ma'm," said the man. "Sorry if I scared you, but I been waitin' for somebody to stir in the house."

He had a pleasant, wrinkled face. His gray hair seemed at odds with a youthful body.

"You've been out here all night?" Beth asked, thinking of the odd occurrences in the late hours.

"No, Ma'm. I hitched me a ride 'bout three this morning. I been here waitin' since."

"What do you want?"

"I come home."

"I'm sorry, I don't think I understand."

"This my home, Ma'm. And my father's and his father's. I was reared up here."

"The house has been sold. I'm the new owner."

"I'm mighty happy to meet ya, Ma'm. Looks like you be needin' help here. Them broken winders want fixin', the roof s just full holes and that drive wants shovelin" up."

Beth sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr...."

"Zack, just Zack. My granddaddy a slave freed by Vandergeld. We always live here."

"I wish I could offer you a job, Mr....Zack," Beth hesitated, "but I really can't afford an employee-"

"You don' haf to pay me, M'am. I jus' work for food and a place to sleep. My room still up there over the stables?" He gestured toward the nearby brick building.

"I don't know," Beth said. "I've just been here two weeks and the weather's been so bad I haven't even looked in the outbuildings."

"I live in that room forty years, M'am. It's a right nice room—fireplace, good solid old bed.

"You lived here forty years?"

"Yes'm. Me and that old lady Dorcas. She take care 'a the house and I take care 'a the grounds. She got really crazy t'ward the end, she did. Gone round talkin' to herself. Other things." He checked himself, seeming afraid he'd said too much. "I got out a here when she start that crazy stuff. Then, I hear tell she gone, so I come back."

"I bought the house."

"I hear that. You seem like a nice lady. Hear tell you got two youngens'. This ole house wants a little life in it. Dorcas, she thinks it a shrine."

A wind whipped around the corner of the building, cutting through Beth's coat, reminding her how cold the old man must be after standing here half the night. "Look, Mr...."

"Call me Zack."

"All right, Zack. I don't think I can offer you a job, but I can at least give you a cup of coffee. Let me get some wood and we'll go inside." Zack scooped a mound of logs from the pile insisting he carry them for her. In the kitchen, he worked magic with the wet wood and they were soon seated at the table over steaming cups of coffee. The children stumbled in and Beth put bacon on to fry.

She noted with satisfaction Autumn had toned down the make-up since starting school in Riverbend.

"I gotta have a piece of wood," said Brian, propping his head on his fist. "I gotta have it right away before the school bus comes."

"What for?" asked Beth, turning the bacon and breaking an egg into a bowl,

"I don't know the word. You put a picture on a piece of wood and you gop varnish on it. It's for art."

"Brian, I'm fixing breakfast. Why didn't you tell me about this last night? I don't have time to find you a piece of wood now."

"Forgot," said Brian, staring down at his plate. "The teacher's gonna kill me if I don't have it." -

"That's okay, M'am. There's wood out in the stables," said Zack. "I get him some."

"Thanks," said Beth. "I don't know what I would have done this morning without you."

"I think I better stay," said Zack with air of finality. "After breakfast I fix that weather stripping on the back door. It's lettin' the cold in."

"Well, I guess that's that, Beth said to herself. Now, I have an employee and no way of paying him.

A few minutes later, Zack returned with wood and a piece of sandpaper for Brian. Beth set a place for him at the table, but he refused to sit down.

"I wasn't raised up to eat with white folks," he said.

"Come on," Beth scolded. "What do you think this is, Uncle Zack's Cabin? Sit down there next to Brian and eat your bacon and eggs. And no more talk in my house like that, understand?"

"Yes'm," he said, looking sheepish.

"Where's the grits?" asked Autumn.

"What?" Beth exploded. Her first thought was that the girl was making fun of the old man, but Autumn's face was empty of malice.

"What are you talking about? You've never tasted grits."

"I don't know," she said, "I just looked at my plate and it came into my mind there were no grits."

"You're too weird," said Brian with distaste.

"You come from around here?" Zack asked Beth, The question coming out of nowhere surprised her.

"Mmm," she said, "born and raised here, My parents had a little restaurant on Main Street—Tobler's Inn."

The old man's face fell and his eyes grew wide.

"You were a Tobbler?" he asked, in a voice so shaken that the children stopped eating and stared at him.

"Yes," said Beth.

"Your folks from Missouri?"

"No, not really. I think I may have had a great grandfather who lived in Missouri. Why?"

"Oh, M'am," he said, his face gone gray, "the baby Jesus and his Blessed Mother watch over you. Of all the houses in Riverbend..." He looked to the ceiling, then back to Beth... "why in Gods' name did you buy this one?"

Chapter 7

For days there was no word from David. Beth left his mail, a magazine and a few advertisements, on the dresser in his room.

Then, one morning when she was scrubbing the hall floor, he rushed through the front door, almost stumbling over her.

"Uh, sorry," he mumbled, stepping around her, swinging his briefcase, the only luggage he carried, to the side.

"Mission accomplished?" she asked, hoping he might offer some explanation for his absence and satisfy her curiosity.

"So-so," he said, leaping the steps of the curved staircase two at a time. About half way up he remembered something and stopped.

"There's a movie in Riverbend I'd like to see. Want to go with me tonight? We could have dinner in town and make a night of it."

Beth looked up at him through the blonde strands of hair hanging in her smudged face. She could not have been more surprised if he bit her.

"I don't know," she hesitated. "Who'd fix dinner for the boarders? There are three more now."

"Sounds like business is picking up. Who besides Madam LaFarge or whatever she calls herself?"

"Madam Zora," Beth corrected, grinning. "And yesterday two brothers who work at the stone quarry upriver moved in. Then, there's Zack."

"Zack?"

"That's his name, all of it. His family's been with Octagon House for more than a hundred years. I can't afford a handyman, but I couldn't bring myself to turn him out either. He was born here."

"I see. Well, if we can't manage dinner, then, maybe just a movie?"

"Hold on now," Beth said, pulling off her rubber gloves and wiping the hair from her forehead. "I'm not going to let you out of that offer if I can help it. God! Do I need to get out of this place for a while. It's been...you wouldn't. Believe what it's been. Cold, noises in the night, bumping sounds up and down the hallway and then Zack scaring us half to death."

"Scaring you?"

"I told him my maiden name is Tobbler, which sent him into a panic, but he won't tell me why. Just keeps praying for our immortal souls or something."

"Sounds like a cheery sort."

"He's likeable. Kind of an Uncle Tom, though. Black people just don't act like that anymore—not even in Riverbend. I don't quite know what to make of it."

David shrugged. He was waiting for an answer.

Beth stood up, smoothed her jeans and smiled.

"Mr. Vale, I would love to have dinner with you," she said with mock formality. "I'll figure something out. Maybe cold cuts and potato salad set out on the sideboard. Autumn and Brian can clean up."

"Good. Seven o'clock then." He was off up the stairs.

It was a pleasure to put on a dress and make-up. Beth, the scullery maid, was left on the floor of the closet with the worn Levi's. The face staring back at her from the mirror was the lady of the manner, good skin, blue eyes, blonde hair, washed and blown in soft waves. The nose could be improved, she decided. Make-up failed to conceal the redness caused by the constant chill in the house.

"On the whole though, not a bad-looking broad," she said to the image in the mirror.

They had dinner in the restaurant of Riverbend's single hotel. Beth, whose appetite had diminished in recent days, ate as if she were near starvation. Food never tasted so good.

The movie, too, was good, a lighthearted tale of teen-agers in the 60s. Several of the scenes reminded her of events in her own high-school years. On the way home, she had David laughing at her stories about her five brothers and sisters growing up in River bend.

About his own past he was silent, changing the subject when she asked.

Beth pointed to a dirt road leading up the side of a bluff.

"That was 'make-out' point when I was in high school," she said. "I suppose it still is. Nothing changes in Riverbend."

David braked and turned the Mazda onto a dirt road. They climbed to a spot where the Mississippi was visible below them for miles in each direction. He turned off the motor and the stillness closed in. Above them the stars were points of ice in the frozen winter sky.

"Nice," he said, looking at the water far below them, where the moon's image shattered in silvery splinters.

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Then, he put his arm around her and drew her close to him. "You know," he said. "It's been a longtime since I've done this kind of thing...the beautiful girl, moonlight, front seat of a car. You may have to show me."

"Don't know," Beth feigned innocence. "Nobody ever brought me to make-out point. My dates were glad to get me home. I always had to take my little brother with me."

David laughed, but Beth was suddenly sad. She remembered Bill as he'd been then, a chatty eight year old. David noticed her change of mood.

"Something wrong?"

"I don't like to think about my brother. He was killed in an anti-American demonstration in Iran."

"I'm sorry."

"It was a horrible year. Two months after Bill's death, my brother John drowned in a gravel pit. I'm the only one left. One of my sisters was struck by lightning and the other died in a freak accident as a child."

"What kind of accident?"

"She was playing hopscotch on the sidewalk in front of my parents' restaurant. A stone from a speeding gravel truck hit her in the forehead. She died instantly."

Beth stared down at the water, deep in thought. "The Tobblers are no good at dying in bed," she said. "Not a single member of our family ever died of natural causes."

She looked up at David and smiled, shaking off the gloom.

"Will you look at me?" she laughed. "Here I am a grown woman. Finally a man takes me to make-out point without my little brother and what do I do? I talk about my family and ruin the whole thing."

David lifted her chin with his hand and kissed her gently. "Mmmm," he said in the way one might evaluate a tasty pastry. He pulled her close and kissed her again, sure and knowing now.

Somewhere deep inside her a flicker of desire burst into flame. She returned his kiss with longing so obvious it embarrassed her.

He unbuttoned her coat and slid his hand under her sweater, caressing the soft curve of her breast, forcing his tongue into her mouth. She was liquid fire, melting, desiring him.

With a great force of will, she pulled herself away.

There was surprise and confusion in David's face, looking down at her in the half light. Her mind was a maze of conflicting feelings, racing thoughts.

"David," she said, almost pleading, "let's go home."

"No," he said, pulling her to him again. You want me as much as I want you. What's the harm in it.

She looked into his eyes. "You're right about my wanting you. Right now, more than anything else in the world, I'd like you to Lake love to me. But this isn't the right place or the right time. We're not seventeen year olds. Let's back off, make sure where we're going-"

He hesitated, started to argue and then gave her a quick hug.

"You're right," he sighed, sliding over under the wheel of the car. "Dear, sweet, sensible Beth. You are right. It muddles things. If I could just tell you..."

He raised his hands and slammed his fists on the steering wheel. "But I can't tell you. Not yet. What an ungodly mess."

He hunched over the wheel and started the engine. On the long ride home, they said not a word.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning Beth set the children cleaning the parlor over the objection of Brian, who insisted it was women's work. Autumn did not protest. She said little these days. She ate what was put in front of her, did what she was told with no initiative, no interest, no complaint.

At least Brian seemed happy in school. He'd made a friend, the son of a farmer about a mile from Octagon House. There was evidence his reading was improving. Although of above average intelligence, Brian in fourth grade read only at a first-grade level. That was one of the problems Beth was sure she could improve by moving them to the country away from the television set.

Brian's new enthusiasm was for horror comics. He read them as if his life depended on the information on the picture pages. Beth might have chosen a different form of literature, but seeing him read anything voluntarily pleased her.

Autumn was another matter. What was it about the girl that worried her? She mulled it over in her mind as she gathered mops and pails and descended the cellar steps.

She'd meant to clean the basement since they arrived. Actually it was only a half-basement under a portion of the house. Busy hands heal worried minds, her mother used to say. There was no point in brooding about Autumn. Or about David, for that matter.

After thinking it over, Beth decided to break off any relationship with him other than landlady and tenant. Her desire for him was too strong. It made her unsure of herself and she needed to be sure. Love affairs sapped psychic energy and she had no energy to spare. The management of this house, the needs of her children, were all she could handle.

But later, perhaps, when things settle down. Handle later later, Beth, she cautioned, taking a vicious swipe at a cobweb strung between the open beams of the basement ceiling.

As she worked toward the far end of the cellar, she could no longer reach the ceiling with her broom. This end was cut deep. Looking around, she found an orange crate covered with mildew and dragged it to the spot where she worked.

In front of her were rough shelves once used to hold the winter's supply of canned goods. How pleasant it would be to put up her own preserves, she thought as she stared at the empty jars covered with dust. Maybe a garden with tomatoes to can and apple jelly from the apple tree. It would help with the food bills, for sure.

She set the orange crate on end and climbed on it to see the back of the top shelf. As she put her weight on the damp wood, it splintered! Beth grabbed at the shelves to keep herself from falling, scratching her forearms on the rough surface.

To her surprise, the wall of shelves swung inward, revealing another room. Using the boards as a ladder, she climbed down.

The room was square without a window. It had a dirt floor. There were crates of paper stacked around the wall. An old lantern hung on a hook. Beth shook the lantern. It

was full of fuel. She reached into her pants pockets for matches. The lantern lit easily as if recently cleaned.

She hung it back on the wall and looked into the cardboard boxes. The largest box contained cancelled checks. The signature on them was Diane Vandergeld's. There were checks for utility bills, taxes, paychecks to Miss Dorcas and Zack.

There were frequent payments to a Mrs. Rodger Fairchild in Ontario. Most of these were for \$200, but there were some for \$50 or \$75, labeled Christmas gift, birthday gift, school clothes. One for \$300 was labeled summer camp.

Beth tried to recall what she knew about Diane Vandergeld. The last mistress of Octagon House lived in California, she knew. She came to Riverbend once a year to check on the house and take care of family financial matters. Odd that she kept a checking account in Riverbend First National when she served on the board of directors of several California banks. Unless she wrote frequent checks to someone she didn't want business associates to know about...

There was a furtive movement in the cellar outside the door. Beth listened for a second. She heard it again.

"Autumn, is that you?" she shouted, wondering at the same time why she picked Autumn. It might be anyone in the household.

There was a scurrying noise and the fruit shelf door banged shut. Beth ran to the door and pushed, but it refused to budge. She beat on the wood with her fists.

"Open the door. This isn't funny."

From far away, she heard muffled laughter. Or perhaps it was the wind. She felt panic rise. Forcing herself to stay calm, she assessed her predicament. She had light and air. It was just a matter of time until she was missed and someone came looking for her. Brian and Autumn knew she was cleaning the basement. When they came, she would hear them and shout for them to open the door.

To pass the time, she turned her attention to the boxes. At the rear of the assortment was an old sailor's trunk. It squeaked open on rusty hinges. The mildewed papers inside dated back more than a hundred and thirty years to the senior Emil Vandergeld's time.

Most of the correspondence was about cattle. Bills for hay, saddles, corn meal and farm equipment were mixed with Emil Junior's letters from the State University of Iowa where he was a student.

Beth dug further into the trunk and came up with a leather-bound book, a diary. She opened it with shaking fingers. There was an inscription on the flyleaf in ornate blue lettering. "To my darling wife Nora, on our second anniversary. May you have only happy accounts to enter herein. Your loving husband, Emil."

So Nora was the wife's name. She turned pages carefully. The diary was fragile. There were reports of church picnics, marriages of friends. Several times Nora thought herself pregnant and was later disappointed to find it was not so.

The Vandergelds had just moved into the house when the diary began and much space was devoted to recording purchase of draperies and furniture. Beth learned for the first time that the dining room set now belonging to her was imported from Italy.

She was transported to another time. Forgotten was the locked door that made her a prisoner in the damp, forlorn place. She rubbed unconsciously at the scratches on her arm and was surprised to find blood on her hands. She'd forgotten the sting of her injury, so intent was she on the diary.

In the spring of 1855 there was a change of tone in Nora's writing. Differences between the North and South approached the breaking point and Nora despaired. A month later she wrote:

"Emil brings me today tidings which make me sick with fear. For a year, unknown to me, he works with a gallant band of men, who operate the underground railroad, carrying slaves from the South upriver to freedom in Canada." He tells me of this now, because a secret place has been prepared in Octagon House to hide these tragic runaways. He does not want me to be frightened by what I may see or hear. I am proud of him, but afraid for us. I have not yet told him I carry a child."

Her fear turned to elation when the railroad succeeded time after time:

"Fifteen families, man, woman, and child have we safely secreted in the month gone by. Friends send word of their safe arrival in Canada with jobs and homes awaiting them. Their bonds are behind them. God be praised."

And then a sorrowful report that turned Beth's blood to ice:

"Today Emil found the body of a young slave girl, Rainy, floating in the river. She was beaten in a most barbarous fashion. He knows it to be the work of the despicable villain, Red Tobbler, a bounty hunter in the employ of plantation owners. Tobbler and his mulatto devil of a son caught her and killed her.

"A charm was found on the barge where we believe the girl was killed. Emil says that in dying she cursed her killer. I am a Christian woman and I do not believe such things are possible. But I wish it were so. He is a monster, but he breaks no law. Only God's law and to that he will answer."

Beth's absorption in the diary caused her to overlook the smell of something burning. When she at last glanced up, a gray cloud seeped under the door and the crackle of flames was audible in the basement outside.

In desperation she pounded on the door calling for help, but no help came. Smoke billowed into the room and she fell to her knees, coughing, still attempting to pound on the closed door.

Her last thought as she lost consciousness was of the bounty hunter Tobbler and the curse.

Chapter 9

Zack prodded the blazing log in his fireplace, switched his aged twelve-inch television to the Saturday matinee and settled down in the wing-back chair that had been his father's. An open beer waited on the table near his side. Zack sipped from it and sighed with contentment.

What more could a man want? He looked around the familiar apartment over the stable. It was the same as it always had been.

He'd been afraid someone—Lydia perhaps— would have tidied, redecorated, but everything was just as he left it.

He frowned thinking about Lydia Dorcas. "Crazy old lady," he said aloud. Thought she was Diane Vandergeld half the time, playing that tiny Victrola and dancing around the music room. Crazy. Still, he couldn't fault her in caring about Octagon House.

It must have been an awful disappointment to her when the place was sold to outsiders. Just like Elaine's son to sell out, get the cash fast as he could. Never too bright that boy, George.

Zack laughed at himself for thinking of George as a boy. He must be near sixty now. When Zack was about sixteen, Elaine used to come home to her Daddy when she and her hubby had a spat. She'd bring the brat along. He was five, then, fat and bad tempered like his old man.

He liked to tease the horses, Zack remembered. Once, on the Fourth of July, he stuck a burning puck through the stall and burned Miss Diane's prize gelding. Zack turned the little whelp over his knee and warmed his bottom good.

He went crying to his Mama, of course. She came flying out of the house mad as a Blue jay after a cat, threatening Zack with lynching and a few other things. Then, Miss Diane come out to see what the ruckus was about and did she tell her sister what's what.

"Childish pranks are one thing, Elaine, but cruelty's quite another," she said. "You get him out of my sight before he gets a second licking."

That Miss Diane was a good woman. Too bad she never married. Fine old family like the Vandergelds whittled down to one no-good pup. Well, at least George didn't own the house.

Zack sucked on his beer and stirred the fire again. It was good to be back. He belonged here. The time in Chicago was unsettling. He had some money, but it didn't last long, so he'd taken a job in a warehouse.

It was strange there. Young bucks with their shirts open to their belly buttons treated the foreman with contempt, glaring at him when he gave orders, answering, "yes sir, boss," and going off to sneak cigarettes behind a wall of crates.

They called him "Uncle Oreo" and he was pleased. Until he learned that meant white on the inside and black on the outside, like an Oreo cookie.

They were wrong. He didn't like white people any more than they did. He'd just learned how to use them. Play the game by their rules. You get power by serving the powerful. That's how his family done with the Vandergelds and they'd done good.

He had little cause for complaint. There were friends in Riverbend, who'd share a fifth Of Mountain Spring on a cold night. And there was the widow of a friend, who'd share her bed when the mood was on her.

And Miss Diane'd left him an inheritance. It was enough to last to the end if he used a bit of mother wit. Working for no pay, he could set his own schedule, lay off when the pain in his belly got too bad. There wasn't no clock to punch.

Food was okay, too. That Mrs. Davis wasn't a bad cook, although he never could sit at a table with white folks and enjoy his meal. She ought to be a good cook, her parents running a restaurant and all. Tobblers. He wondered if she could be a great, great granddaughter of the Tobbler who was supposed to have killed the little girl a hundred years ago. Unlikely. Still a curse invoking Lyangombe was strong magic. His granny taught him that. It could pull people to a place despite themselves. And that red-haired young'un sure was acting strange.

Best forget it. Nothing to be done anyway. He forced himself to concentrate on the movie flickering across the screen. The posse rode into an ambush. John Wayne drew his six-shooter.

Zack was distracted by the slam of the stable door and the sound of small feet on his stairs.

He opened the door as Brian reached out to knock.

"You got to help my Mom," the boy gasped between breaths. "She's in a fire, in the cellar."

Zack pulled his heavy coat from the peg next to the door and hurried down the steps after Brian. On the way across the barnyard he saw the smoke seeping out of the cellar window. Call the fire department, he thought and then remembered. There's no phone.

He barged through the kitchen door nearly colliding with Goldora, who was wringing hen pudgy hands and pacing across the linoleum!

"There's a fire. Get help," Zack ordered.

"But I don't drive. Oh, dear." She looked ready to cry.

"Then get out to the road and flag somebody down. Get them to take you to the next farmhouse and call."

She continued to stare at him with great saucer eyes.

"You gon' let this house burn down while you stand there like a heifer gettin' bred?" he shouted at her. The angry outburst from the diminutive man startled her into action. She turned and left the kitchen.

Zack paused at the sink to wet a dish towel and wrap it around his face, muttering as he worked. "Jackasses tryin' to burn down the Vandergeld's house. Got no place here. Now I'm gone' risk my black hide gettin' her out."

By the time he reached the bottom of the cellar steps, the smoke was so thick he could not see. Edging his way along the familiar wall, he allowed his feet to search for anything that might trip him. He burned his hand on the furnace.

"Kee-rist," he muttered, "first time the bastard's been hot in weeks."

At the rear of the cellar, he saw the flames. Cardboard boxes, papers, grocery sacks kindled a fire fed with broken chairs and bureaus he recognized as belonging in the shed. Above the flames, the ceiling beams glowed neon red, threatening to spread the fire to the main floor.

"That ain't no spontaneous combustion," he said aloud, coughing. Smoke burned his lungs and he fought to stay conscious. Must find her. The boy said she was here. But what if he's wrong? He dismissed the thought.

He felt his way along the far wall, rounded the corner. The basement was a shroud of smoke. He doubled over with coughing. Just as he thought he must give up, get air, he touched the fruit shelves he'd built for Miss Vandergeld. From behind the panel came a low moan.

The dirt floored room he'd disguised with his carpentry. She must be in there.

His lungs were vials of acid eating from the inside. Feeling with his open palm along the shelves, he located the wooden latch, tripped it, and pushed the door inward. It moved a few inches, then jammed. Something blocking it. Putting his back against the selves, he shoved with all his might and the door inched open.

The obstacle was Beth's body. He lifted her to his shoulder and staged across the cellar toward the tornado door that opened into the yard. It would let in air to feed the fire, but he had no choice. Near unconsciousness himself, he knew he couldn't carry her up the stairs to the kitchen.

Dropping his burden on the cement floor, he stooped and raised the wooden storm door. Sunshine and fresh air poured in through the opening. He breathed deeply and pulled Beth's body up the four, steep, wooden steps to the yard.

The exit was dug and the trap door set in the ceiling when the house was built in case a tornado would trap the family in the cellar. The Vandergelds insisted it be shoveled after each snow to prevent the door from collapsing. Zack cleared it that morning by habit. Had it been heavy with snow, he could never have raised it.

Zack stretched the unconscious woman out in the snow. Her skin looked gray. Putting his ear to her chest, he heard steady heartbeats. Her breathing was shallow and irregular.

Brian came around the corner of the house and stared at his mother with wide eyes.

The fire would take off with fresh air. Zack knew he must get back to it, but he was afraid to leave her. He made a check of those he could call for help.

The college professor was away. The two brothers were at work. That fool of a woman had probably gone to do her made-up and change her dress before going for the fire department. That left Brian and the girl. Where was the girl?

He slipped off his coat and placed it around Beth. Clad in his flannel shirt, he re-entered the basement where the gray smoke had changed to an ominous black.

"Take care of your Mama," he yelled back at Brian.

There was a coil of hose in the proper place on the wall. He tore it down and felt for the faucets. He stumbled into the washing machine.

“Shit,” he said to himself, she’d covered the only water supply with this damnfagled thing. He tore the machine away from the wall, ripping the connections.

Flames leaped from the ceiling, spreading along the walls and into the corner.

Zack pushed away the washing machine and joined the garden hose to the faucet. The spray brought a welcome hiss as it wet the jumping flames. More water, more flames doused.

He returned to the storm door, opened it and breathed in the fresh air. Beth still lay unconscious.

"You watch her," he told Brian.

Back and forth across the cellar he went. When the beams were soaked and smoldering, Zack turned his attention to the pile of burned rubble on the floor. Holding the hose with his left hand, he reached down with his right and retrieved a partially burned paper from the edge of the blackened mass. He straightened it on his pants leg and tucked it into his pocket.

Five minutes and many gallons of water later the rubble ceased smoking. Water ran in rivers to the corners of the cellar. Zack pulled himself up the steps into the cold air feeling his seventy-plus years.

Beth was sitting up hugging Brian as if clinging to a raft.

"Zack," she said, groggy. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Just don't go burning down the house," he snapped, and was immediately sorry. Not like him to speak like that. He helped Beth to her feet and they made their way on the path around the house to the front porch. She was weak, but able to walk with his arm supporting her.

Once inside, she collapsed on the sofa. Her face was still an ashen gray. Zack sent Brian to bring a blanket.

There was a wail of sirens in the distance. It grew closer and the Riverbend Volunteer Fire Department pulled into the drive. Zack met them on the front steps and directed them to cellar door. He knew the fire was out, but it not for him to tell white men their jobs.

Autumn opened the screen door and came out onto the steps, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"What's going on? Are those firemen?"

Brian burst onto the porch screaming, "Where have you been? Mom almost died."

"I was in my room."

"You were not. I came to get you to help."

"I was asleep on the floor by the register. You couldn't see me. What's wrong with Mother?"

Zack reached into his pocket and pulled out the paper burned black around the edges.

"This belong to you, Miss?"

"My book report," Autumn was delighted. "I looked all over for it. Where was it?"

"In the basement. It was used to start the fire that almost killed your Mama."

Chapter 10

"Mrs. Davis, an end must be made to this or I shall move elsewhere," Madam Zora complained.

She was seated at the kitchen table in her purple bathrobe, her hair up in the familiar tin cans. Beth poked at the eggs she prepared not knowing what to say.

Losing her boarders meant losing Octagon House. But who could blame them for leaving? Since the day of the fire there was no sleep for anyone. Knocking and banging behind the walls continued until sunrise. Doors creaked open and shut with a loud bang. There were footsteps on the stairs, but when the boarders looked, there was no one there.

For the past few nights, there were lights among the trees down by the river. Everyone noticed them. It seemed that someone...one of her boarders?...explored the riverbank by night.

And then, there was the cold. The constant, unrelenting chill in the house grew worse no matter how much coal she fed the basement monster.

How could she blame them for leaving?

She set a plate of eggs in front of Madam Zora and the woman attacked it as if afraid the chicken would return for its progeny.

Beth envied her appetite. She looked down at her pants, bagging in the seat, gaping at the waist and vowed to eat more.

"It's certainly nothing personal, dear," Madam Zora continued her interrupted complaint. "I'm extremely fond of you and the children, of course. But the nature of my work demands a tranquil mind and I simply cannot function in this super charged atmosphere."

Goldora reached for a third piece of toast and sloshed butter over it. She stopped, struck by an idea.

"Have you considered an exorcist?"

"What?"

"Surely, Beth, you've heard of an exorcist. They say a few prayers and the spirits are released to the nether world. Poor lost souls. You see sometimes they don't know they're dead. They have to have it explained to them."

"Could I just send a telegram?"

Goldora ignored the remark. "The more I think about it, dear, the better I like it. I'm going into town today. I'll ask around. I don't suppose we could get a priest. Catholics are so conservative in Riverbend."

Brian appeared in the doorway, his eyes sunken, red rimmed. He half fell into the chair, resting his head on his elbows.

"Do I have to go to school today?" he asked.

Beth left the stove and tousled his hair. "Yes, you do," she said, kissing the top of his head. "I know you're tired. We all are."

"Autumn's not tired."

"Why do you say that?"

"Everywhere I go, she's right behind me, grinning. She scares me, Mom."

"She's just teasing you," Beth said, but a chill of warning shot through her, making her stomach lurch.

Autumn scared her, too. Either she was listless and vacant or...or what, Beth? Like another person, she answered herself. Another person with bright, hating eyes and a mocking laugh. And something else—a southern accent.

"Do you know what I used to do to my sister?" Goldora confided, leaning across the table to Brian. "Our voices were so alike no one could tell us apart on the phone. When she was mean to me, and oh, could she be a wicked girl at times...well, I'd call her friends and say terrible things to them. And they'd be mad at her."

Goldora laughed her tinkly laugh, pleased forty years in retrospect by her prank.

"It's not like that," Brian protested, staring down at the plate Beth placed in front of him. "I don't know how to say it, Mom, but Autumn wants to hurt me." He worked to hold back the tears. "It's not teasing."

"I'll talk to her," was all Beth could think to say.

Should she punish her? For what? Following her brother around? Falling asleep in her room while a fire raged in the cellar? Leaving school papers in the basement?

Beth found herself longing for the problems she'd left behind. Autumn smoking, wearing too much make-up. Autumn meeting boyfriends when she said she was going to the library. The problems of a little girl trying to grow up too fast. But what was this?

At that moment Autumn entered the kitchen. She took the chair next to Brian and he moved as far from her as he could. Seeing the movement, she grinned at him, an evil, mocking smirk, bright eyes flashing.

David looked in the door. "I'll get breakfast in town, Beth. Gotta' see a man about a paper."

He looked fresh, handsome, in control. She'd seen little of him since she showed him the checks and Nora's diary several days ago. He'd been very excited, asked her if he could keep the checks. Since then, he'd been gone constantly. She told herself it didn't matter. David's time was his own business.

"See ya," she said, but he'd already disappeared.

Beth placed bacon and eggs in front of Autumn. "Better move along. School bus comes in ten minutes."

Autumn looked at her, eyes filled with loathing. "Fuck school," she said under her breath.

Goldora stopped chewing, her face gone stiff. "Dear, dear, such language."

"Fuck you, too, you fat old cow," Autumn said.

It was no surprise when Autumn returned from school that afternoon with a note. It was the vapid, listless Autumn who handed her the envelope. Disinterested in its contents, she drifted up the stairs to her room and closed the door behind her.

Beth ripped open the envelope and read:

"Mrs. Davis,

"I must see you at once. Autumn's behavior is unacceptable. I cannot tolerate it any longer. Please keep her home until we can talk this over and come to a solution. Sincerely, Mrs. Bradshaw."

Beth entered the parlor, closing the double doors behind her. Making sure she was alone, she dropped the note to the floor and sank to the sofa. She put her hands over her face and allowed the tears to flow, feeling more alone than she'd ever been in her life.

Chapter 11

Lincoln County Consolidated School was three stories of windows topped with solar heating cells. It reflected the late afternoon sun like a mirror.

Beth pulled the station wagon into a spot for buses. The buses would be gone for several hours, returning a thousand children, including Brian, to farms around the county.

She slid out of the driver's seat and gazed up at the tiers of glass, thinking they'd never last the night in a city school.

She found Mrs. Bradshaw, Autumn's teacher, alone in one of the glass-walled classrooms. As she entered, Mrs. Bradshaw looked up from the papers on her desk and tucked a pencil in her gray hair. She indicated a student chair and invited Beth to sit down.

Beth lowered herself into the undersized chair and she was back in her student years. Do teachers do that on purpose, she pondered, place a parent in a child's chair and strip away years of self-assurance?

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Davis," the teacher said. "I'll get right to the point. I don't want Autumn back in class until she sees a doctor. I've discussed it with the principal and he agrees."

"Do you think she's sick?"

"Yes, I do. I think she's mentally ill. She has mood swings that make it difficult for me to deal with her."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean by mood swings?"

"Most of the time she's quiet, well-behaved, a bit dreamy. Then, for no reason I can see, she'll explode in a temper. She's physically attacked her classmates. Once she threatened me with a pair of scissors."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea this was going on."

"This didn't happen in the former school?"

"Never."

"You really should get a medical opinion."

She might have a brain tumor—something like that."

"Yesterday, when you sent the note home, was there a special reason—I mean in addition to the other things you told me?"

Mrs. Bradshaw nodded. "I guess you could call it the final straw. I'd asked her to get some forms. She'd been in a stupor all afternoon. I thought sending her to the office might yank her out of it. She refused to go and her language was most unacceptable."

"Can you tell me what she said?"

The teacher's face reddened. "She said, 'I ain't your nigger. Fetch it yourself.'"

"I see."

"The children like to run errands for me as a rule."

"There have been problems with her at home, too." How to explain? "Sometimes it's like she's a different person, a stranger," Beth ventured, hoping she didn't sound as foolish as she felt.

"Exactly," said the teacher, shaking her head in agreement. "I've worked with children for more than twenty years. Girls this age can be hard to handle, especially for a woman. Autumn's problem is more than adolescent rebellion. I'm sure of it."

"All right," Beth said. "I'll make an appointment for her. I'm sorry she's caused so much trouble. I'll keep her at home until we sort this out."

She stood, anxious to end the interview, and walked toward the door.

"Mrs. Davis."

Beth stopped, turned back.

"I'm really sorry. I like the girl."

"Yeah." A lump formed in her throat and she did not trust herself to say more.

What would she do, she asked herself as she started the car and pointed it in the direction of home. Doctors meant tests and hospitals and money. Lots of it. With four paying boarders, she just managed to pay bills and keep food on the table.

Ask Burt for the money? She'd never do that. She'd refused child support. How he'd love to have her go begging to him now.

What was the matter with Autumn?

Beth's mother used to say, "Oh, he's not himself today," when one of her brood was out of sorts. Beth once asked, "If he's not himself, who is he?" Her mother had laughed. Would she laugh now?

Two unfamiliar cars were in the curved drive when she pulled up in front of Octagon House. Clients of Madam Zora, she assumed. The old Vandergeld home brought Goldora more business than she'd ever dreamed possible.

People made appointments for readings just to see the place. And Goldora gave them what they wanted. She embellished the history of the house. She told them in whispers of the strange noises and the footfalls on the darkened stair. Her public loved it.

That's not to say Goldora took recent happenings lightly, Beth knew. She was terrified, but she was not too frightened to milk it for every drop of drama she could get.

Beth took the car around to the rear and entered through the kitchen door. Dishes were stacked on the counter where she'd left them after lunch. She'd told Autumn to wash them. What had the girl been doing?

"Autumn?" she shouted.

There was no answer, but she heard voices from the front of the house. Not wanting to interrupt Goldora's session, she avoided the music room and took the alternate route through the darkened parlor. She was halfway across the room when a voice spoke to her.

"Mrs. Davis?"

Beth started. A man rose from the sofa seeming to materialize from the late afternoon shadows. Holding out his hand in greeting, he approached her. He was tall, slender. His lined face was topped with sparse white hair. Beth relaxed. He was real enough.

"I'm sorry. You startled me. Yes, I'm Beth Davis." She took his hand which was cool and dry.

"I'm the Rev. Alistair Trimtree. Madam Zora asked me to come."

Goldora, having dispatched her client, chose that moment to flutter through the parlor door.

"Beth, dear. I see you've met Rev. Trimtree. Wasn't it wonderful of him to come all the way out here to help us?" She clasped purple tipped fingers in delight.

"Help us?" Beth echoed.

"With the exorcism, dear. Don't you remember? He's been waiting for hours for you to come home."

"Barely thirty minutes," the man corrected, "and I don't do exorcisms, Mrs. Zora. I thought I explained that."

"Oh, of course, of course," she dismissed his objections. "But Beth, dear, he was a missionary in the Congo for twenty years and he knows all about spirits and magic and," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "possession by devils."

Beth took a deep breath, wondering what she could possibly say. It had not occurred to her that Madam Zora would return with a minister. The man seemed pleasant enough. No point in insulting him.

"Rev. Trimtree, I really appreciate you coming. It's very kind of you. I'm just not sure our problems are of a spiritual nature."

"On the contrary, Beth," Goldora giggled, "we do have a problem of a spirit."

He ignored her. "Mrs. Davis, whatever problem you have, sometimes it helps just to talk it over. Perhaps I could come back at a later time. We could pray together, ask God's direction,"

Beth seized on the "later time" and hastened to agree.

"Yes, yes. Another time would be better, Reverend. Right now I've got to find my daughter. Goldora, have you seen Autumn?"

"Can't say I have. The school bus dropped Brian off a while ago. He's around somewhere. I think I heard him go upstairs."

"Good," said Beth, turning to leave.

"Thanks for coming, Reverend. We'll talk another time."

"As long as you're here," Goldora said, taking the man's arm. "I'll take you on a tour of the house. You'll just love it."

Beth mounted the stairs with a growing sense of urgency. She was frightened and not sure why.

"Autumn, Brian, you up here?"

She passed through the cold spot in the hall without noticing.

Everything in Autumn's room was in order. Too good order. Nothing on the bureau top. No clothes scattered. It was a nun's cubicle, not the room of a twelve year old. Not like Autumn to be so neat.

In Brian's room there were comic books and a week's supply of clothes on the floor. A half finished model of a spaceship cluttered the bureau top. But no Brian.

Could they be outside? Beth went to the window at the end of the hall and looked out. There was no movement in the snow-covered yard.

Several clumps of white fell past the window. Why should snow fall from the widow's walk, she wondered? There was no wind. Unless...could someone be up there? But she kept that door locked. The keys were in her dresser drawer.

She tried the door to the third story and found it open. Gathering her skirt close to her, she hurried up the tiny steps circling a metal pole. A low door led to the roof outside.

When she opened it, her blood turned to ice.

The setting sun made silhouettes of the two figures against the iron railing of the widow's walk. Autumn held her struggling brother bent backward over a gap in the metal pickets.

There was a gag in his mouth so he couldn't cry out, but his eyes were eloquent with terror. She was forcing him over the side.

Chapter 12

Later Beth would wonder what she'd said. She attacked her daughter...the thing masquerading as her daughter...screaming threats and obscenities. The girl was amazingly strong. Beth struggled to break her hold on Brian. The girl laughed at her failure, a cruel, deep sound, boiling out of her throat.

In desperation, Beth grabbed a mass of curly red hair and pulled. With her other hand she slapped the mocking face, over and over. The girl spit at her.

With all the force she could summon, Beth raised her knee and sunk it into Autumn's stomach. The girl gasped for air and the leer left her lips. She let Brian go and doubled over in pain, hollowing a spot in the snow as she fell.

Beth pulled her son away from the iron fence and yanked the gag from his mouth. She hugged him, burying his frightened face in the bodice of her dress. Tears of fear and rage turned to ice on her cheek.

For the first time she was aware of the cold. Brian was bundled for outdoor play, but the girl wore only slacks and a pullover. Her feet were bare.

Using the fence for support, Autumn pulled herself upright fighting for breath. She leaned against the iron spikes and stared at Beth with sharp, hating eyes.

"What kina Mama you?" she panted, kick you girl in the belly like that?"

Beth held a shaking Brian half in her arms, half over the shoulder.

"You're not my daughter," she hissed. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

"Rainy," Beth whispered and the girl grinned.

They glared at each other in silence. A gust of wind whirled snow across the roof, scattering it in silver spray three stories to the ground.

"You locked me in and set the fire." It was not a question.

The girl laughed. "I'm fixin' to kill you, Mama, and dear little brother, too. Ain't nothin' you can do to stop me."

"What have you done to Autumn? Where is my daughter?"

"I'd just love to stay here and chat with y'all, but this here body's getting' blue with cold. Don't want it to freeze. Ah need it."

The corners of her mouth turned up in an imitation of a grin. She pushed herself away from the fence and walked toward Beth, hips swaying, her bare feet leaving prints in the snow. She entered the roof door, slamming it behind her. From inside came an echo of her laughter.

Beth sat on a bench in the hospital corridor waiting for the doctor. She'd spent the last three days, since Autumn was admitted for tests, on this bench. She knew every crack, every mar in the opposite wall.

Autumn's blood was tested for diabetes, thyroid, blood cell count and a variety of little known diseases. Urine was analyzed for kidney or liver failure. Her skull was X-rayed, her brain scanned.

Autumn's response to the proddings and probing was listlessness, boredom. She stared at the ceiling, refusing even the novelty of television, something she'd been without since moving to Octagon House.

At first the doctors refused to believe this silent, passive child behaved in the outrageous manner Beth described, but a call to her teacher confirmed the story.

When a spinal tap yielded no abnormalities, the doctors again launched a search for exotic diseases, bacterial infection. An hour ago, the neurologist had come by to ask Beth if she kept amphetamines or hallucinogens in the house. That was their last grasp effort at a physical solution.

So far, the only thing they'd turned up was a mild cold, the result of the barefoot outing on the snowy roof. But Beth continued to hope. How strange to be so eager for illness.

At least she didn't have to worry about the money. She'd subdued her pride after what happened on the window's walk and called Burt. He wasn't in the office, but she

explained to his secretary, Miss Pours, that she had to have money for Autumn's medical treatment. A half hour later Miss Pours called back to the hospital pay phone where Beth waited, to tell her Burt still carried the children on his company insurance policy.

She'd hoped he might call to inquire about his daughter's illness, but she should have known better. In thirteen years of marriage, it was Miss Pours, who most often responded to family crises.

Dr. Sherwood sat down on the bench beside her. She flinched. His approach was so quiet, she was caught unaware. He smiled at her, a genial teddy bear of a man with a mop of unruly hair and a belly that rested on his lap when he sat.

"Anything?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. No answers. Everything normal.

"What do I do now?"

"See a psychiatrist."

Beth nodded in agreement. The only thing she hadn't tried was a witch doctor spreading chicken entrails across the bed, reading the illness in the blood and gore.

"There's a man at University Hospital," Dr. Sherman said. "He's one of the best in the country. It's a thirty mile drive there, I know, but I think you'll find it's worth it."

"Will you make the appointment?"

"I've already talked to him. He didn't have an opening for more than six months, but I've pulled some strings. He can begin seeing her in eight weeks."

"Eight weeks?" Beth shrieked, jumping up from the bench. People in the hospital corridor stared, but she was oblivious. "What am I supposed to do with her for two months? She needs help now. You don't know what it's been like."

Dr. Sherwood took her hand and pulled her back down on the seat.

"Now just calm down, Mrs. Davis. I'm going to prescribe a tranquilizer for her, Librium. It will help level out the manic behavior, those highs and lows she's subject to."

"Jesus Christ, man." She pulled her hand from his. Her voice rang off the tiled walls. "My daughter tries to kill her brother and you prescribe a tranquilizer?"

Dr. Sherwood was losing his temper. He disliked scenes, especially in public places. His speech was short and clipped.

“There’s no reason to be so upset. It’s not unusual for adolescent girls to rebel against their mother’s authority. Admittedly Autumn’s reaction is stronger than most. Your divorce and the loss of her father may account for that. Possibly she blames you.”

Beth stared at him in disbelief. Surely he must see the difference between defiance and attempted murder.

“My children were not close to their father. The only effect of the divorce on their lives is financial.”

The doctor shrugged, a silent refusal to argue. Believe whatever you find convenient, he seemed to say.

He pulled a prescription pad from his white jacket pocket and wrote on it. “You may take her home now. Get this filled on the way.”

When Beth and Autumn pulled into the drive of Octagon House, David was on the porch waiting for them. He was pacing, agitated.

What now, she wondered. Had Brian done something? David insisted on looking out for the boy while he was at the hospital with Autumn.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, sliding out of the car.

He came down the steps to meet her.

Brian’s gone. He left hours ago to walk to the farm house down the road. He never got there. His friend came looking for him half an hour ago.”

Chapter 13

Beth stood at the sink, steam from the dishwater rising to warm her face. Outside the window, the lights of a snowmobile cut through the darkness. There were dozens of the vehicles out there searching for Brian.

She wanted to go with them, but the sheriff refused. He said she'd get in the way, slow them down. So she washed dishes and worried.

It had been more than five hours. At first, she, Zack and David covered all possible routes from Octagon House to the O'Reilly farm. There was no trace of Brian, no answer to their shouts. They could not find a small footprint in the unbroken snow. When the sun set, Beth called the sheriff.

Sheriff Blake was a huge man with an intimidating manner. He arrived with two deputies and a score of snowmobiler volunteers. And he took command, leaving Beth with nothing to do but worry.

She peered down into the white suds as if she might read an answer in the bubbles. She forced herself to re-evaluate what they'd done.

If Brian had taken the trail through the woods and fell or hurt himself, they would have found him. If he'd gone by way of the river and ventured out on the ice, he might have fallen through. But that was unlikely. The river was frozen solid for more than a quarter of a mile, all the way out to the channel.

If he'd taken the road, he might have been hit. But they would have found him. Kidnapped? No. She had no money.

From the sheriff's pointed questions, she knew he suspected Brian's father of taking him. The Sheriff had experience with custody kidnapping. But he didn't know Burt. Her former husband was glad to be rid of his son.

A sexual deviate? Beth considered that for a second...that right now Brian might be...She moaned and clenched her fists forcing the image from her mind. Not in Riverbend. But Riverbend had its psychos, too. She knew that.

Brian wouldn't get into a car with a stranger. Both her kids were too street wise. But what if he'd been forced? The road was isolated. No one would see.

If she only knew how he was feeling at the moment. Was he in pain? Frightened?

There was a way to find out, but it made her stomach lurch to think about it. Autumn would know. She could read moods, thoughts, especially those of her family.

It wasn't right. The girl was sick, mentally unstable. But Beth knew she must ask. She had to know. There was no choice.

She found Autumn in the parlor, lying next to the hot-air register, an afghan wrapped around her. She was flipping the pages of a teen magazine, looking at music idols, not reading. Beth sat down on the floor next to her.

"Autumn?"

"Mmmm" Far away. Dreamy.

How to begin? So many times she'd tried to ignore Autumn's special gift, make it go away.

"Autumn, Brian's missing. I thought maybe you... well, I wondered if you'd know how he is."

A vacant face with blank eyes regarded her. "He was already gone when I got home from the hospital. I didn't see him."

"I know you haven't *seen* him, honey. But sometimes you know things. Can you help? I'm frightened for him."

Autumn stared into space. "Sometimes if I close my eyes and think hard about somebody, I know what they're feeling," she said, as if it were a skill she'd just remembered.

"Would you try it now?"

Autumn closed her eyes and folded her hands. From far away the sound of snowmobiles droned into the silent room. The wasps of winter, Beth used to call the noisy machines. They sounded different tonight. Their buzzing was the sound of help, of neighbors caring.

Autumn's posture changed. Her back straightened. A grin spread across her face. Slowly her lids opened. The eyes that glared out were vicious, hateful, old as time.

“He dies, Tobbler bitch,” she spat. “And so will you and the witch girl.”

Beth’s hand went to her mouth, stifling a scream. She stood and ran from the room.

David, come in to warm himself from the search, caught her in the hallway as she ran blindly by him, not knowing where she was going. Or why.

“Easy, Beth. This isn’t like you. Get hold of yourself.”

He pulled her to him, holding her in his arms. She sobbed into his lumber jacket unable to speak. David held her for a long time, allowing her to cry. Then, he kissed her. She responded with a flood of emotion, wanting to lose herself in him, to blank out everything else.

The doors to the music room opened. They separated. Madam Zora emerged with two birdlike women.

“Any word on Brian?” she asked.

Beth shook her head.

“So distressing. The boy’s been missing for hours,” she confided to the women. They nodded, eyes bright in bobbing faces.

They’re enjoying this, damn them, Beth thought. And damn David, too. She’d meant to keep things light with him. Not like this. She hadn’t strength to fight on so many fronts.

“I think what you need, Beth, is a strong cup of tea,” David said.

“Just a minute, Beth,” Madam Zora stopped her from leaving. “I’ll walk out with my clients. Then I want to talk to you. *Alone.*” A significant glance at David.

“I’ll heat the water.” He grinned and left.

Goldora bustled the ladies out into the night. “Now don’t you worry about your nephew. Saturn is retrograde in his second house. That’s the problem. By mid-month his financial difficulties will be over. That’s a promise.”

The ladies twittered their “thank you” and closed the door behind them. Beth and Goldora entered her “study” as she called the music room. They climbed the steps to the

stage, passing through a break in the wine-colored drapes Beth had reclaimed from the attic.

Madam Zora did her readings at a small table on the stage, preferring the intimacy of the closed curtains to the empty expanse of the music room. She had lined the walls with palm charts and the natal horoscopes of the famous. Beth noted that Adolph Hitler's chart on shocking pink poster board was a recent addition.

"I will get to the point at once," Goldora said, indicating that Beth should seat herself at the table. "Did I see you kissing David in the hall just now?"

"Now why would you want to know that?"

"Because I'm worried about you, Beth. That man is trouble."

"I know. I know. He has bad ears."

"It must have occurred to you that he was alone in the house with Brian today."

"I know. He had papers to go over. He insisted it would be no imposition to watch him while I went to the hospital."

"Well, he certainly did a fine job of watching him."

"He did nothing I wouldn't have done. What have you got against him?"

"I just think he's very suspicious, all that coming and going with no explanation. They say in town he's asking strange questions about the Vandergelds."

"That's his job," Beth snapped. Goldora's mother hen act was a token of affection, she knew, but tonight it wore thin.

"Goldora, why don't you come have some tea with David and me? My son is missing. My daughter is sick. I'm not in the mood for gossip and I don't feel like arguing with you."

"No, thank you." Her words were icy crisp. She turned from Beth and headed for the staircase.

The sheriff, his men and the snowmobilers were huddled around the stove in the kitchen when Beth entered. Snow-covered parkas hung from the pegs by the door and from the backs of chairs. Melting snow puddled on the linoleum.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Davis,” the sheriff said, “I’ve called off the search. There’s nothing more we can do tonight. My men are exhausted.”

“I understand. I’m thankful for everything you’ve done.”

A huge, blue, metal pot burred on the stove. Beth had seen nothing like it outside Western movies. Now where did Zack find that? He was amazing.

The black man lifted the pot and poured coffee into mugs. Beth remembered some brandy she used for pudding. She poked through the cupboards until she found it and added it to the cups. The half-frozen searchers were grateful for the warmth.

Later, when they left and the household was in bed, Beth checked on Autumn. The girl slept heavily, her hands above her head as she’d slept as a baby.

“Get well, my love,” Beth whispered, kissing her soft cheek.

Back in the kitchen, she tidied up, stacking the cups on the drainboard, wiping up the melted snow from the floor. The house was quiet as a grave. The thought made her shiver.

Is it quiet where Brian is? Is he cold? Hurt?

The brandy bottle was on the table in front of her. She poured a coffee mug full and drank it down in one gulp. Minutes later she was asleep, her head resting on her arms at the table.

She awoke to find Autumn shaking her.

“Mom, I looked all over for you.”

“Autumn?” She looked into the pixy face and relaxed. Yes, it was Autumn. Wan, dark circled eyes, listless expression.

“What is it?” Her voice was groggy.

“I know about Brian.”

Beth sat up, awake. “What?”

“I woke up a little bit ago and I just knew.” The girl gave her an accusing look. “Why weren’t you in your bed?”

“Never mind. What about Brian?”

“He’s someplace near. Underground, I think. It’s very black, but he’s not cold.”

Buried. The word burst into her mind. Oh, God, no, buried alive.

Autumn read her thought. “I don’t think he’s buried.” She rubbed her temple with three fingers. “He can stand up.”

“Is he in pain?”

“No, but he’s awful scared. And he’s lost. He’s afraid to move.”

Her face went white and tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. “He can’t move, because there might be a drop-off in front of him or behind him. It’s so dark. We gotta’ find him, Mom. We gotta’ find him right away.”

Chapter 14

Beth pounded on the door of Zack's apartment. The sound thudded into the night air and echoed back at her from the surrounding brick buildings.

Terrible to do this to the old man. He'd only had a few hours of sleep since the sheriff and the snowmobilers left. But she needed him. He knew the grounds like she knew her kitchen.

As she raised her fist to knock again, Zack opened the door. His black face peered out at her above white thermal underwear.

"Brian's underground near here. Will you help me find him?"

"Underground?" He was dull with recent sleep.

"I know this sounds crazy, but Autumn... well, she dreams things." Beth gestured, palms up, helpless to clarify.

Zack nodded as if her explanation were entirely logical.

"Whad's she dream?"

"Brian's in the dark, but he's not cold."

"That's all?"

"He's able to move around, but he's afraid to."

Zack bit his lower lip as he thought. "Cave," he said, after a few seconds. "Same temperature winter or summer in a cave."

"Is there a cave near here?"

"Used to be, about a mile from here, down by the river. Haven't been there since I was a boy. Hope I can still find it."

"Please hurry. We've got to get him out. Brian's so afraid of the dark."

Zack closed the door, leaving Beth to wait on the stairs while he dressed. She leaned against the doorjamb, thinking. Should she wake David? Ask him to help? She decided against it not really knowing why. Goldora's allegation? Perhaps. She'd reason it out when they found Brian.

She *knew* she trusted Zack. Brian followed the old man everywhere like a puppy, and Zack was always patient with him. He was the father Brian never had.

Zack emerged from the room dressed in a heavy jacket and a cap with ear flaps. They went down the stairs and into the freezing night.

The snow was trampled with footprints and ski tracks as though an army had traveled through. If he were here, above ground, they would have found him, Beth reasoned, looking at the lines crisscrossing her property as far as she could see.

They moved along the path between the trees. Beth carried her Coleman lantern; Zack, a flashlight. She looked back at the darkened house, wondering if anyone, the two brothers perhaps, watched them as they walked through the woods. It would look much like the lights several nights ago, she decided. Someone else walked in these woods then. Who? Were they responsible for what happened to Brian? Had they taken him and left him somewhere alone in the dark?

They walked in silence for a long time. At last they came to the river. A freezing wind blew in over the black ice, chilling her through the heavy parka. She clapped her mittened hands together and the noise startled her.

How terrified Brian must be. Since they'd come to Octagon House, he'd insisted on a night light. He was never without it. Until now. Strange how she'd accepted Autumn's dream without question. A disturbed child's tale in the middle of the night sends mother off into the cold in search of...what? A dark place? Six months ago, she would have sent Autumn back to bed, turned over and gone to sleep- you've changed, Beth Tobbler. Hope it's in the right direction. Maybe you should see a psychiatrist.

A sandstone bluff faced them, rising up out of the river. Zack stared up at it uncertain.

"This could be it," he said. "It was afore the dam I was here. It's all changed."

"Dam?"

"Sure. When they built the lock and dam downriver, water backed up all over here. Good crop land under to the fishes. Shame. This here spot was a nice sandy beach if it's what I'm remembering.

She scanned the steep bluff. It was covered with brush and a few stunted spruce trees. Frozen water clung round the base.

"First the dam backed the water up. Then 'bout thirty years ago, the Dutch Elm Disease come through and kilt all the big trees. It's so different. It's hard to remember where things was."

Walking with great care, he took several steps out onto the ice and hoisted himself up the hill using bushes as handholds.

"There's a little ledge up here, Ma'm. Do you think you can make it?" he shouted down to her.

"I'll make it," Hanging the lantern from the crook of her elbow, Beth found footing among the rocks and brush. She pulled herself up slowly, little balls of snow cascading down in her wake.

Once her foot slipped on a patch of ice and she slid several yards, but she managed to keep the lantern safe. Zack climbed down to the spot where she lay tangled in a stand of brush. He offered his hand and pulled her up to a snow-covered ledge.

They continued to climb until there was nothing above them but sheer cliff. She allowed herself to look down and gasped at the distance to the river far below.

"Look," Zack said holding the flashlight in front of him, pointing at the ground. A child's footprints in the snow led around a corner of the rock face and off to the south.

Her heart beat in her ears. She forced herself not to run on the snowy path. You're no help to him if you slip and go over the edge, she reminded herself.

They followed the footprints for a few yards. Suddenly there was a second set of prints coming from the south. She held the lantern high and found that a less steep path wound round the bluff and down into the trees in the other direction. The snow there was heavily packed from much use.

"Down this way?" she asked, pointing to the winding trail down the south side of the hill.

"Somebody's been comin' up that way, fur sure," Zack said, looking down, "but I think the entrance to the cave is here on the bluff."

He searched along the path, looking behind boulders and pulling the scrub spruce aside.

"Bet the boy come along by the river," Zack formulated a theory out loud, "sees somebody up here on the bluff. So he climbs up the way we come and follows em."

Beth nodded in agreement. But who'd be up here in the middle of winter?

Zack kicked at some loose brush and held his light on the snow, tracing the point where the boy's footprints joined the larger prints coming from the other direction.

"Here, M'am," he called, pushing aside the branches of a large tree to reveal an opening in the rock face.

They stopped and entered. After a few yards, the opening grew larger and they found themselves under an arch-shaped dome.

"Brian?" Beth called, her voice echoing off the rock. Silence and the far-off drip of water.

"Come on," Zack ordered, leading the way with his flashlight. The passage narrowed and Beth winced. She disliked tight places. They made her think of caskets, closed in forever, unable to move.

The passage ended and they found themselves in a gigantic room. Stalactites, stalagmites met in regal columns in shades of red and tan. A waterfall hewn in rock dominated one wall.

"Try calling him," Zack said. His voice was hushed in the rock cathedral.

"Brian. Brian."

From far away a faint voice. "Mom?"

She ran in the direction of the sound, paying no attention to the darkness. She made herself stop. The wet rock was treacherous. Deep pits fell away on either side of the narrow rock walkway.

"Keep yelling, Brian. We'll find you."

"I can see your light. I can see it." The voice seemed to come from everywhere. It bounced off a hundred surfaces.

"Keep yelling, Brian."

"I was scared nobody would find me."

"We'll find you."

"You're above me. I see your light above me." His voice was close now.

Ahead the wall convexed like a spoon on its side and the path detoured sharply to the right, leaving a drop-off in front of the wall. She held her lantern out over the void.

Five feet below her Brian sat cross legged on a floor strewn with pebbles. He looked up at her blinking in the light.

"Just hang on, sugar," said Zack, leaning out over the opening. "We're gone git you right out a there."

"I was feeling my way along the wall. The floor disappeared and I fell down here." His voice was resonant and strange.

Zack handed Beth his flashlight and slipped off his coat.

"You hurt, boy? Think you can climb?"

"I'm okay."

Zack lay down on the cave floor, holding one arm of his heavy jacket and lowering the other arm toward Brian. The boy grabbed it and walked his way up the wall. When he was close enough, Zack and Beth grabbed him under both arms and pulled him from the pit.

"Brian," Beth hugged him to her.

"I sure am glad to see you, Mom. I thought I'd never get out a here."

"Why'd you come in here in the dark?" Zack asked.

"I was on my way to Sean O'Reilly's house. I saw a woman up here so I came to see what she was doing. She had a lantern. I followed her in here, but she got ahead of me and I couldn't see any more. Then I fell." He started to cry.

"It's okay now," Beth crooned, rocking him.

"Mom." He pulled away from her, looking up into her face. "I seen that lady before. She used to be in our house. She wouldn't let us in once."

"Miss Dorcas, the Vandergeld's housekeeper?"

"Yeah, her," Brian nodded in agreement.

Chapter 15

Jacob and Joseph Franco stood staring down at the parlor carpet, hats in hand, looking like a pair of gnomes displaced above ground.

"You wanted to talk to me in private?" Beth closed the parlor doors.

"Yes, M'am," Jacob said, his face reddening. "We're going to have to leave."

There it was. When they'd asked to talk to her privately, she assumed that would be it. Well, she couldn't blame them. For the past week the noise had been unbearable. No one slept. It sounded as if large objects were being scraped across a wooden floor somewhere behind the walls.

In the mornings, Beth found cupboard doors open, linens pulled from the shelves and scattered across the floor. In the pantry, dishes were moved and pans rearranged.

Jacob shifted his weight from side to side, uncomfortable.

"We sure hate to do this, Mrs. Davis, but we're old men. We need our rest."

"I understand," Beth said. "I guess if I could get out of here I'd leave too."

"Maybe, when you get things worked out, we can come back," Joseph ventured, anxious to please.

"Sure," Beth said.

Within an hour, the brothers were packed and gone. Beth stood in the open door watching them go. The loss of two boarders meant she couldn't meet the house payment. What would she do now?

David came up behind her and kissed the back of her neck, making her jump.

"When did you get back?"

"Early this morning."

"You'll be sorry."

"Why?"

"Noise. It's unbelievable. The backs you just saw going down the walk were those of the Brothers Franco. They couldn't take it anymore."

"That bad?"

She nodded.

"I left the mail on your dresser," she said, changing to a more comfortable subject. Tears loomed behind her eyes and she determined not to let them fall.

"Anything important?"

"Nothing personal. Ads mostly. Oh, one funny thing. You got an advertisement for a magazine addressed to David Vandergeld. Wonders of the computer age! Must have picked up this address and transferred your name from Vale to Vandergeld."

"Mmm," he said. "How's Autumn?"

"Subdued. No problems. Right now. I bought Brian a deadbolt for his door. It makes me feel more secure."

Beth cleaned the house from top to bottom that day, hoping to exhaust herself to the point where she would sleep in spite of the noise. Might as well get the place shaped up, she decided. I'll be showing it to buyers soon.

The sounds began at midnight, muffled booms and scrapings. She slept fitfully coming fully awake when the house quieted about two in the morning.

She reached for her robe at the bottom of the bed intending to go to the bathroom. Something stopped her. A sound? No, more a feeling. A feeling that she was not alone. She sat tense in her bed and listened. There was no sound. There was no moon. The night was black and deep.

She reached for the flashlight on the bedside table, clicked the button and swore. The battery was dead. She pawed over the table top, searching for the matches she kept there, apprehension causing her to scatter possessions this way and that.

And then, the match box was placed in her hand.

She screamed. Half falling, half staggering across the dark room, she found the door and yanked it open, screaming again into the void of the carpeted hallway. Her voice echoed up and down the corridor.

Behind her, a whisper, a faint familiar voice. "No fear, Bets. Want to help you. Help you." The words drifted away like smoke.

David in pajama bottoms ran up the hall, his bare feet shushing on the soft carpet.

"Beth, what is it?"

"Someone in my room," she sobbed. "Oh, Christ, I don't know. Something put a box of matches in my hand."

"Hey, now easy," he put his arm around her. His bare chest against her face was warm, sensuous.

"You were dreaming, perhaps?"

"I was awake."

"Well, let's have a look." He went to his room and returned with a flashlight. He played it in the corners of her room. There was no one there.

"I think you need a cup of tea," he said, when he finished.

Beth laughed in spite of herself, "David, do you think tea solves all problems?"

"You'd be surprised how a cup of tea gets one over life's little hurdles," he answered solemnly. "You stay right here. I'll serve."

"No," she said, terrified at the thought of being alone. "I'll come with you."

They put on robes to ward off the chill of the house and walked toward the stairs. Although the night was black, the sky light above the staircase allowed a faint gray sheen to enter.

There was someone downstairs in the hallway. David threw an arm in front of Beth stopping her, a finger over his lips. She nodded, letting him know she'd seen it, too.

A figure in a heavy coat and long scarf moved silently across the hall. It paused at the base of the steps seeming to sense it was watched. The face looked up into the stairwell. Beth gasped in recognition.

"Hey, you there," David shouted. "Stop."

The form disappeared down the hallway. David jumped three steps at a time and ran after it, shouting. A moment later he reappeared.

"Got away," he called up the stairs to Beth. He looked sheepish. Got away, she said to herself. Where? There was no place to go. She came down the stairs to meet him.

"You recognize him?" David asked.

"It's Lydia Dorcas, Diane Vandergeld's housekeeper."

"How'd she get in here?"

"Key, I guess. I've never changed the lock. Didn't see a need to."

"Is she the one Brian followed into the cave?"

Beth nodded.

"I think we may have a solution to our poltergeist."

They made tea in the kitchen and carried the steaming cups upstairs with them. Beth paused at her door reluctant to enter. The incident with the matchbox was still fresh in her mind. David sensed her fear and walked in with her. She did not protest. His presence was comforting, reassuring.

She was soon in his arms, their cups forgotten on the bedside table. And this time there was no holding back. That other woman, the sensible, fearless, in control Beth Davis had been lost in the black of this endless night. The woman returning David's embrace was someone else, someone who wanted to be cared for, protected.

And when the caring turned to passion, she met it gladly, glorying in her need for him, making love with an ardor she'd never known she possessed.

When the gray light of dawn touched the room, David kissed her on the brow, gathered his clothes and left. Beth snuggled under the covers, happy for the first time since she'd entered Octagon House. For a brief period she slept.

Later, stumbling into the kitchen, her eyes bright with sleep, she almost tripped over David. He was on all fours on the kitchen linoleum, carpenter measure in hand. He muttered, scribbled with a pencil on a pad he drew from his shirt pocket.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Boyish grin, brief flash of memory of the past night. Beth grinned back, remembering.

"Ah, measuring, but why?"

"To see how far it is around the house."

Beth stared at him dumbfounded as he disappeared through the kitchen door. She could hear him crawling along the dining room wall still mumbling.

She shrugged and filled the stove with wood. It crackled into life and she began the preparation of breakfast. David ceased his measuring long enough to down the hotcakes she put in front of him and was off again with his tape. She could hear the "whoosh-snap" of its recoil in the parlor as she ate her own breakfast.

Autumn entered, sat listless at her place, picking at her food. Beth placed the Librium in front of her.

"Don't forget your medicine," she said, wishing there was an alternative to drugging her daughter into semi-consciousness.

David was back. He took his jacket from the peg by the door. The measure was in his mittened hands.

"Doing the outside," he said, as he went out the door.

She'd fixed breakfast for Brian and Goldora and she'd just begun the dishes when he stamped into the kitchen, clearing the snow from his boots. There was a look of triumph on his face.

"Just as I thought," he said. "The outside of this house is fourteen square feet bigger than the inside."

"What?"

"I felt there was something wrong here. Didn't seem to match up, too far from one side of the octagon to the other."

"What are you talking about?" She shook suds from her hands and wiped them on the seat of her pants.

"Don't you see, Beth?" Her lack of comprehension irritated him. "There's a room at the middle of the house. It's probably the reason Emil Vandergeld built in the shape of an octagon. It's the ideal way to disguise a center space. And unless I miss my guess, you get there through the cave where Brian followed the old lady."

Chapter 16

Water from the roof of the cave, plopping into ancient puddles on the rock floor. Ahead Zack and David called to each other as they explored passageways.

Beth was impatient to leave. Autumn and Brian were alone at the house. Although the girl was subdued since starting on the Librium, Beth was still uneasy.

"Dead end." David's voice far away, echoing off the walls.

It was at least the fifteenth dead end in the last hour. If a tunnel to the house led from this cave, it was well concealed.

Beth skirted the large chamber, admiring the formations. A cleft in the wall opened to her right and she stooped to follow it for a few feet, holding her flashlight on the floor to avoid a sudden drop. Something flashed white against the gray stone. She knelt to pick it up.

It was a bone. She examined it in the light of her flash. Human? Too small. The remains perhaps of some animal? She turned it over and scraped at the sand and rock debris clinging to it. A carving emerged, a skillful reproduction of the head of a crocodile. It was very old.

She retraced her steps to the large chamber where she could still see the shadows from David and Zack's lanterns.

"David."

He emerged from behind a column a few feet away and came toward her.

"I'm a washout as a spelunker. I know the damn passage is here, but I can't find it."

"Look." She held up the fragment of bone.

"Where'd you get that?"

"There." She pointed to the small passageway.

"I think that's part of the leg of a goat."

Zack came from somewhere to her left adding his lantern to their island of light.

"I'll be hornswoggled," he said, looking at the bone. "That's a curse juju."

"A what?" they asked in unison.

"Juju. Used for curses, fortunetelling. My granny showed me one once. Different animals work different spells. Don't know what that one does."

Beth studied the fragile carving, turning it over in her hand.

"That minister Goldora brought around, he'd know what it is. I think I'll ask him."

There's a clue to the puzzle here some inner voice told her. She was learning to trust those feelings, those small hunches. Had they been there all her life, ignored until now?

She tucked the bone into the pocket of her jacket and they left the cave.

Rev. Trintree lived in a modest cottage on the outskirts of Riverbend. At first glance the building was not visible, so immense were the oak and box elder trees surrounding it.

He answered her knock and invited her into a cheerful living room crowded with mementos of his days in the Congo. African masks and a ceremonial sword hung above the sofa where he indicated she should sit.

"I live by myself now," he explained. "My wife died several years ago. My son Eric lives in Seattle with his family. But I make a fine cup of coffee. May I offer you one?"

"I'd love it," Beth said.

He went to the kitchen, leaving her to examine his souvenirs. One wall was covered with framed pictures. His church, a white stucco structure, looked out of place in a semicircle of thatched roofs.

There were small black faces above white choir robes, many shots of Eric playing with village children. In one he ate a reddish fruit. It was sour by the look on the boy's face.

A fat black man, his hands folded in front of him, sat on a dirt floor surrounded by his children, newborn to adolescent. Their heads were shaved, their eyes deep brown, alert, intelligent. In the background were four of his wives, their breasts hanging long and pendulous over skirts wrapped round their midriff. Polygamy. Why did a Baptist minister select this picture to frame?

There were dancers painted to resemble snakes and lions, an initiation ceremony with the initiates beaten by men painted blue. She looked at the next frame. A chill went up her spine and spread ice to her fingertips.

It was the black woman with the white painted face she'd seen twice talking to Autumn. She stared at it, fascinated, absorbing details. Yes, she was exactly the same.

Her long, black hair hung past her shoulders. Her face was painted a ghost white. Beads wound through her hair and around her neck. She wore a white, gauze-like dress wrapped above her breasts and tied with a dark colored scarf. On her arms were scars, six dots arranged three in a row with five sets showing on each arm.

Her bracelet was in the form of a snake and in her hands... Beth squinted, trying to make out the thing cut off by the picture frame. It appeared to be the twin, of the juju in the pocket of her jacket.

Rev. Trintree entered carrying a tray with coffee and cups, startling her.

"Ah, I see you're admiring Mganga."

"I've seen someone dressed like that."

"No doubt. Mganga is a popular Congolese figure. Misunderstood though."

"In what way misunderstood?"

"Europeans and Americans tend to think Mganga or Mfumu is a witch, a bad guy or gal. It can be either sex. Actually he or she is a combination of soothsayer, herbalist, philosopher and psychologist."

"All that?"

"More. She predicts the future, cures the sick, administers tribal justice, casts out evil spirits and avenges crimes against members of the tribe."

"What's in her hand?"

He looked closely. "Um, never noticed that before. That's 'the bones.' The Mganga falls into a trance and throws the bones on the ground. Different bones for different predictions. If it's a crocodile or lion bone and it lands standing up, it means danger. If it's a more friendly animal and it stands erect, it means a successful journey.

"The unfriendly animal is also used to cast a spell on an enemy, to curse him and sometimes his children, too. But the curse must be merited. Mganga is always fair."

"I don't understand."

"It's complicated. The Congolese does not believe in a supreme being. He believes in a creator of the universe, but that creator takes no interest in the affairs of man. What the Congolese reveres and fears is his ancestors, the mizumu, the departed. They must be constantly placated, rendered a sacrifice or they will take over his body."

"You mentioned cursing an enemy."

"If a wrong is done a native, his mizumu can be encouraged to take over the body of the person who wronged him. It's done with the help of a kind of demigod, Lyangombe."

"You almost sound like you take this seriously."

The minister smiled. "I'm a born-again Christian, saved through the grace of Jesus Christ, but in my years in Zaire, I learned there is much overlooked by our narrow view. There is truth our theology can't explain."

"Your congregation, have they returned to the old ways? These services," she pointed to the men painted like snakes, "hardly meet Baptist standards."

Rev. Trimtree threw back his head and laughed. "You're quite right. They kept many of their ways and added my ways. I'm not sure my superiors at the Bible Institute would have approved, but I think we had the best of both worlds."

He paused in thought, smoothing the gray hair over his temples.

"What disturbs me these days about my former flock is their return, not to the old religion, but to a drug, Iboga. It's been around for years. Now there's a cult grown up around its use and it's gaining converts faster than either Christianity or Islam."

Beth reached into her coat, hung from the back of the chair, and brought out the carved bone. She handed it to the minister.

"Excellent example of a curse juju," he said. "Where did you get it?"

"It's a long story. I found it in a cave where my son was lost. It may have been left there by runaway slaves over a hundred years ago. One of my boarders, a Canadian college professor, thinks Octagon House was a station on the underground railroad."

"Very possible. The crocodile carving is very strong magic. Wonder how it got into the cave? The person who owned that would be very sorry to lose it."

"David, that's the professor, thinks the cave connects to the house, that runaway slaves were hidden there. They were brought upriver on barges and taken through the passage from the river to the house. Someone could have dropped it. Or, it might have been deposited there during a flood. Sometimes in the spring the river gets high enough to flood that cave."

"When the palmist came to see me...what is her name?"

"Madam Zora."

"Yes, of course. When she came here," he paused frowning, "looking for an exorcist, she also mentioned that your daughter was acting in a peculiar manner."

"I apologize for Goldora. Her enthusiasm outruns her judgment."

He waved a well-manicured hand. "No need for apology. I know nothing of palmistry or astrology, but I do believe God gives us truth in many different ways. Someday, the puzzle pieces will all fit together—Buddhism, Shintoism, all of it—and we will see the face of God."

"I hope you're right, Reverend"

"What is the problem with your daughter? Do you wish to talk about it?"

"She's returned from a week of tests in the hospital. There's nothing physically wrong with her." Beth hesitated, unsure, then rushed on. "Rev. Trimtree, I think she's possessed by the spirit of a slave girl, Rainy, killed by my great, great, great grandfather more than a hundred years ago on Octagon House estate."

Once she began, the dam broke and the story came flooding out, the diary in the cellar, Autumn's attack on her brother, Zack's suspicions about the curse.

The minister listened intently, nodding at certain points.

"And how is your daughter now?" he asked when she'd concluded her tale.

"Drugged, listless. Once or twice, there have been flashes of the other personality."

"That could be bad. She may be gathering strength for an onslaught"

"You don't seem surprised by this?"

"I've heard it before. I must ask you something."

"I'll answer if I can."

"Could there be a Mlozi, a bad magic practitioner, living at your house. Think carefully now. It could explain a lot."

"Surely not Goldora. She's a fool, but not malicious."

"Don't discount anyone. Is there someone who has a grudge against you, wishes you ill?"

"Not Zack, my handyman. He's like a grandfather to my son."

"He also knows the history of the place and he'd have access to so-called forbidden knowledge."

"And then there's David. He's a puzzle. Says little about his past. Disappears for days with no explanation."

"Anyone else?"

"The Franco brothers left."

"Any of those people have a reason to want to be rid of you?"

Beth frowned thinking. Could any of the people she shared her home with practice black magic without her knowing? Could one of them be encouraging that thing taking over her daughter?

"I don't know," she said at last. "I really don't know."

Chapter 17

Lydia Dorcas raised her lantern and examined the cave for evidence of the intruders. She knew they'd been here. She'd heard them talking about it through the walls.

That dreadful boy followed her and lost his way in the dark. Served him right, poking into what didn't concern him. But now she'd have to rush with her plans. They might stumble onto the passageway to her room. Then, it would be too late.

Such awful people. That woman, the daughter of a *cook*, turning the Vandergeld's home into a boarding house. Disgraceful. Well, the rabble wouldn't destroy Octagon House. Not as long as Lydia Dorcas lived.

A sandstone waterfall was in front of her. Light from her lantern made it sparkle like water in sunshine, a statue of what it once had been.

She slid behind the delicate structure. Her back against the rock wall, she made her way sideways, moving slow, until she came to a low opening. She stooped, entered and began the climb up a long, natural tunnel.

She remembered the day the master showed her the secret room at the end of this tunnel. His own daughters didn't know it existed. How proud she'd been that he told her.

She was sixteen, then, the newest member of a household staff of thirty-five. For her, coming to Octagon House was like stepping into a painting and finding it real. The poverty and brutality of her childhood was left behind, forgotten. She became, if not a fairy princess, a servant of one. The Vandergeld daughters were the wealthiest and most beautiful girls in the state.

Diane and Elaine gave a costume party the night before the master showed her the room. It was because of the dance—and the mouse— she'd been privileged with the secret.

How well she remembered that party. It was the year before the war began, a spring night with a soft breeze blowing from the river. The windows and doors were open. The curved drive in front was lined with shiny motorcars. Everyone of importance in the state came to the Vandergeld's yearly costume ball. Those who came from Des Moines and farther would spend the night.

An orchestra was on the stage in the music room playing Glenn Miller arrangements. Diane was dressed for her namesake, the goddess Diana, white Grecian dress, brown hair piled high on her head with a few strands curling down the back.

Elaine, the older sister, was dressed as a milkmaid. It suited her. She was blonde and pretty but without the depth and intelligence of her younger sister.

Couples walked in the garden enjoying the spring night. Two young men and a girl sat on the steps in the hall drinking champagne and laughing.

When Lydia finished with her kitchen chores, she sneaked around through the parlor and hid behind the curved staircase. From there she could see into the music room,

which was cleared for dancing. Diane was in the arms of a handsome, dark-haired young man.

Lydia, caught up in the music, spun and turned, dipped and bowed in her hiding place, believing for a moment she was Diane.

A mouse ran across her foot. She screamed, startling the guests seated on the stairs, causing them to spill champagne on their expensive costumes.

The next day the master found her in the kitchen and told her to bring the traps and follow him. As the newest kitchen worker, it was her job to set the wooden and wire devices and empty them of their grizzly burden. It had been a hard winter and the field mice sought the warmth of the house. There was no end to them. The more she trapped, the more there were.

The master led her to the hallway, checked to see there was no one else in sight and opened the closet under the stairs, near the spot she'd stood the previous night.

"We're going to solve the mouse problem. Can't have you frightening our guests. Imported champagne's too expensive to pour on the stairs."

Lydia reddened and hid her face in her hands. Emil Vandergeld apologized. He hadn't meant to upset her. He was a kind man, scholarly, gentle, much like Emil, his grandfather, and Emil Jr., his father. At least the older servants said they were alike.

He moved the clothing in the closet aside and passed through a panel that opened on the rear wall. Amazed, she followed him into the large, windowless room.

"I think this is our breeding ground," he said. "Set traps here, but do not tell anyone about the room. It dates from a sad period and it's best forgotten.

Many years later, she thought of the room one day while cleaning. She hadn't entered it in forty years. All that time she'd kept the house spotless and forgotten the space at its heart.

Gathering her mops and brooms, she entered by the door at the back of the closet. While sweeping, she found the ring in the floor. She pulled it and to her surprise, the trap door raised revealing stairs leading down to the cave.

In all the years she lived at Octagon House there was never a ball to equal the costume ball. Soon after, the country was plunged into World War II. The young men who called on the sisters came in uniform. Elaine married one of them, a self-important boy with narrow, pig eyes. The master never liked his son-in-law. She could tell.

The Sunday afternoon musicals became bandage rolling sessions for the ladies of Riverbend. Each week brought news of another young man missing in action.

And something happened between Diane and her father. There were shouts and tears. The servants could not guess at the cause of it. Diane went to live with friends in Canada.

The master's health failed when his daughter left. He seemed to lose his will to live. Diane returned half a year later, but within a few months, her father was dead.

The Mistress reduced the staff, keeping Lydia and a few others. She led a quiet life. Visitors came infrequently. One day after the war ended, she announced to the staff she was moving to California.

It was a miracle. Octagon House was Lydia's. Hers alone.

Rising promptly at six each morning, she began the housework. Summer or winter her routine never varied. Each morning a room was thoroughly cleaned, floors scrubbed, shelves dusted and furniture waxed. Every six months draperies and rugs were dry-cleaned. Pots and silver were polished on Saturday morning.

Once a week, Lydia drove her 1936 Deluxe Ford Sedan to Riverbend for provisions. People smirked when they saw the old car, but as the years passed, their sneers turned to admiration. Her perfectly maintained car had become a classic. At least once a month, someone offered her three times the money she'd paid for it. But she was never tempted.

She still had the car. They'd never find it. Lydia hid it in a locked tumbled down barn. It was sealed in plastic and covered with a pile of rotting wood. Someday it would come out and she would drive it again.

How well she remembered driving the Mistress in that car when she came to Riverbend on her yearly inspection. Lydia would pick her up at the airport and take her on errands around town to see her banker and her lawyer. She knew the locals were amused to see the state's richest woman riding in the ancient car, but it never bothered the Mistress. She sat proud as a queen in the rear seat.

The Mistress's homecomings were the event of the year for Lydia. The house sparkled. The grounds were cut and trimmed to perfection.

It had been a good life, then, before the intruders came. Another woman might have found it lonely, but it suited Lydia. In the evenings when her work was done, she'd go into the study and read from the Master's books.

It was there she'd learned the secrets of witchcraft from many civilizations. She was a clever student as a girl and no less clever as a woman. She quickly saw the similarities, how the magic from many countries was matched and interwoven.

Sometimes she'd drink from the magic potion she'd found, wind up the Victrola and put on a record. A wonderful thing would happen. The music room would once again be filled with voices, dancers in costume and she would be Diane Vandergeld, dressed as the Huntress.

Perhaps she was a huntress. She'd been clever in finding a way to get rid of people. She'd found the tunnel. That was a stroke of good fortune. It allowed her to go in and out as she pleased now. She made trips to town for food and no one ever knew.

Of course, that man chased her the other night. Lucky she was able to duck in the closet and get away from him. She'd have to be more careful when she went out into the house.

She reached the end of the tunnel so lost in reflection she was surprised to find herself at the wooden stairs. She mounted them, raised the trap door and entered the bit of Octagon House that was still hers.

Chapter 18

Autumn accepted the dish Beth pulled from the rinse water and swept a towel over it. Her attention was far away, focused on the snow scene outside the window.

"Mom."

"Um?" Beth looked up from her cauldron of hot, soapy water.

"I shouldn't have acted the way I did when we lived in Chicago. I worried you, going out with older boys and smoking and..."

"What brings that up?"

"I was just thinking..."

She stared out at the white drifts, looking for words. It was quiet in the house. They were alone. David had given Goldora a lift into town to visit friends. Zack was off on a mission of repair somewhere around the estate with Brian in tow as usual.

The alkaline smell of soap crept into Beth's nose, making her scratch it against the shoulder of her sweater.

"Thinking about what, hon?" she prompted.

Did her daughter miss the routine of school? She hadn't complained.

"About dying."

"My, aren't we morbid on such a bright February morning?" Beth teased, hoping she hid the shiver of apprehension that shot through her.

"It's just that sometimes I felt...I still feel...like I have to get it all in, the dates, the things only grownups are supposed to do, because I'm never going to get old enough for those things."

She turned to look at her mother and there were tears in the sapphire eyes.

Beth wiped her soapy hands and put her arms around her daughter.

"Autumn, honey," she rocked her. "You mustn't think such things. It's the medicine making you feel this way. Just a few more weeks. You'll start seeing the doctor. Go back to school. Everything will be fine."

"I don't think so, Mother. I feel something in this house, something getting stronger. I feel it pulling me."

"Autumn, no." She stepped back and looked into her daughter's face, holding her at arm's length.

"Would you like to get away from here for awhile? Stay with your father?"

Damn, Burt, she'd make him take the girl.

Autumn made a sound that tried to be laughter. "Dad? He doesn't want me. He'd never understand. I don't think leaving would help anyway. What's going to happen is going to happen. There's no running from it."

Beth stood for a moment thinking.

"I talked to a man yesterday, a minister. He may be able to help. He seems to understand what's happening to you. I'm going to ask him to come here and see you. All right?"

The girl shrugged. "Sure."

There was the sound of a car pulling around the back of the house. A minute later David came through the kitchen door triumphantly waving a manila envelope.

"It's come," he said, clearly pleased with himself.

"What has?"

"Plans, my dear Beth, house plans."

"You building a house?" Autumn asked without interest.

"No, I'm trying to find out how this one was built."

He removed salt and pepper shakers from the table and spread blueprints across the surface.

"This is the floor plan of an octagon house in Sacramento. It was built almost fifty years after this one, but it's much the same."

"Where did you get it?" Beth asked helping him unfold the layers of flimsy paper.

"Friend of mine. He teaches architecture at UCLA. I described the house and asked him if he could find plans of something like it."

Beth studied the paper until the blue lines and symbols emerged into a pattern of walls, doorways and windows. The house sketched was not identical to hers, but it was similar.

"This one has a full basement and your house has only a half basement. Look at the angle of the walls. They're different than this house. See how each of these rooms comes to a star point in the center. Your rooms don't because there's a space, a fairly big one," he checked the figures he'd jammed into his pocket, "fourteen by fourteen feet, at the center of this house. That's why the exterior measurements don't match with the interior."

"You're right," she said, comparing the blue line house with her own.

"Something else too. I assumed there was only a half basement, because Vandergeld didn't have the technology to blast through rock so he just dug around it. But what if there's an exit under that room leading out to the cave. He couldn't put a basement there."

"Nora Vandergeld talked about a secret room in her diary."

He nodded. "Now if my figures are right, it's diamond shaped. Like this." He drew a diamond across the center of the papers. "The lower corner is under the curved staircase. The upper corner is over the cellar stairs."

"There's got to be a way in from inside the house. If slaves were hidden there, they had to be fed."

"The entrance could be in any of the rooms. Each room shares at least part of a wall with the hidden room."

"Then, let's start looking," Beth said. "Autumn, you finish drying the dishes and put them away."

Autumn nodded. Their excitement did not touch her.

After an hour of searching, knocking, moving heavy furniture, they were back where they started in the kitchen. Beth poured two cups of coffee and sat down across the table from David.

"It's got to be there. It's got to," He slammed a fist on the table, spilling coffee from the mugs.

They sat in silence, thinking. What could they have missed?

"David." Beth's speech was like the slow starting of a train. "I think I've got it. The closet under the stairs. It would touch the room. That's the one place we didn't look."

David left the kitchen so fast he seemed to disappear. She ran after him through the old study and the music room. When she reached the hall closet, he had already begun to throw out storage boxes and mismatched luggage.

At the back of the closet, the roof sloped to accommodate the staircase. Beth stooped under the incline and watched as David ran his hand along the wall facing what they assumed was the hidden room.

He found a loose corner and pulled. A section of light wood fell forward. Beth helped him move it aside. The rear of the closet was open, revealing a space behind.

Beth stepped around David and into the room. A musty smell assailed her nostrils. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the lesser light, wondering why the room wasn't pitch black. There could be no window. Light came from a source she couldn't see.

She looked around and gasped. From floor to ceiling there were walls of furniture and cardboard boxes.

"Holy Jesus," she said to David as he entered. "It's like the inside of a moving van."

A table leg jutted out from the mélange at a precarious angle. Beth looked at the carving and recognized it as the mate to her sideboard. It was the gate-leg table she'd admired the first time she toured Octagon House.

"These things are Lydia Dorcas' inheritance," she said, puzzled.

They edged along the path cleared through the center of the room, making their way sideways past desks piled on end, framed paintings, boxes of yellowing linens, wastebaskets, books, a museum of household goods.

At the far end of the room, space had been cleared for a table. It was set with silver knife, fork, spoon, expensive painted china and a silver goblet. Beside the table was a mattress made neatly into a bed with pillow and bedspread.

A lighted lantern hung on the wall above the table. It was the source of light for the room.

"Someone lives here," Beth whispered.

"Lydia Dorcas," they said in unison, nodding like two puppets on strings.

There was a sound of movement behind the wall of boxes and furniture. A familiar voice said, "And now you invade my home."

Miss Dorcas stepped into the aisle in front of them. She looked much as she had the day Beth first saw her – tall, gray, dignified. But her eyes were red-rimmed and glazed.

She looks insane, Beth thought. She stepped away from the woman, backing into David, who put his arms around her.

Beth tried to speak, but her throat closed and no sound came out. With great effort she finally managed to say, "You're responsible for this?" She gestured at the wall of possessions.

The old woman looked around wild, agitated. She put her hand to her chest as if in pain. "These are the Mistress's things. I care for them."

Understanding dawned. "The noises at night. That was you moving this furniture. *You* rearranged my dishes and linens."

"You placed them incorrectly. It is not the way we do it in Octagon House. The Mistress would be most upset."

"The mistress is dead."

"You don't belong here," she spat at Beth. "You're trash. West-end river-rat trash. You disgrace this house. You must leave."

"The house belongs to Mrs. Davis now," David said, as if he were addressing a child.

"You don't belong here, either. You are not a Vandergeld. You're nothing. Nobody. Get out of the Mistress's home."

David's grip tightened on Beth's arm. She looked down and saw that he was shaking with sudden anger. He shoved her aside and moved closer to Lydia.

"Don't you call me a nobody, old woman."

"It's what you are –nobody."

"What if I told you there's a Vandergeld living in this house?"

Lydia did not retreat. She met his glare. "I would say you are a liar, like the Madam Zora said...bad ears." The woman arched one gray brow and fixed Beth with a meaningful look.

Why, she knows everything that goes on in this house, Beth realized. From this room she could listen to every conversation on the first floor. It took a moment for that implication to sink in, then she realized what David just said.

"What are you talking about, David?" she asked his back. "What do you mean there's a Vandergeld living here?"

He turned and looked at her. His face was red and stiff with rage.

"My name is really David Vandergeld," he said. "I'm Diane Vandergeld's illegitimate son."

Chapter 19

"You lie," Lydia's face was a study in loathing.

"No, I don't, Miss Dorcas. Think back. Remember when Diane went to Canada for six months. It was to give birth to me."

"The Mistress would never..."

"That's where you're wrong. My mother was a human being, not a piece of the furniture of Octagon House like you've made yourself."

"No."

"Yes, Lydia. There was a man she loved, a soldier. He would have married her, but he died in a bombing raid. She didn't even have a chance to tell him she was pregnant."

"But who?"

"I don't know. God knows I've tried to find out."

Lydia's hand was at her throat. She leaned against a crate for support. It was marked "china" in elegant, old fashioned script.

David turned to Beth. She was frozen, staring at him in disbelief. A thousand thoughts raced wildly through her head. Was he conning the old lady? She knew from his solemn expression that he was not.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean for you to learn this way. I lost my temper. I've been called a nobody too often. I just snapped."

"Is it true?" Her voice sounded strange, faraway.

He nodded. "I thought you guessed when that letter came for David Vandergeld."

"No, I didn't guess. I've been quite gullible, a trait I didn't know about 'til I met you, whoever you are."

"Now you're angry. Beth, I'm truly sorry. I should have told you, but I had to be sure. I've got proof now, but I didn't have it until..."

With a cry of rage, Lydia lifted a hook set in the floor. A section of the wood raised and she disappeared down the steps.

"No, you lie," she screamed at them. Her voice echoed back off the walls of the tunnel.

David started after her with Beth behind him. When they were a foot from the trap door, light was snuffed out as if a black cloth were dropped over them.

"No good. There might be drop-offs. Get the lantern."

Beth raced back up the wooden stairs and snatched the lantern from the wall. With its glow leading them, they hurried along the tunnel.

. Ahead, somewhere in the darkness were running steps, then a scream. It hung in the air, then dropped away. "She's fallen. She couldn't see," Beth breathed.

They ran. The man-made tunnel gave way to a natural tunnel that became the cave. The lantern bobbed, making insane shadow patterns on the rock. "David, stop," Beth screamed. A pit loomed before them. The path made a sharp turn to avoid it.

"I think she's down here," David said, holding the lantern out over the void.

Far below, at least three stories, Beth could faintly discern a crumpled form in a house dress.

David swung the lantern to the side. "I think I can make it down that way," he said pointing.

Using natural handholds in the cave wall, he lowered himself into the pit, leaving her alone in the dark. She watched his lighted progress as he moved down the rock face.

Reaching the bottom, he set the lantern down and put his ear to Lydia's chest. He yelled up to Beth:

"Dead. We'd better get the sheriff."

It seemed an eternity until he made his way back up to her waiting arms. Her anger of minutes ago was stored away. They held each other for a long time, saying nothing.

"Poor woman," Beth said at last. "Octagon House was her life. I took the only thing she ever cared for."

Chapter 20

Beth tugged off her calf-length boot and dropped it on the floor by its mate. With a sigh of relief, she placed her stockinged feet on the coffee table and wriggled her toes,

It was near midnight. She wished she could go to bed. The sheriff, his men and Dr. Sherwood still searched the room where Miss Dorcas had lived. They'd been at it since the body was recovered and removed late in the afternoon.

"I wonder why Dr. Sherwood's still here," Beth said, contemplating her wool covered feet.

David looked up from the fireplace where he knelt poking at the logs.

"You don't think he'd miss the biggest event in Riverbend since the high bridge fell down?" he asked.

Beth studied his familiar, handsome face in the light from the fire. This man shared her table and her bed, but he was a stranger. Someone named Vandergeld.

"Who are you, David?" She was surprised to realize she'd spoken aloud.

He replaced the poker and joined her on the couch, looking into her eyes for a long time, while he arranged his words.

"I am David Vandergeld. Those cancelled checks you found in the cellar prove it. They're made out to my foster mother and signed by my mother."

"Your foster mother?"

"Yes, a Canadian woman named Fairchild, a widow. Her family and the Vandergelds were friends for generations, dating back to the time they worked together on the underground railroad. She raised me."

"Didn't she tell you who you were?"

"I was always called Vandergeld, but she was very vague about my background. She died last year. In the hospital, just before the end, she told me about my mother. I went to California to look for her, but I was too late. She'd died a few weeks earlier."

"So you came here?"

He nodded. "I wanted proof. The two people in the world who knew my parentage were dead. I had no birth certificate. Just my foster mother's word."

"So there is no research project?"

"None for publication. When I came here and saw this house, I knew I had to own it. I felt I had a right to it."

"I see."

"But Cousin George had already sold it to you."

"But you were able to move in anyway. How convenient for you."

If he noticed the ice in her voice, he ignored it.

"Once I had those cancelled checks, I started tracking down my past. It's taken me weeks. I've been all over the Midwest, but I have it in writing now. I'm a legal heir."

"All those times you disappeared." She understood at last.

"As far as money is concerned, I was chasing wind." A wry smile. "Cousin George lost no time in going through every penny."

Dr. Sherwood appeared at the door holding a brown bottle in his hand.

"Have you seen this before, Mrs. Davis?"

It looked like an antique beer bottle, the kind collectors dig out of old dumps and display with pride.

"I don't think so. What is it?"

Dr. Sherwood turned the unlabeled bottle in his hand.

"We found it in the room. If it's what I think it is, it may explain your daughter's behavior."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't be sure until tests are run, but it smells like Iboga, a psychedelic drug. If the old woman was administering it to your daughter, it could answer a number of questions."

"Do you think it could be the reason she's been s—strange?" A flicker of hope exploded into flame. Maybe there was an explanation. A rational one.

"It's a root," the doctor explained, "of the Taberranthe Iboga. African. There's a cult grown up around its use in Brazzaville.

"But where would Miss Dorcas get it?"

"I don't know. It might have been in this house. It's been around for centuries and the Vandergelds were renowned experimenters."

"But how could she give it to Autumn?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Davis. I'm not even sure it is Iboga, but it's a possibility."

Brian ambled into the room, yawning.

Conversation ceased.

"Where have you been?" Beth asked him.

"Watching the cops."

"Well, I'm glad you're here. It's past your bedtime. Go find your sister and tell her you're both to go to bed."

"Oh, Mom."

"Go on, scoot."

"Autumn's in the kitchen. She made tea for the cops."

"That was thoughtful," Beth approved.

"Speaking of bedtime," Dr. Sherwood said. "It's past mine, and I'm due at the clinic at seven. I've taken a sample from this bottle. Keep it in a safe place 'til we find out what it is."

He handed her the unmarked container.

"Here, Brian," Beth said, placing it in the boy's hand. "Put this in the cupboard over the sink. On your way to bed."

He left, pouting.

After Beth let the doctor out, she returned to the parlor where David sat, the firelight casting shadows across his face. Once she would have thought him mysterious, but not now. The enigmas of Octagon House seemed to disappear as the moments passed. Still in her stockinged feet, she padded across the rug and slid in next to him on the sofa.

"Have we really come to the end of this?" she asked, snuggling against him.

"I hope so, Beth," he said, putting his arms around her. "There are still unanswered questions."

"I don't care. I feel so happy. I'm even willing to forgive you for lying to me."

She turned her face up to him and he kissed her for a long time. Then, he pulled away and regarded her thoughtfully. "I think I'll have to marry you," he said at last.

"Don't I have a say in this?"

"No." He frowned in mock concentration. "When I came here, I intended to get this house from you one way or another. Now that I know what a determined woman you are, I see it's hopeless. I'll just have to marry the landlady."

"Let's see if I have this straight. You're going to live in Octagon House with me and commute to your classes in Canada?"

"Dear, Beth, ever practical. Is there no romance in your soul?"

"You're a fine one to talk about romance after proposing to me because you covet my house."

"I also covet your pale, white body," he replied, pushing her backward on the sofa, kissing her hard and running his hands along her hips and under her sweater.

"David, cut it out," she shoved him away, laughing. "The children are still up."

His face sobered and he regarded her with intense gray eyes.

"Did I also mention I love you?"

"I wondered if you were going to get to that."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"When you tell a woman you love her, you 'usually get an answer—like 'oh, wow,' or maybe 'I love you, too.'"

"Oh, David, of course, I do. It's just that...well, how would you make a living in Riverbend? There's nothing for you to do here."

"I see we are going to be practical," he said, gliding to the other side of the sofa and folding his hands in an exaggerated manner.

"How does this sound? You want to open a restaurant here. Well, I have some money saved and I think we can borrow more. We'd have a tough go of it the first year, but in the end..."

"You mean it?" She was shouting.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well—that was different. Anyway, I think it would work. With the history of this house, we'd draw people from all over the country."

"And I bet we could get the original furniture, too." Beth was so excited she hopped up and down on the sofa like a child. "After all it's still here in Lydia's hideaway."

Autumn interrupted them. She stood in the doorway, silent, weighed down by an ornate silver tea service.

"I made tea for the policemen. I brought you some."

"Thanks," Beth said, rising to help daughter. "I'm glad you did that. It was a good idea."

She placed the service on the coffee table and poured a cup from a pot decorated with silver grapes and vines entwined in the Vandergelds's favorite—eight.

"I'm going to bed," the girl said, whirling and disappearing from the room.

"Tea?" Beth asked David.

"No thanks. Keeps me awake. I'm going to turn in, too. We'll talk in the morning."

He kissed her.

"David?"

"Minmm?"

"I love you."

He wriggled his nose at her and left without a word.

The scalding tea made her sleepy. Before she'd finished the cup, her eyelids drooped. I'll leave the service here and take care of it in the morning, she decided.

Making her way to the stairs, she placed her hand on the banister for support. The steps seemed to waver in front of her.

"God," she said squinting. "I'm more tired than I thought."

She found her way to her room and fell on the bed without undressing, reminding herself just before sleep took her that it was over now. Tonight there would be no noise. No fear.

And in another part of Octagon House, a hate-filled slave girl made final plans to avenge herself on the descendents of the man who murdered her more than a hundred years ago.

Chapter 21

She woke knowing she was not alone in her room. Her eyes opened to a blur of light and color. The walls of the room pulsed, patterns shifted from yellow to brilliant orange and back again.

A figure stood at the foot of the bed. But it was a long way off. The comforter covering her seemed to stretch for a mile. The form came closer, moving toward her past acres of quilted cotton. It loomed over her.

Beth struggled to focus her eyes. Red, curly hair, a pixy face with a nasty leer. The mouth seemed to swallow the face, then vomit it out again.

"Autumn?"

The figure giggled, taunting, cruel.

This is a dream, Beth told herself. I will tell myself it's a dream and I will wake up.

The face moved closer and Beth saw it was lit by a candle. A blob of hot wax dropped on her arm. It was no dream.

"Rainy," she whispered.

"Hi, white lady. You like Iboga? Make you feel good." Her expression was defiant, tormenting.

Beth shook her head to clear it. The girl laughed.

"You put something in my tea?" Beth's tongue felt thick, immovable.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Cause you an me goin' to a party, down on the dock, Tobbler bitch."

Beth realized the girl held two coats in her hand.

"No."

"Look at me," Rainy commanded and Beth obeyed. The candle in front of her eyes grew to a searchlight, an exploding sun. The heat of it seared her skin.

"You keep lookin' at that candle." Beth tried to pull her eyes away and found that she could not.

"You do as I say. When I say walk, you walk. When I say stop, you stop. Understand?"

"I understand," someone said, and Beth recognized the voice as her own.

"You goin' do just as I tell you to. Now, git outa that bed and put you boots on."

To Beth's amazement, her body responded throwing off the covers and accepting the boots the girl handed her.

"Thas' real good. Now put you coat on. Wouldn't want you goin' to your death with cold." She giggled.

Beth tried to focus on the wardrobe in front of her. It undulated as if made of liquid. The knobs began to swell, covering the cabinet, expanding to fill the room. She screamed and fell back, putting her hands out to keep it away.

"Iboga works good," Rainy said, approving.

Beth's mind framed a question, but she wasn't sure she could ask it. "Miss Dorcas...Iboga...she gave Autumn?"

"Nah, took it herself. Mess up her mind good."

"But how you?"

"How I take over the girl? Easy. She got the gift. Crazy ole lady try magic. Think she Malozi, black magic witch. She do couple things, make house cold, make rocks fall from sky. Like that. Weak magic.

"You didn't need her?"

"Listen, Tobbler. Get this in your head. The second you born, it's sealed. I kill you. Mlozi, no Mlozi, it don't matter

"But?"

"I said enough. I don't haf to tell you nothin'. We goin' to the river now."

Her body moved in spite of her. She followed Rainy down stairs that waved like grain in a breeze. They went through the understairs closet to the hidden room. Rainy lifted the ring in the floor and they went down the stairs and into the cave. Beth, following the girl's candle, felt she'd entered hell. Stalactites and stalagmites, glowing red hot, caught at her. A pit opened in her path then closed again. The nightmare seemed to go on forever.

Cool, fresh air reached her heated face and she knew they were at the mouth of the cave. She looked out over the river shining beneath a full moon. At Rainy's direction, she half slid, half climbed down the ice-covered hill.

"This way, Tobbler," Rainy pointed. "Used to be a dock down here. Thas' where Red Tobbler killed me. Now you die there. Your Tobbler brats, too."

Moonlight slithered through the branches of the winter trees, silvering the snow and tracing black shadows along the path they walked.

At last they came to a clearing in the trees and Beth could see the embankment leading down to the frozen river.

A flash of red to her right caught her eye. With a shock of recognition, she knew it was, Brian, dressed in a red ski jacket and tied with his hands wrapped around his bent knees.

Rainy pushed her down in the snow next to a tree at the edge of the clearing.

"Stay here," she ordered.

The branches above her scratched in the night. Beth looked up. The tree swayed, dipped and reached for her, the limbs clawing hands of some foul creature with neon eyes. She stifled a scream, throwing herself flat on the snow and covering her head with her arms. She closed her eyes and forced herself to relax. It was not real. In a minute, it would go.

She opened her eyes to snow and shadows. Nothing more.

She must think, try to clear her mind of the drug that muddled her reason.

Rainy stood in the center of the clearing twenty feet away. She wore Autumn's! outgrown jacket. The sleeves were so short, her forearms shown white in the moonlight. I should have bought a new jacket, Beth thought. Meant to do that. The child shouldn't be outside in a coat too small. For Autumn? For Rainy? Rainy-Autumn? A rainy autumn means a cold winter.

Stop it, Beth. Keep your mind in check. It was so hard to think. And it was all so unfair. Tears formed in her eyes when she thought of the unfairness.

Rainy changed as Beth tried to focus on her. She drew in the snow with a long stick. Eights. The girl drew figure eights over and over, swaying her body from side to side, front to back, dancing along the lines until she became the figure she drew. Faster and faster she moved, a blur against a field of white.

It was an evil, unnatural thing she did. It must be stopped. She must protect...who? Brian. She remembered.

"Brian." She tried to stand, but the force binding her would not allow it. How awful for Brian, tied alone in the dark. How she hated that thing dancing in the snow. She would hurt it, kill it. But it's Autumn, too, she reminded herself. Try to think straight. It's the only chance you have. _

Rainy stood still. She was silent, head thrown back, listening. She seemed to be waiting for something.

A chill wind blew across the ice bringing with it a wisp of fog. As the gray film drew close to the bank, it thickened, took form. For a moment it seemed to hang near Brian on the embankment, as if unsure. Then it moved forward to Rainy and encircled her, blotting her from Beth's view.

It swirled, changing from gray to pink. And a human shape stepped from the mist.

It's the drug, Beth told herself. Stare at your hand and when you look up it will be gone. She studied her hand, which to her relief remained a hand only, slightly red from the cold, the nails broken.

She looked up. The figure was still there beside Rainy. It was the Mganga, the one she'd seen in the yard and in the picture on Rev. Trimtree's wall.

The woman wore the same flowing white dress, her shoulders bare. The pair came toward Beth, seeming to float across the snow. They stood over her, the Mganga's white-painted face ghostly in the moonlight, staring down.

"I am the Mganga," she said in accented English.

"Stand in the presence of Mganga," Rainy ordered, raising her palm as if directing a puppet.

Beth stood and nearly fell. Her feet were numb with cold, her muscles cramped from lack of movement. How long had she been here? A minute? Hours? If she could just get her mind to function.

The woman raised her painted face to the moon. She touched her ears and eyes as if it might help her to hear or see.

"Do you know of the Mizumu?" She looked into Beth's face with dark, intent eyes.

"Spirit of the departed ancestors? Yes." To her surprise, her tongue spoke clearly.

"Your Mizutnu are close. They would help you."

The Mganga turned to Rainy. "I am puzzled," she said, "by the presence of those who've gone before. Why should her white ancestors interfere with our ways?"

"Her Mizumu not all white, revered one. Tobbler's half-black son with him the night he kill me. His Mama a slave"

"So," said the Mganga, "black blood comes down the generations. It flows in the veins of all her Mizumu. They seek help for her, but there is no help. Dying curse, most binding magic."

Beth looked around wondering if she might see the Mizumu. There was nothing but moonlight on snow and shadows. And yet, she did feel something. A breath on her cheek, a whisper on the breeze. "Help you. Help you." There *was* something there.

"Fetch the boy," Mganga ordered.

Rainy disappeared over the embankment -and returned with a frightened, silent Brian.

"As it was, it is," the Mganga proclaimed, raising her hands to the moon. She swirled, her long dress spraying snow. She retraced her steps to the middle of the clearing and stopped at the spot where the eights were drawn. Turning toward Beth, she folded her arms as if waiting for a performance to begin.

"Mother, discipline your children," Rainy said, looking deep into Beth's eyes.

Beth understood. It was her duty. The boy had been bad. He must be punished. She looked down at her son cowering in the snow. How like his father he looked. She'd never noticed. Well, she'd beat Burt out of him. Best thing in the world for him. It was clear now. She'd never touched her children in anger. And that's what was wrong with them.

First Brian, then Autumn. She'd beat Rainy out of Autumn. So simple. Why hadn't she seen it before? It was the only way.

She examined the tree behind her looking for a dead limb. She pulled at several before she found one sturdy enough for the job. She hung on it for a moment with all her weight. The brittle wood gave way, falling to the ground with a muffled crash like a dropped cantaloupe.

Beth picked up her club, weighing it in her hands with satisfaction.

"Come here and take your punishment like a man, you sniveling coward," she sneered at Brian.

The boy froze for a moment, unbelieving. Then, he turned and ran through the trees, Beth after him.

The snow was too deep for his short legs and she was soon behind him. She raised the club and struck. He ducked and she hit a tree trunk, scarring the bark and scattering wood chips over the snow.

The boy whimpered and that enraged her.

"I'll beat that out of you," she yelled.

Brian looked back at her as he ran. A tree root was in front of him and he tripped, sending him sprawling in the snow. He looked up at her, tears shining on his cheeks.

"Now I've got you," Beth said, raising the club to take aim at her son's head.

Chapter 22

"Help her. Help her," the dream voice urged. He ran down corridors of white light, across a field, between the singing cars on the highway. The scene shifted. He was back in the village in Zaire. But it was changed.

There was snow. How could there be snow in the tropics? The thatched huts were heavy with it. His church was like a Christmas card scene.

"Find her. You must," the voice demanded.

He took the path through the woods to the river. Ahead in the clearing, he found what he sought. The woman was wrapped in fish net, unable to move. He came closer and peered into her face. Her expression was so agonized he woke with a start.

Rev. Trintree sat up in his bed dragging himself into consciousness. Light from the full moon streamed through the window and fell across the quilt.

The woman in the dream was Beth Davis. An icicle of warning crept along his neck. There was something in the air, something familiar. It didn't belong here in his tidy home in Riverbend, Iowa. It belonged to those nights in the hut in Zaire, lying awake, listening beside his sleeping wife. He'd known on those nights his flock worshipped another god. They were out there in the moonlight in a forest clearing. A trial was underway.

He felt it now, the psychic current, the familiar tug at the soul. The day he entered Octagon House he'd known it was coming. The atmosphere there was charged, a wire pulled taut to breaking. When he left, he'd looked up. He saw the girl pushing her brother over the roof, struggling with her mother.

And he'd prayed to be spared what he now must do.

"Dear God, don't let me be too late," he prayed aloud as he left the warmth of his bed and started dressing.

The road to Octagon House was like driving on a winter lake. The sunshine had melted a veneer of snow that day, and when the sun disappeared, the water had frozen. He moved at a crawl.

When at last he pulled into the curved drive at the front of the house, he jumped impatiently from his car and ran up the front steps. He yanked the screen door open, crossed the porch and pounded on the carved oak door. The sound seemed to boom inside the house. There was no answer.

He continued to knock. When he feared his fists would turn to bloody meat, he heard someone call to him. A black man about his age came around the corner of the building.

"Rev. Trintree," the man recognized him through the screen. "What you doin' poundin' on the door in the middle of the night?"

"I've got to find Mrs. Davis. She and the children are in trouble."

"The house is locked up for the night."

"It's all right," he said, remembering the dream. "She's not in there anyway. I was hoping to find someone in the house to help me. Mrs. Davis is somewhere in the snow by a river, I think."

"How you know?"

"I dreamed it," he said, feeling like a fool.

To his surprise Zack nodded, seeming to accept a nightmare as a logical reason to drive in the black of a frozen night to pound on doors of acquaintances.

"I think she and the children are under psychic attack. It's hard to explain."

Zack nodded again. "By the river? Come on. I'll show you the way."

They tramped between the trees over the crusted snow.

"You think Rainy's back?" Zack asked.

"Rainy?"

"Little slave girl killed a long time ago. She's got the body of Mrs. Davis's girl. Mrs. Davis thinks old Dorcas caused the trouble. Me...I figure Rainy just waitin'. She be back."

"Is the girl a psychic?"

"Yeah, she got the gift all right. Poor thing. Ain't her fault her great, great, how many granddaddy's the most evil bastard ever rode this river."

"I was told there's a dying curse."

"Thas' the story. My granny told it to me that when I was just a shaver. Guess she told it right."

"That's bad. There's only one way to break a dying curse. If someone from the tribe of the person wronged offers his life for the cursed person's."

"I guess that don't happen too often."

"The members of Rainy's tribe have all been dead for years."

"No more talking," Zack said. "We're coming close to the bank."

They made their way among the trees attempting to be quiet. Boots crunching in the snow seemed loud as rifle fire. As they rounded a curve in the trail, Trimtree saw a movement ahead of them. It was the woman, a club in her hand ready to strike at something on the ground.

"Miz Davis," Zack yelled. "What you doin'?"

He ran toward her. She turned an angry face at him.

"Go away," she screamed.

He reached for her and she swung the club at him. Trimtree grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her.

"Stop it," he ordered, trying to wrestle the club from her. Her strength was surprising. He slipped a leg behind her knee and managed to throw her to the ground. He landed on top of her.

Zack scooped up Brian and held him. The boy shivered in fear and clung to the old man's neck.

"I have to punish him. I have to," Beth screamed. She pounded her fists on the ground. Trimtree had barely the strength to hold her down.

"I have to beat it out of him. It's the only way." she sobbed, kicking with her feet like a child in a tantrum.

There was a sound behind them. The men turned to face the Mganga.

"It is sad you interfere," she said. "This is not your crime. Now you die, too."

She turned, swirling her robe in the snow and disappeared into the trees. It did not surprise Trintree when his feet, acting on their own, followed in her wake.

Chapter 23

She hoped to die soon. She'd tried to kill her son, would have killed her daughter. If not death, she wanted madness. Perhaps she was mad already. Perhaps this scene in the clearing by the river was only in her mind.

She was once again seated in the snow, her back against the tree. Rev. Trimtree and Zack stood where Rainy had drawn figure eights. Brian clung to Zack's hand. Facing them, stood the Mganga her head thrown back, moonlight playing on her painted face. Rainy stood to the side, alert eyes watching every movement.

Mganga spoke to Zack, breaking the silence: "Nigger, what you do here? This none of your affair."

"I work for this woman."

"You her slave?"

"There are no slaves. I'm her friend."

"It is not possible. The white race is master, not friend."

Trimtree spoke: "The Vandergelds were friends to the girl. They tried to help her get away to freedom in Canada."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a minister."

"What you say of the Vandergelds is so, but they did not save her. They did not punish her killer."

"There was nothing they could do. Her killer broke no law."

"White demon's law," Mganga sneered. "Lyangombe avenges."

"Lyangombe has avenged. This woman's family is gone, wiped out every one. She and the children are all that's left."

"When they die, curse is complete."

"Mganga, are you not called judge, the just one?"

"I am so called."

"The God I serve is also just. And merciful. I propose a bargain in his name. My life for the life of this woman and her children."

"It is not allowed."

"Does not the law say a tribesman may sacrifice himself?"

She fixed him with a curious gaze. His knowledge seemed to surprise her.

"It is possible, where Lyangombe allows."

"Then, I offer my life for theirs."

"No," the woman said. "You are not of her tribe. You are a white man."

Zack dropped Brian's hand and took a step toward Mganga. "Then take my life," he said.

"You would give your life for this family?" she asked.

"Yes," Zack said, staring into her eyes.

"You are not of her tribe."

"Maybe I am. I'm descended from slaves of the Congo. I don't know what tribe."

The woman considered it. She turned her white face to the moon for guidance.

"We will consult Lyangombe," she said at last, reaching into a fold of her dress.

She took out the leg bone of a goat, a juju identical to the one Beth found in the cave.

"If the bone lands on its side, Lyangombe says 'no.' If it stands on end, he accepts your bargain."

She closed her eyes and turned her face to the moon, holding the hand containing the juju stiff in front of her.

"Lyangombe, mighty hunter, all powerful being, help me, your loyal servant, to be just."

Sound died. The river ceased its faraway babbling. The night froze. She dropped the bone, her face still to the sky.

The juju rolled across the snow, seeming to have a life of its own. It landed flat on its side.

"No," Zack rasped, willing it to move. "Turn, turn." He clenched his fists and shook them at the bone.

And the juju moved. One end sank into the snow and it stood up as if pulled by a thread.

Mganga turned her face from the moon, and looked down at the juju standing in the snow.

"It is done," she said. "Lyangombe accepts your life."

"No," screamed Beth, the gravity of the decision reaching her, even in her stupor. "You can't do it."

Zack turned and walked the few yards to the place where she sat. He took her white hand in his black one and looked into her face.

"You a kind lady, Miss Beth. I glad you got the house. There's a thing 'bout me you don't know. I come home to die."

"What?"

"Yes'm. I got a cancer gnawing at my belly. You let me live out the time left to me in the place I belong. Now you let me do this for you and the young 'ens."

"His death will be painless and merciful," the Mganga pronounced to the clearing.

"You hear that?" Zack said, his face breaking into a pattern of smile lines.

"That's a better deal than I expected."

"So be it," said the Mganga, stretching out her hand.

The grin still on his face, Zack sank to the ground next to Beth and lay dead in the snow.

"No," Beth sobbed, getting to her knees beside him. She cradled his head in her arms.

"It is done," said the Mganga. She turned to Rainy and put a hand on the girl's shoulder. For the first time her stern face relaxed and took on a look of warmth.

"And now, my child, it is time to rest. The day for you has been long."

She spun her white gown around her, spraying snow. The snow turned to mist, rose and floated out over the river. She was gone.

A second later, the ghostly form of Rainy in long braids and torn dress stepped away from Autumn. For a second, it looked back at her wistfully. It hung for a space in the night air. Then, it became fog and moved out over the frozen water.

Sound returned.

From far away over the ice came the gurgling of the river. A breeze set the bare branches to clicking. Somewhere among the trees, a hoot owl called.

Chapter 24

Beth opened her eyes to sunlight. She blinked several times to focus and realized David was seated on her bed.

"Good morning," he said. "We thought you were going to sleep through the day."

"Oh, David," she said, remembering. "How good to be home in my own bed. I didn't think I'd ever see morning again." She frowned, confused. "How did I get here?"

"The minister and the children dragged you back. You were flying at 20,000 feet with no plane. I got Dr. Sherwood. He gave you a shot of Vitamin B3 to bring you down and some tranquilizers to lighten the blow when you hit."

"Bet the doctor was delighted to come for the second time in one night?"

"It was near morning by the time we got back." His face sobered, "You know Zack is dead?"

She nodded.

"Sherwood said it was a stroke. Called it a blessing; I guess Zack had cancer. The doctor'd been giving him pain pills, but it was reaching the point where the pills didn't help. He only had a few more weeks to live."

"He never told us."

"Sherwood took the Iboga with him. He suggested you be more careful what you drink in the future."

Beth raised her eyebrows and chuckled. "I intend to. Are Brian and Autumn all right?"

"They're fine. They're downstairs making a mess of the kitchen." He paused, brushed a stray curl from her face. "Now are your questions answered?"

"I guess so."

"Will you answer mine?"

"Okay."

"What in the hell is going on?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "You missed all the excitement, didn't you? I wish I had. All I'm saying for now is it's over. Rainy's gone. It's going to take the rest of my life to sort it all out."

"When you're ready to start sorting, I'll be here to help. Which reminds me, we'd better set a date for the wedding. Rev. Trintree says Riverbend is tsk-tsking over our sharing the same roof without benefit of clergy."

"Riverbend must be the last outpost in the world where people even care about such things."

"It seems Goldora spread the word our relationship is more than landlady and tenant. With everything that's happened here, the sooner we stop the talk, the better. Trintree offered to do the honors."

"My thanks to Rev. Trintree—for a lot of things."

There was the sound of small feet pounding up the staircase. Brian burst into the room and slid to a halt. He stared at his mother, remembering, frozen in place. Then, he shook it off.

"You feeling better, Mom?"

"Much better. We'll talk about what happened later, okay? For now, it's over. Let's just remember that. It's never going to happen again."

"Okay," he agreed.

"You want something?"

"Yeah, you gotta' stop Autumn."

A prickle of fear traced its way up her spine. She dug her nails into her palms and fought for calm.

"What's wrong?" The question was a whisper.

"She ate the last two slices of bread and now I don't get any toast. She did it on purpose, too."

Beth collapsed in relieved laughter and lay back on the bed, while Brian looked at her in confusion.

More running feet on the stairs and Autumn came into the room wearing a robe. Her red hair was still uncombed from the night.

"Brian, you rat fink," she addressed her brother, ignoring the adults. "I was just teasing you. There's more bread in the freezer,"

She put her arm around her brother and pushed him in the direction of the door. "You shouldn't come up here and bother Mom and David when they're talking about getting married."

Beth and David stared at her wide-eyed.

"How did you know that?" David asked.

Autumn shrugged, unconcerned. "Come on, you little creep. I'll fix you some toast. Cinnamon toast?"

"Yeah," Brian agreed, his eyes lighting in anticipation. Autumn closed the door behind him.

Giggles on the stair and they were alone again.

"I never thought I'd be so delighted to hear normal bickering."

"You've been through a lot," he said, taking her in his arms and kissing her forehead.

She pulled away and looked into his face. "David, do you remember that night in the motel when we met and you told me about the figure eight?"

He nodded.

"I remember you said 'eight represents the eternal and spiral motion of cycles. It is the ending and the new beginning.' "

"Did I say that?"

'Indeed you did. I was terribly impressed. It sounded so...poetic.'

"I'm not surprised. I'm impressed myself. All I remember is that this gorgeous blonde met me at the door and I was so taken with her that I rambled on and on to cover my nervousness." He thought for a moment, running his finger along the line of her jaw.

"Octagon House plunged us into the evil of the past, but it can be a new beginning for us too, Beth."

Her agreement was silent. She tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him down on the bed next to her.

The new beginning began.