

Mirror Me



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by

Yvonne Navarro

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ebook design
by
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In no particular order,
thank you to:

My Dad, Martin Cochran

Weston Ochse

Rain Graves

Dimitri Gennetti

Don VanderSluis

Brian A. Hopkins

David McKoy and Patrick Kelly
of the Chicago Fire Department

Richard Glasser of the Chicago Police Department

Anne Lesley Groell

Prologue

The things they did in the dark to the baby were unspeakable.

The older one had been watching crime shows on television, and so he knew about things like fingerprints and bits of skin that might be found under fingernails. It was high summer in the poorer part of Cicero, Illinois, hot and green, and beneath the heavy, pre-thunderstorm clouds and the whine of insects buzzing in the humid air, everything around the yard was open-- the garage, the rickety gardening shed, the side door to the house. They'd gone scavenging in secret and picked up things like a couple of sets of dirty gardening gloves, rusty trimming shears, a hand-sized hoe-fork, a partially used roll of duct tape and a flashlight from the garage. Then, while the mother was in back hanging the wash on the line-- trying to save electricity and keep the ancient dryer from dumping more heat into the small, shabby house-- they went into the house and took the eighteen-month-old girl from her crib.

And when they saw that the mother had left the five-year-old girl to watch over the toddler...

Well, they took her, too.

Nineteen Years Later

*Friday
September 29th...*

He is waiting for the woman in the hallway of her building when she gets home.

It is, he thinks, as if the universe has conspired to make this, his little act of revenge, easy for him. The building where she lives is an old brick three-flat and her apartment is on the second floor, but he is not concerned with that. What he does find helpful is the foyer, which is shallow but wide, with a deep, handy "blind spot" on each side of an entry door that only has glass in the top half and bears a lock that is pathetically easy for him to slip. There are heavily frosted windows to each side of the door, but they aren't wide enough to cause any problem-- he can easily stand beyond where his shadow might show against the outside glass.

His emotions are a mixture of cool calculation and anger... no, rage. It expands and contracts inside him like a red spider working long, prickly legs every time he hears the words she said to him on the telephone that last time--

"Listen, you lying son-of-a-bitch, because this is the last time I'm going to tell you this. Don't call me, don't talk to me, don't even *think* about me. If I pick up the phone and it's you just one more time, I'm going to call the police. They'll take care of you once and for all."

--and then the red spider inside him actually bites down, filling him with venom at the memory of the final words she said before she slammed down the phone--

"I don't know you, and I don't want to. You are one sick fuck."

No, he thinks as the door opens and she comes inside, you don't know me at all. The door eases shut behind her and she is looking toward the mailboxes on the west side of the foyer, so she doesn't see where he waits a few feet away, like a giant, silent version of the vicious spider inside his mind. There will be a second or two when the spider, this dark, vengeful side of himself, is visible to all in the window of the entry door, but that cannot be helped. The mailboxes have doorbells below each and he must move her to avoid the chance that she will slap her hand against one of them as he performs his task.

Keys in hand, she is reaching for her own mailbox when he darts forward and clamps his left hand hard across her mouth. Her keys drop as he drags her backward and spins her toward the interior entry, bending low to avoid the window in the door behind him, using her body weight and momentum to slam her against the wall on the opposite side. There is a narrow wooden table there and the jarring movement bounces it away from the wall and leaves an eighteen-inch space; she is too stunned to resist as he forces her to bend over the tabletop, pressing against her from behind as he shoves her head and shoulders down and into the gap, keeping her pinned against the wall. He lets go of the back of her head, quickly reaches into the deep right pocket of his black windbreaker, and brings out his weapon. The knife is a beautiful K2K Folder with a drop point and a serrated edge, slightly more than two and a half inches of deadly stainless steel blade. Revenge would be, as they say, a much sweeter thing if he had the time to enjoy it; he does not and so without wasting any more movement he reaches under her neck and draws the blade left to right across her throat.

She thrashes and goes deeper into the space, voiceless, and he holds her there, keeping the spray of blood directed toward the left outside corner of the foyer and away from his clothes, sees it splatter against the wall like an abstract scarlet painting. Warmth covers his hand, seeping through the heavy latex glove he's stretched up and over his wrist to protect the cuff of his windbreaker. When

her struggling stops, he lets her fall, not caring about the awkward position of her body or the leather purse that drops to the side of it. He backs away, pleased when he sees that he hasn't stepped in any blood and so he won't have to use the bottle of ammonia in his other pocket to wash away any footprints. There is an arc of ruby-colored liquid climbing across the wall and ending midway on the east pane of frosted glass, so he wipes the blade of his knife with the gloved, bloodied fingers of his left hand and puts it away, then reaches up with his right and loosens the dim, bare bulb overhead.

The foyer drops into darkness and he stands at the door for a moment, studying the sidewalk out front. It is dark and comforting, lined with thick-leaved maples that rustle in the pleasant fall evening and scatter the already weak glow of the overhead streetlights. No one is out there and he quietly pushes the door open and slips onto the porch, quickly stripping the latex gloves inside out and pocketing them before descending the stairs and strolling, unconcerned, to where he's parked his car beneath the elevated train tracks only a block to the west.

f f f

The trauma team at Illinois Masonic Medical Center was waiting when the Chicago Fire Department ambulance, lights flashing and siren screaming, careened into the driveway and lurched to a stop beneath the protective overhang at the entrance to the emergency room. The men and women-- two doctors and two trauma nurses-- were experienced and capable, and no one among them had been with the group for less than a year, plus they'd gotten a heads up from the driver, so they all knew what was coming, had all the equipment ready.

That she was alive, still, was a shock.

"Female, early twenties, knife wound to the throat!" one of the EMTs shouted as he and his partner propelled the Gurney out of the back of the bus and into the half dozen reaching hands. There was blood everywhere, and beneath an oxygen mask the victim's face was as white as the marble cross that hung in the chapel in another wing of Illinois Masonic. Over the past several years, Dr. Ireta Tansey had

seen that cross many times, *too* many, and she had also seen this young woman before.

"Ready the suture tray," Dr. Tansey ordered. As the patient was rushed into the ER, she paused only long enough to shoot a question back to the paramedics who stood stripping off blood-soaked gloves and looking disgusted at the mess inside their vehicle. "ID?"

The older one jerked his head toward a police car swinging over to the curb at street level. "Randall's got it."

The doctor gave a crisp nod. "Tell him to bring it in, stat. This girl's been here before and we can look up her records, save time on the blood type."

He turned and headed toward the cop as she slammed back through the ER doors and followed the trail of blood into chaos.

The trauma team had put the woman in the crash room, on the right and closest to the entrance. Everyone was moving at once, juggling IVs, hooking up blood pressure and pulse sensors, hands changing off holding a wad of scarlet-soaked gauze in place over the gaping, happy-mouth of a wound that nearly circled her throat as tasks were switched back and forth.

"Pulse is fifty-nine, respiration is steady, and blood pressure is holding at... one-twenty over seventy?" Jeremy, one of the trauma nurses, scowled. "What the-- that *can't* be right!"

Before the doctor could make her way up to the examination table, everyone in the room just... stopped. And stared.

"Move your asses, people," Dr. Tansey snapped as she strode forward. "Unless you want this girl to bleed to death in front of you!"

"I don't think so, doctor," said Camila, the other nurse. Still, at least the others were moving again, if only to step forward and peer at the ivory-skinned girl lying quietly on the table. The other doctor, a young man named Sajag Bharat, looked back and forth from the monitors to the patient, then cautiously lifted his gloved hand from her throat. It came away filled with sopping red gauze, but

there was no fresh red pulse behind the material. "She's stopped bleeding on her own."

"*What?*" Dr. Tansey scooted in closer and leaned over the victim. The cut on her throat was fresh and deep, the edges separated enough to show muscle and the thin, creamier-colored layer of adipose tissue. If it hadn't been for the steady *beep-beep-beep* of the heart monitor, Tansey would have thought the girl was dead-- at least that would have explained the abrupt halt of the blood flow.

"Her name is Hannah Danior," the charge nurse called from the doorway. Dr. Tansey glanced over and saw the older woman flipping rapidly through a bunch of cards obviously just handed to her by a policeman a few feet away. "Here-- she's got an IM card. I can pull up her data on the computer." She shoved the rest of the cards back into the policeman's hands and disappeared down the hallway.

Dr. Tansey straightened, feeling the gazes of the rest of the team. She knew what to do next, of course, but for the first time in her career she couldn't explain what had just happened on the examination table in front of her.

"Maybe it wasn't as deep as we thought," Jeremy suggested. He sounded as unconvinced as she was, but at least it gave them all something to grasp, a lifeline in the midst of inexplicability.

Dr. Tansey stared at the young woman, her eyes narrowing. Yeah, even without the records pulled up, she remembered this patient. It had been awhile, back in the spring perhaps, but recollections like that didn't die easily in someone trained to hang onto the most minute of details, and when she brushed the girl's hair away from her jaw line, the doctor's memory was confirmed.

"Stitch her up," she said abruptly. She pulled off her gloves and tossed them into the waste receptacle, then pushed back the strands of streaked blond hair that had fallen across her own forehead. "Make sure she's stable and have her transferred... into the psych wing."

f f f

"Welcome to another exciting Friday night."

As he climbed the steps of the apartment building, Detective Greg Jedrek raised one eyebrow at the nearly light-hearted sound of his partner's voice. Maybe it wasn't going to be so bad, he thought... then again, a homicide was a homicide, and what could ever be good about something like that? When Greg didn't say anything in response, Tony Rutland regarded him impassively. The blue bubble lights atop the three squad cars parked in front cut across Tony's face at half-second intervals. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Got my taste of that Friday night spirit you're so excited about," Greg retorted. "It's called DePaul traffic. Must've spent fifteen minutes stuck on Fullerton between Clark and Lincoln-- nobody gives a damn about lights and a siren anymore."

Tony nodded, then stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He jerked his head toward the porch of a small brick apartment building at the end of the short walkway behind him, where a couple of uniformed cops stood unhappily flanking the entrance. Dim light bled out of the doorway and lit two murkily-textured windows on either side of the door; something dark was streaked in a semi-circle across the one on the left. "Well, wait'll you get an eyeful of what's up there," he said as he ran a hand through his hair. "I bet it makes you wish you were still sitting on Fullerton and listening to the radio."

Greg bit back a sharp reply and shouldered past the older man, who made no move to follow. "Aren't you coming?" Greg finally asked as he paused on the last step.

Tony shook his head and one corner of his mouth turned up in a vaguely cruel smirk. "No, thanks. I've already seen enough to make me blow dinner. Your turn, farm boy. Enjoy."

Greg turned back toward the entrance to the building and said nothing despite his annoyance. What was the use in arguing? Some people were just how they were. Tony wasn't that much older than him but he'd been on the job here in Chicago a lot longer, had been exposed to levels of brutality that Greg would readily admit hadn't been found in his hometown of Grinnell, Iowa. Maybe it was the job that had made Tony the way he was, a young guy who radiated the same emotionally-dead spirit that Greg had so despised in his own

father. In a comparison like that, Tony came out the winner-- at least he had a reason for the way he was; Boyd Jedrek had made a lifetime career out of turning away from his wife and children, fine-tuning the art of cold-shouldering his loved ones.

The beat cops by the door nodded to him and stepped aside as Greg moved toward the entry door. He frowned when he saw it was open but there were no telltales smears of print dust on it.

"Evidence techs are on the way," one of the uniforms told him before he could ask. "I don't know what they'll be able to salvage, though-- the lady who lives on the third floor found the victim, said she had her hand all over that knob when she opened the door. The light was out, too, but she reached up and tapped it with her newspaper and it came on. That's when..." He shrugged.

"Damn it," Greg muttered under his breath. Louder, he said, "What else?"

The older of the two took a deep breath. "Female, middle twenties. We can't tell from the position of the body, but the amount of blood makes it look like her throat was cut. Her clothes are intact and her purse is still inside." He jerked his head toward Tony, still standing and smoking calmly at the foot of the porch. "Rutland already snapped a couple of Polaroids, but nobody's moved anything."

"The woman upstairs-- she found her?"

The policeman nodded. "The victim's name is Eloise Addison. The neighbor was a friend of hers, so she's pretty freaked. Couple of the guys are up there with her now. Rutland said you'd do the interview."

Greg nodded. Yeah, Tony would have left it to his softie partner to question the crying witness-- which was fine with Greg. If there was ever a classic good cop/bad cop twosome, they sure filled it; too bad they didn't actually get along and make it a perfect match. "I'll get to her in a minute," he said, and toed open the door.

As places to off someone went, this had been a good choice-- very little visible from the outside and plenty of space to work with

inside. He watched where he was stepping, but the killer had made a clean exit and there were no footprints to worry about. On the floor beneath the mailboxes was a set of keys, and it didn't take much brainpower to guess the victim had been about to open her mailbox when she'd been grabbed from behind. He could see a line of envelopes behind the slots of the box marked ADDISON. She hadn't made it that far and had probably been grabbed and pulled to the other side so she couldn't ring any of the bells.

Greg ground his teeth, then turned to look at the other end of the foyer.

At first he didn't register what he was looking at, then Greg realized what the murderer had done. Mindful of the pool of blood around the small, wooden table over which the corpse was bent, the detective stepped closer. There wasn't much he could see until the body was moved, and they wouldn't do that until the techs got here and bagged the victim's hands, dusted the keys and the other surfaces in the foyer. Lying on its side in the blood beneath the table was a black leather handbag, its zipper closed and clotted with blood-- no robbery motive here. Eloise Addison's skin was a dull, bled-out gray and her eyes were slightly open; she'd had her hair, long and dark, twisted into some kind of a chignon and part of it had come loose and was now covering most of her face. From what Greg could tell, the dead woman was wearing an expensive navy blue business suit under a lightweight London Fog trench coat; the coat had gotten tangled to the right when her head and upper body had been forced between the table and the wall. Her skirt and stockings were still intact and tear-free, so there'd been no rape. The atrocity that had been committed here had gone down fast and, for what it was, neat.

The inside door on the right was slightly open and beyond it Greg could see a stairway leading up. He nudged the door with his shoulder so he could get inside, though he knew the neighbor had probably turned the doorknob when she'd run to her apartment to call the police. The detective climbed the stairs slowly, his mind turning over what he'd seen so far. No robbery, no rape, no break-in. What was the motive here?

When he got to the third floor landing, that door was also open so Greg walked inside without knocking. It was a nice place and

probably had the same layout as the victim's directly below, but they'd have to contact the landlord to let them in before they could look around down there-- that was standard procedure, and no doubt one of the uniforms had already called. He was standing in a living room that had been painted a cheerful yellow to complement a feminine-looking living room set. Vases with silk flowers were set here and there amid lots of floral paintings and china and crystal knickknacks, Victorian lace curtains and embroidered pillows. Nice place but it made him nervous; he wasn't a big man, but he felt like he could move the wrong way in here and break something without even trying.

He heard voices down the hall and turned that way, followed an oak-floored hallway to a kitchen that could have come right out of a Martha Stewart magazine. More yellow-- lots of it-- trimmed with a generous motif of tiny pink and white roses. A border of the stuff encircled the room at the juncture of the wall and ceiling and on one wall hung a four foot square cabinet with an exhibit of collectible miniature teapots and matching plates. The counters showed off an assortment of carefully placed cookie jars and serving dishes in colors that matched the kitchen and the ruffled, painfully floral curtains at the windows. By the time Greg's brain had taken in all this, he'd resigned himself to dealing with someone his grandmother's age.

But the woman who sat clutching a cup of tea at the table was only a few years older than the victim, in her mid-thirties at the most. Built a little round at the edges, her attractive face was pale and streaked with tears below a messy head of reddish curls that fell to her jaw line and she'd thrown a dainty crocheted sweater over a ribbon-trimmed dress that Greg wasn't surprised to see was in another heavily flowered pattern.

When he saw Greg, one of the officers in the kitchen stepped forward. "This is Mary Kidman," he said. "She found the victim."

"Eloise," Mary Kidman said. Her voice was a little loud and brittle, like little pieces of wood being shaken in a bag. "Her name was *Eloise*. She was my best friend."

Ow, thought Greg, but Mary didn't lose it. "I'm sorry," he said simply, then squatted in front of her. "I'm Detective Jedrek. Can you tell me what happened here?"

Mary shook her head. "I don't know." Her eyes, strikingly gray beneath reddened lids, filled up and a double line of tears joined the moisture already on her cheeks. "I just... found her like *that*, in the hallway, when I came home. I didn't see anyone and I could tell that she was--" She gulped air and dropped her hands to the twisted Kleenex in her lap, then managed to keep going. "She was already dead."

Greg nodded and gave her a second or two before asking his next question. "Do you know if there was anyone who would do this to her? Was she married, or did she have a boyfriend?"

The woman worked her fingers together. "She wasn't married, and she didn't have a steady boyfriend." She bit at her bottom lip for a second. "There was this one guy she had a little trouble with, but I don't think he knew where she lived-- she said she'd never told him and her phone number was unlisted. And she hadn't heard from him in almost two weeks, since she told him off."

Greg's eyes narrowed and he pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket, flipped it open and readied his pen. "What kind of trouble? Did you meet him?"

"No. And I just know what she told me." She dabbed at her eyes with the tissue.

"And what was that?"

Mary frowned as she tried to remember. "Eloise was an account executive at Leo Burnett Advertising," she told him. "They're downtown and she met this guy, Blake, in line at one of those fast-food places everybody goes to for lunch. They had lunch a couple of times-- nothing more serious than that-- then she couldn't go the next time he called her at work and asked her out. She was busy and wanted to call him back, but he wouldn't give her a number, said he wasn't reachable because he was out in the field or something."

Greg scribbled a few notes on his pad. "Where did he work?"

"I don't know. I remember it was some kind of security company, but when she called there, they told Eloise they'd never

heard of him. So she put it all together and decided he must be married, and when he called her back, she told him not to call her again." Mary looked vaguely embarrassed. "Eloise was rather... *outspoken* sometimes, and I'm afraid she was rather crude when she did it."

Greg resisted the urge to smile. There wasn't anything about this that was funny, but he found it amazing that the fragile Mary Kidman could be best friends with someone like Eloise Addison, whom he suspected had been a polar opposite. "Then what happened?"

Mary blinked. "He kept calling her, at work, at home, at least twice a day. Finally she told him that she was going to call the police on him if he didn't stop."

"And did he?"

She nodded. "Yes. Eloise was on edge for a couple of days, but her threat must've worked. She never heard from him again."

Oh, yes she did, Greg thought without looking up. One last time. "Did she mention what he looked like?"

"She said he was tall, with dark hair and blue eyes. Handsome."

Just like a million other guys in Chicago. "All right, Ms. Kidman. Thanks for your help."

She looked up at him, her wide, gray eyes penetrating. "I wasn't really much help at all, was I?" Her voice trembled.

"Don't be so certain of that," he said, but it was an automatic response. He'd run the Addison woman's phone records, but the wanna-be boyfriend had likely called from pay or untraceable cell phones, especially if he had murderous tendencies. Greg glanced at the two uniforms. "Is there someone you can call to...?"

She sniffed. "I already did. My fiancé will be over as soon as he gets off work." She looked at the two officers. "You can go ahead and leave-- I'll be all right. I think I'll just stay in here until..." Her words faded and she stared at the floor.

Greg knew exactly what she was talking about. "That would probably be best. If you think of anything else, you can call me at this number."

He handed her one of his cards, then headed back downstairs, stopping at the second landing when he saw the door to Eloise Addison's apartment was open. There was a heavysset middle-aged man standing just inside, shock still etched into the lines of his face. Greg could hear noises from deeper in the apartment. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And who else is in here?"

"I'm the landlord," the man said, stepping back at Greg's sharp tone. "The detective downstairs said to let him in-- that's all."

Greg relaxed a bit as he registered the crowded ring of keys in the man's hand. "It's fine," he said, not bothering with any more of an explanation. He hurried down the hall-- a matched layout to the Kidman apartment upstairs-- and found his partner in the bedroom, methodically looking through the dresser drawers. "Find anything?"

Tony shrugged. "Bunch of frilly underwear, socks, sweaters, the usual. Nothing kinky. The super says as far as he knows, she never gave anyone else a key, not even that woman upstairs. Seemed to like her privacy."

Greg looked around the room thoughtfully and left Tony to his search, though he had a hunch the other man wouldn't get much out of this place. No number for this Blake guy, no last name, no employer; he'd do a follow-up with her coworkers and a canvas of the neighborhood, but he was betting no one but the late Eloise had actually seen him. When he passed the techs on the way outside, they looked at him and shook their heads-- that meant no fingerprints or, at least at first glance, anything else usable. Guy had probably been wearing gloves.

He sighed and went down by the car to wait for Tony. Too bad they didn't have anything to go on, but at least they weren't dealing with a serial killer.

Saturday September 30th...

Hannah opened her eyes and found two men staring down at her.

Early morning sunlight, bright enough to fry her eyeballs, leaked through half-closed blinds across the small room, but she forced her eyes to stay open. She tried to speak, but for a few seconds nothing worked. Her throat hurt monstrously, like someone had wound it with barbed wire, then twisted the ends nice and tight. She'd endured what she had come to call her *Affliction*-- in her mind, she always thought of it with a capital "A"-- off and on for most of what she could remember of her life, but this year it had gotten worse... much, *much* worse. She'd thought the time last April, which had also landed her here in Illinois Masonic, had been painful enough to make her think she was going to die, but waking up in a bed this morning in the psychiatric ward when the painkiller had worn off was a rude reintroduction to just how bad life could be.

Hannah tried again, swallowing around the band of fire that had settled between her chin and her collarbone and trying to focus her eyes past the medicine-grit that had settled in their corners. "Who are you?" she finally managed to croak. She was thirsty and she wanted to wipe her mouth but the staff doctor had ordered her hands strapped down. The level of compassion around here was absolutely mind boggling.

The two men standing a few feet away were both tall, one dark-headed and one blond and wearing glasses, slightly shorter than the other. It was the blond who stepped forward and regarded her with calm, light blue eyes; the other one stayed back, and for a moment Hannah thought she saw an expression of raw surprise on his face. What, she thought crankily. He's never seen a woman with her throat cut before?

"My name is Detective Jedrek," said the blond. He pulled one hand out of his pocket and showed her a gold badge encased in leather, politely holding it in front of her eyes where she could see it without moving her head-- like she could, anyway. He nodded at the other man, who was still standing a few feet away, as though he was afraid she'd suddenly spray blood all over him-- brave cop. "This is my partner, Detective Rutland."

Hannah could think of a hundred replies, and most of them had the phrase 'so go away' neatly tacked onto the end-- *I don't want to talk to you, so go away. I don't care, so go away. Leave me alone, so go away.* Unfortunately, she wasn't in the best position to be insistent about it, so she tried a different approach. "What do you want?" Maybe it wasn't barbed wire encircling her throat after all... crushed glass glued to the inside of a wide band of sandpaper seemed more like it.

Detective Jedrek didn't waste any time. "You're Hannah Danior, right?"

"What's left of me is."

Jedrek ignored the crack. "I'd like to talk to you about who attacked you, Ms. Danior. I--"

"I don't remember."

Damn-- even though her voice was barely above a whisper, she'd said the words too quickly, and now Hannah could tell he didn't believe her, could see it in the way his eyes narrowed. "Well, that's unfortunate, Ms. Danior. You see, there was another young woman attacked in the same manner last night. When the report on your incident came out this morning, we saw the similarities right away-- we're estimating that the two attacks may have even occurred one right after the other." He paused and the look he gave her was penetrating. "I'm sorry to say that the other young woman didn't survive, so any help you could toss our way would be appreciated. We wouldn't want this guy to try it a third time." He looked at her expectantly.

Hannah started to repeat herself, then stopped as someone strode into the room. A doctor... yeah, Tansey. She recognized the

woman from the emergency room last night. And, of course, last April. "Hannah," she said, "how are we doing today?"

Hannah grimaced. "I don't know how *we're* doing, doc, but *I* feel like hell."

Dr. Tansey smiled vaguely, then her gaze fell on the straps around Hannah's wrists and irritation flitted across her face. "I think we'll take these off now," she said.

"Changed your mind about me?" Hannah rasped.

"Why was she strapped down?" Detective Jedrek asked. He flashed his badge at the doctor before she could ask and Hannah snatched at the momentary pause to answer the question herself.

"They think I did this to myself," she said. Her voice was working a little better, still sore but using it was getting rid of some of the stiffness. "Body art, maybe."

Dr. Tansey frowned and studied Hannah as her fingers undid first one strap, then the other. "You have to admit there's a history, Hannah."

"I have never tried to hurt myself!" she said hotly.

"Then explain it to me," the doctor shot back. "All of it, right now."

Hannah flexed her wrists and turned her face away from the accusing stare of the doctor, reflexively brushing back the hair that had tangled around her face and neck. Too late she remembered the thick, puckered scar just beneath her jaw on the left side of her neck, too high up to be covered by this newest round of bandages. When she turned back, she saw the sharp eyes of the detective move from that to the pale, inch-long scar through her right eyebrow. Battle wounds from wars in which she'd never fought, but how could she make them understand that?

She couldn't.

So she said nothing.

"Just a minute," said the other detective. What was his name? Rutland, that was it. He stepped up to the bed and stared down at her. "You're saying she tried to commit suicide?" Hannah started to scowl up at him, then found herself shuddering instead as she met his gaze. His eyes were blue like his partner's, but a deeper, darker shade that made her feel like a trapped animal and made her want to look away. There was something disconcerting about his voice--

"There was no weapon found at the scene," Detective Jedrek said, fragmenting her train of thought. "Either by the bookstore owner who discovered her, or by the paramedics or police." He raised one eyebrow and Hannah thought she kind of liked the derisive tone of his voice. "Since you shipped her off to the psych ward, I'm assuming you had her personal belongings searched?"

Dr. Tansey shrugged and Hannah knew that meant yes. What a life-- head home from work, then wake up in the ER and have strangers pawing over your body and your private stuff. She didn't want to think about the part in between the ER and here, not yet. "I didn't do this to myself," Hannah said to the physician. "For God's sake, if I was going for a permanent check-out, don't you think I'd have picked someplace more private than my own fucking front doorstep?"

The doctor rubbed her forehead and said nothing, and Hannah glared at her, hoping she was getting a migraine. The woman deserved one for leaving Hannah tied up in this bed like some unruly nutcase. Okay, maybe she had a *history*, as the doctor had said, but her past had never included attempted suicide... though, really, if they knew the truth, could they have blamed her if it had?

"Listen," Hannah said. "I have pets at home, dogs that need to be walked. There isn't anyone else to take care of them. *Please*-- I don't need to be here. Let me go home."

The doctor shook her head. "Absolutely not-- you've sustained an extremely serious injury. I'll allow that it may have been a misjudgment to have you placed in the psychiatric ward, and I'll have you moved within the hour. But you need to be hospitalized for at least two more days--"

"I'm almost healed!" Hannah protested.

Detective Jedrek look at her in surprise, then at the doctor. "What's that?"

"I said--"

Dr. Tansey cut Hannah off. "The young lady heals at a... remarkable rate," she said carefully. "But it's still not so rapid that you don't need medical supervision."

Hannah scowled. Damn it-- if this had happened after she'd gotten safely inside her apartment, she'd have woken up this morning, cleaned up the mess, and gotten on with her life after wrapping some gauze around her throat and putting on a turtleneck. "I can't stay here," she said again. "I *won't*. I have responsibilities."

Dr. Tansey gazed down at her and smiled gently. Hannah saw the woman's eyes glint, then realized that of all the things in the world she could have let come out of her mouth, that had been the absolutely, undeniably, *worst*. "I'm sorry to hear that, Hannah. That makes me believe you're a danger to yourself, and as the physician in charge of your case, I'm afraid that means you'll have to remain on the psych ward-- where we have locked doors and guards-- until I deem you well enough to be signed out."

Hannah's mouth dropped open as the doctor tucked her clipboard under her arm, turned, and started to walk out.

"No!" Hannah struggled to pull herself upright, fighting against the sheet and the rough hospital blanket. "I won't--"

"Unless you want to be restrained again," Dr. Tansey commented as she stopped by the door, "I'd strongly suggest you calm down and remain in that bed."

Hannah froze, then slowly sank back onto the mattress as she and the detectives watched the stiff-backed doctor stride out. Jesus, this was terrible-- she'd never been in this deep before. What was she going to do about Knothead and Puddles?

"Miss," said Detective Rutland, "we really need you to try and recall something about the attack. If you could think back to right before it happened... was anyone following you or--"

"My dogs," Hannah said miserably. "That damned woman has me locked in here-- who'd going to feed and walk them?"

Rutland made an exasperated sound. "Tough luck about the animals, miss. But can we get back to why my partner and I are here?"

"I'll do it," Detective Jedrek said.

Hannah blinked and turned her head to look at him. "What did you say?"

The blond detective flipped open a small notebook and checked it. "You live over on Belmont, right? Near Sheffield. I'm pretty close to there. As long as they don't bite me when I go in, I could handle it."

Hannah stared at him, betting her own expression was a close match to the look of incredulity on Rutland's. "You would? *Why?*"

"Ditto," Rutland said.

Jedrek shrugged, suddenly looking self-conscious. "Can't just leave 'em stuck in the apartment like that. I like dogs a lot, but I can't have one in my building."

Hannah twisted the sheet nervously and thought about this. He was a stranger... but he was a cop. What if he was crooked? And if he was, what would it matter? She had nothing of worth to steal. All she cared about on this planet were those two spoiled animals, and the only friend she had who liked her enough to help out, Winnie Harbin, was fiercely allergic to dogs-- it was a given that she started sneezing just from being within two feet of Hannah's front door. But nothing ever came without a price. This man, this *cop*, would want something in return. But what?

Whatever it was, she would give it, because she had no choice. Knothead and Puddles couldn't feed and walk themselves, and no one else would do it. She'd be out of here in two days, and while that slice of time would mean a mess and a couple of hungry pooches who were getting thirsty toward the end of it, two days wouldn't be the end of the world. Unless...

Her *Affliction*.

It was happening more often now. Less than two weeks ago she'd been standing at the bathroom sink and brushing her teeth-- with a sniffling, sneezy Winnie leaning in the doorway and talking to her-- when she gotten a nasty three-inch slice across the line of her right collarbone. Before that had been less than six months, and before that it had been, literally, *years*. The time periods were getting shorter, *really* shorter.

So what if something happened to her tomorrow, or the morning after, something that kept her sad and sorry butt locked in this place for another week, or two? Or worse... what if the next time her Affliction actually *killed* her?

Someone should know about her dogs, and the way her life was going, Hannah would have to grasp the offered kindness of a stranger.

"The keys are in my coat pocket," she said. It sounded like someone else's voice, small and tired, a woman she didn't know giving up a measure of hard-won control. A woman *surrendering*. "In the closet over there."

Hannah turned her head away as Jedrek went over and opened the door, then dug around in the closet until he found her keys.

She would not let them see her cry.

f f f

Hannah Danior lived above a bookstore called Stars Our Destination on busy Belmont Avenue. Greg had never noticed the place before, but it looked like a great way to burn up a lazy afternoon-- thousands of new and used genre books and a friendly-looking staff who acted like they really enjoyed what they were doing. Posters on the picture window advertised everything from new releases to the store's upcoming annual Halloween bash. The roar of traffic on Belmont Avenue might be a downside to

Hannah's address, but maybe living over a shop like this made it worthwhile.

The slightly recessed door to the upstairs was off to the side, barely noticeable except for the dark, circular stain on the concrete in front of it-- undeniable evidence of Hannah's attack. Strange, Greg thought as he stared at it. Horns blared from the street and people walked by in a steady stream. This stretch of Belmont, especially on weekend nights, was crowded to the point of chaotic. No criminal with a quarter-brain's worth of caution would attack a woman in a place so much out in the open, and so populated.

When the detective let himself in, he found a narrow hallway dark enough to make him grimace-- now *this* would have been more to the tune of a rape and/or robbery. Yet that hadn't been the case here; the police report clearly specified that Hannah hadn't even gotten her key in the lock, and the bloodstain out front supported that. She'd still been clutching her purse when the paramedics had arrived. The old wooden steps creaked beneath his weight as he climbed, his ascent taking him onto a landing that was a bit more well lit by a small, dusty window high on the eastern wall. Not much to see up here beyond the door to Hannah's apartment, and as Greg stepped up to it, he grinned at the snuffling and low whining coming from the crack at its bottom.

Hannah had assured him that her two dogs weren't the attack type, but then did she really know how they were going to react to a stranger walking in? "Well," he muttered, "Here goes nothing." He pushed her key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

Two shapes-- one dark, one light-- zipped past him and into the hall as he stepped inside. Then the dogs twisted around each other and came back in, circling and bumping against his legs before finally moving back and forth in front of him in little excited hops. He was relieved to hear no growls or grumbling from either of the well-cared-for animals fidgeting in front of him. "Okay, gals," he said. "Leash?"

Both of them rocketed away, heading for the shadowed recesses of the apartment. Greg closed the front door and followed, watching his step. There was a mess in here somewhere-- he could smell it-- but that could hardly be helped. Even the most well-trained

dogs weren't built to hold it for nearly twenty hours; he'd walk them first, then come back and clean it up. The dogs didn't come back and he found them sitting skittishly by the back door, each offering well-worn leather leashes. He took the somewhat gooey leads and snapped them onto their collars, then led the pooches outside. As he passed, Greg snagged a couple of plastic bags from a bunch hanging on a hook on the porch and marveled that although they were excited and obviously anxious, the dogs still didn't yank him off his feet as they all clambered down the back stairs. It didn't take long-- all of twenty seconds-- for both dogs to get down to business; Greg cleaned up after them, then went for a nice, twenty-minute trot around the neighborhood.

They were a pair, all right. Before he'd left the hospital, Hannah had told him the older one was Puddles, a black Lab so named because a puppyhood kidney infection had made house-breaking a true challenge. The other one was Knothead, and it was obvious from the little pointy spot on top of the Golden Retriever's head where the name had come from. Together they were a silly duo, nipping good-naturedly at each other's tails and toes, pouncing on blowing bits of paper, *woofing* when they saw another dog or cat peering through a window. Happy, healthy, and not a mean bone in their bodies, and Greg was glad they hadn't been left stranded in Hannah's apartment until God only knew when.

Back inside, Greg found the pups' dishes and gave them fresh water, then refilled the dry dog food in the all but empty bowls. He hunted down the accident-- only one-- and cleaned it up, amused that both dogs sat and watched him the whole time, each looking so ashamed that he wouldn't have known which one to blame. The entire walking, feeding and cleanup took less than forty-five minutes, and there was really no reason to stay beyond that.

Except, of course, the dogs kept following him around and nudging his hands, leaning against his legs, and bouncing playfully around him with toys in their mouths, silly plastic things that made plaintive squeaking noises every time they bit down. Greg knew they had to be lonely, missing Hannah and starving for human companionship, so he finally just sat on the floor in the kitchen area and played with them, tossing the toys, doing the tug-of-war thing with a well-chewed rope toy Knothead brought him, teasing Puddles with a ridiculous, big blue rubber pacifier. Both dogs were so funny

that he found himself laughing out loud as each tried to outdo the other for his attention; ultimately they crawled up on either side and simply snuggled close.

“Good girls,” he said as he stroked their fur. “Don’t worry. Hannah will be home soon, you’ll see.” Now that the dogs had calmed, Greg glanced around the place absently, noticing the sparseness of the furnishings. There wasn’t much in the way of knickknacks in what was essentially an oversized long studio, but there *was* a bit of clutter-- small piles of magazines here and there, a bundle of some kind of knitting on one side of the couch, stacks of obviously used books. The bed was straightened rather than made, but it didn’t look like the dogs were inclined to get on the furniture; rather, there was a large, heavy oval rug in front of the oversized window at the north end of the apartment-- the place’s only significant source of light-- that seemed to be where Knothead and Puddles slept for any length of time.

Extracting himself reluctantly from the dogs, Greg stood and wandered around Hannah’s place. Clearly there wasn’t a whole lot of income going on here-- tips probably weren’t high dollar at the Classics Diner down the street where she worked as a waitress. Helluva note, that-- only a block and half to walk home from work Friday night and look what had happened. There was a double row of closets with flimsy folding doors across from the bed in the center of the apartment and he opened them both without thinking about it, then felt vaguely guilty as he stared at what was inside. Not much-- in the first was a handful of sweaters and a few pair of jeans hanging alongside a winter coat, an extra waitress uniform, and two dark-colored dresses. He found himself wondering how Hannah, with her pale skin and wispy, equally light brown hair, would look in them. But the vision was too much like funeral attire, and he scowled as he pushed the doors closed. The other closet was surprisingly bare except for t-shirts and underclothes folded on a couple of shelves and one of those plastic filing crates, the cheapie things you could buy at Wal-Mart for a couple of bucks. It held no more than a dozen folders, each neatly marked-- ELECTRIC, GAS, PAY STUBS and the like, and the only one that caught Greg’s attention was labeled TRINITY MHC. What was that?

He took the crate out to where he could see better and, telling himself he’d been planning on checking her background anyway-- it

was part of the job-- Greg flipped through the contents of the folder, raising an eyebrow when he discovered that the "MHC" part on the label referred to "Mental Health Center." There weren't that many papers inside, but their titles gave him a load of info-- dateless form copies of things like *Patient's Release Instructions* and *Outpatient Help* seemed to corroborate Dr. Tansey's inferences back at Illinois Masonic. He paged through everything twice, but there was nothing else in the folder that was informative, except for a business card that he almost missed. On it was the name and telephone of a psychiatrist-- Dr. Guido Gorrado-- from Trinity Mental Health Center, and when Greg turned it over he saw that someone, Hannah perhaps, had written the man's home telephone number on the back in a feminine hand. He fingered it thoughtfully, then tucked it in his pocket; he'd check it out when he ran the background on Hannah, then put it back in the folder the next time he walked the dogs.

With a start, Greg realized it was getting late. Knothead and Puddles had abandoned their scrutiny of him for the comfort of the oval rug below the window in the living room, where they now lay curled around each other like dozing puppies. Greg checked the locks and let himself out with a final glance around Hannah's place. A bit more spacious than his own, but it was... emotionally bereft, nothing more than a box where a troubled woman lived and which would have been cold and empty without the presence of the two large and loveable dogs. The worn couch and inexpensive television, the small, no-name stereo setup on a beat-up bookcase next to it... all of this said something deeper and far more heartbreaking than financial poverty. If it hadn't been for the limitless affection offered her by those two animals and the love she obviously had for them, Greg might have thought Hannah had, indeed, tried to cut her own throat. But if people who truly wanted to die were worried about what was going to happen to those they left behind, animal or human, they generally made arrangements for them before taking that final step.

No, he thought as he went down the stairs and stepped outside and into the Saturday afternoon traffic now clogging the sidewalk. The apartment he'd just left was barren, but it was also incomplete... waiting, *wanting*. Instinct told him that Hannah Danior didn't want to die at all.

She wanted very much to live.

f f f

"Hey, hey, if it isn't St. Gregory."

Sitting behind his desk, Greg looked up as his partner shoved a pile of papers aside and settled on one end of it. "Done with your do-goodly-doggy-duty for today?"

"For now," he told Tony. "I'll stop by and walk them again late tonight."

Tony raised one dark eyebrow. "So what's the deal here? You got a thing for this Hannah? I think she's weird as a three-headed frog-- did you see those scars?"

"No, fool, I don't have a 'thing' for her." Greg tapped the file on his desk. "Quite an interesting history on her though. Did you see it?"

"No," his partner said and folded his arms. "I thought we dead-ended yesterday with her insistence that she doesn't remember anything about the attack. Anything else is a waste of time and energy."

"You give up too easily." Greg pulled out the business card he'd filched from Hannah's files and pushed it toward Tony. "I talked to this guy's assistant. She'd only tell me a few things over the phone, but said if we go out and talk to her, where she can see that we really *are* cops, she's positive the doctor himself will want to speak with us."

Tony looked surprised as he looked at the card. "Well, that *is* interesting. None of the usual patient confidentiality crap?"

"Nope. The impression I got was that if we identify ourselves and they're satisfied, they'll open wide."

"Uh-huh. And exactly why is it we want to drive all the way to--" He peered at the address. "St. Charles?"

Greg leaned forward. "Come on, Tony. Are you trying to tell me there's nothing strange about the way Hannah's injury *exactly* matches Eloise Addison's?"

Tony stood and handed back the business card. "I never said that."

"But...?"

"But I think you're trying to climb cobwebs here. I mean, it can't be more obvious-- the guy who killed Addison went for Hannah, but just didn't quite hit his mark."

"Maybe." Greg tidied up the papers on his desk. "But there isn't any connection between the two women, and Hannah told us she hasn't dated anyone since she arrived in Chicago. It's also a completely different crime scene-- one hidden and well-planned, the other in front of God and everyone else on the street."

Tony's expression was dubious. "So what's your point? We probably just haven't *found* the connection yet."

"I don't know," Greg said thoughtfully. "I guess I'm wondering if maybe she knows the killer somehow, maybe there's some kind of twisted relationship thing going on here that-- duh-- she isn't telling us about, a kind of kinky pre-crime practice-on-me type of thing."

"That'd be different," Tony said. "Do me first, then do someone else? You really believe that?"

"Find me another way to explain the wounds. Hannah's injury is like a mirror image of Eloise Addison's." He swept up the folder and tossed it into one of the desk drawers.

Tony was silent for a moment. "All right. When are we going to St. Charles?"

"Monday," Greg told him. "Dr. Gorrado doesn't do Sundays. Big surprise there."

"Okay." Tony brought out his notebook and jotted it on his schedule. "So what are you up to tomorrow?"

"Day off," Greg said. "Keeps me sane. Training in the morning, then I'm gonna come home and stay around the neighborhood. Check on Hannah's dogs now and then."

As Greg picked up his jacket, Tony fell into step beside him. "So how's it going with that martial arts stuff? You've been doing it for how long now-- couple of years?"

"Yeah," Greg said. "It's going well and I like it a lot-- it's a real stress reliever, good workout and great people."

"Plus they teach you how to kick ass, huh?" Tony grinned.

Greg smiled ruefully. "Self-defense, Tony. Not offense. And respect."

"Sure." His partner sounded anything but convinced and Greg knew from dozens of conversations just like this one that there was no convincing Tony otherwise.

"You should try it sometime," Greg said. "It would teach you how to deal better with people--"

"There's nothing wrong with the way I deal," Tony said flatly.

Oops-- hit a nerve there. "Of course not," Greg said smoothly. "But it's a great way to stay in shape, lots of fun."

"Nice try, farm boy." Tony glanced at him out of the corner of one eye. "But I got a wife and kid who suck up every spare bit of time and money I get my hands on. And I'm not exactly packing any extra weight."

True enough. Tony was tall and lean, with dark good looks and an athletic build that always caught the eyes of the ladies. Tony, of course, played up to the attention constantly, and sometimes Greg wondered just how faithful he was to Dara, who seemed to worship him and tolerate a lot more of Tony's biting sarcasm than Greg would have ever taken. Then again, Greg's mother had suffered through his father's coldness without comment. Was that what marriage was all about-- endurance? No thanks. "So," he said, curious despite himself. "What are your big Sunday plans?"

As they pushed through the doors of the 19th District Police Station, Tony looked sideways at him. "Not much. Hey, maybe I ought to ask around on your girlfriend's case."

Greg sent his partner a sharp glance. "Don't get stupid on me. I'm just helping out because it's convenient and I feel bad for the dogs-- there's no other connection."

"Sure," Tony said with a rare and utterly false show of amiability. "Anyway, I'll check stuff out, see if anything else comes up."

Greg nodded. "Let me know if you find anything interesting."

"Should I call you at home or at... Hannah's?"

"Very funny."

Tony laughed and slapped him on the back. "You're too easy, Greg. See you."

Greg managed a half-hearted smile and watched him stroll away. Maybe Tony was right-- he *was* too easy, a no-miss target for Tony's constant needling. But there was a difference between pals who teased you because they liked you and someone who did it only to see how much they could aggravate you. What, he wondered, would Tony do if he actually did blow up at him? Perhaps it was a test, a competition thing... or was Tony simply looking for an excuse to get physical with him? Or maybe it was nothing but Greg's own psyche inventing causes and effects that simply didn't exist; some people were just born jerks, harmless but constantly annoying. He couldn't explain it, but Tony had hit a bit of his own nerve with this Hannah thing. There was nothing there beyond the animal lover in him-- first and foremost, Hannah was a case to him, a number in the assault with a deadly weapon statistics.

Then why did the idea of Tony asking anyone, *anything* about Hannah Danior, leave a taste in his mouth like three-week-old milk?

Sunday October 1st...

Classics Dinner was a 1960s-style restaurant on the corner of Belmont and Sheffield, done up in the appropriate black, white and red color scheme and sporting lots of checkerboard patterns and chrome, with little replicas of the old-fashioned button-type jukeboxes on the walls by every booth. The place was hopping on early Sunday afternoon, with a constant stream of customers and a harried, overloaded wait staff. Tony thought it might have been a better idea to come by on a slower weekday, but that was too bad. Hannah might be released by then and he wanted to check things out with her employer before that happened. He didn't for a moment believe Greg's far-fetched speculation that she was involved in a perverted game of imitation murder, but there *was* another connection. The exact nature of that-- the hows and whys-- remained to be discovered, but he was damned well going to figure it out.

Ignoring the surprised looks of the workers, he pushed through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door and headed for the small, glassed-in manager's office he spotted off to the right. The guy inside, who wore a name tag that said MR. ZUBRO, MANAGER, was short and a little on the heavyside-- too many of the big burgers served in his own place. He was wearing a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and Tony could see blotches of moisture seeping across the fabric under the arms and at the sides of the loosened tie around the man's neck. More than that, the cranky expression on his face when he saw Tony gave evidence he wasn't fond of his little place off the heat of the kitchen.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?" Zubro demanded. "This is an employees only area."

"Consider me a temp," Tony said and held out his badge.

Zubro's eyebrows lifted and he put down his pen. "What can I do for you?"

The detective dropped onto a metal folding chair that had been crammed into the small space between the front of the manager's desk and the wall. "I have a couple of questions about one of your employees, Hannah Danior."

Zubro nodded. "Yeah-- of course you do. Helluva thing, that attack. Winnie tells me Hannah's still in the hospital."

"Winnie?"

Zubro waved toward the restaurant. "One of the waitresses. She and Hannah are chummy."

Tony made a mental note to talk to this woman after he was done here. "So what do you know about Hannah?"

The manager shrugged and pulled a key ring from his pocket, swivelled on his chair and unlocked a file cabinet behind him. After a few seconds, he selected a manilla folder from the drawer and opened it, but there wasn't much inside. From where he sat Tony could already tell that there was zip to see on the employment application. "I know what she looks like and what's in here," he said. "And that most of the time she shows up for work when she's supposed to. Other than that, I don't get involved with the help."

Zubro shoved the folder toward Tony and the detective glanced through it, noting that under both 'Previous Address' and 'Education' Hannah had written only St. Charles, Illinois. No work experience, no next of kin. "Didn't give much in the way of references, did she?" he said and tossed the file back on the desk.

Zubro gave him a bland look. "I needed a waitress, not a rocket scientist. As long as she knew how to add and could remember what hamburger went to which table, things were copacetic."

"Uh-huh." He wasn't going to get anywhere here. "This Winnie person--"

"Winnie Harbin. She's out front, short black hair, brown eyes." Zubro was anything but pleased. "Don't keep her too long. I've got a full Saturday crowd here."

"I'll keep her as long as I need to," Tony said without missing a beat. He rose and walked out, grinning to himself when he heard the man cuss under his breath. There were damned few people in this world whom he'd allow to order him around, and this fat, scummy little manager sure wasn't one of them.

The diner was a swirl of motion, people moving in and out from the kitchen and behind the counter, voices calling out, plates rattling and old music blaring from the ceiling speakers. It reminded him of a beehive-- at first glance there didn't seem to be any particular order to anything, but no one collided or hindered, and everything got done the way it was supposed to. The Harbin woman, pretty in a petite, slightly boyish way, was standing at a booth by the west window taking a food order from four teenagers who were trying to flirt with her but probably wouldn't leave over a dollar's tip between all of them. Tony caught her when she hustled up and shoved the ticket onto one of the fry wheels then made for the soda machine.

"Winnie Harbin?"

"Who wants to know?" she asked without actually looking at him. She loaded a tray with plastic water tumblers, silverware and napkins, then started filling over-sized glasses with Pepsi, deftly avoiding getting the soda spray on her white uniform.

Tony took out his badge and waved it between her and the soda machine. "Detective Tony Rutland. I want to ask you a few questions about Hannah Danior."

Now Winnie Harbin did glance at him. "Ask away. Kind of busy, so you'll have to fit it into the gaps."

Tony frowned. "Would you just stop for a minute?"

"No," she retorted. "I'll be glad to tell you whatever I can, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm trying to scrape out a living here."

Without waiting for a response, she hoisted the now full tray and headed back to the booth.

When she returned, Tony tried to block her way with his body but she ducked around him to get to the food window. He had to admire her speed. "Listen," he began. "I don't want to have to--"

"I know you're a cop," Winnie interrupted, "but I never believed that crap about how the word is a synonym for asshole. You gonna prove me wrong?"

Tony started to snap at her, then stopped, unable to halt the grin that wanted to tug at the corner of his mouth-- he didn't know whether to like or smack this scrappy little woman. "I just want to find out who attacked Hannah Danior," he said. "Preferably before he targets someone else. But Hannah isn't talking."

"Because she doesn't remember," Winnie said.

"I don't believe that."

Winnie shrugged, her movement never stopping as she pulled plates off the window and compared them against a ticket in her book. "Believe me, if she knew how it happened she'd tell you."

Tony stared hard at the waitress. "How?"

"How, why, whatever." Winnie hesitated. "The girl has problems, okay? That's all I can say. If she wants to tell you about them, she will. Otherwise..." She shrugged again.

"These problems have anything to do with Trinity Mental Health Center?" he asked.

Winnie slammed a plate onto her tray, then spun to face him. "Are you *trying* to get her canned? Maybe they are, and maybe not, but you can bet King Zubro'll use any excuse he can to bounce Hannah because of the work she's missed. He can't do it because of the attack, but he'll damned sure use that Trinity business if he finds out about it." Her expression was furious. "What the hell's the matter with you? Hannah's the *victim* here, not the criminal. A little sympathy wouldn't hurt."

Tony smiled darkly. "That's not in my job description."

"Call me surprised," Winnie said as she lifted her filled tray. "I don't know anything to tell you and I've got nothing more to say anyway, except that if you blab about that Trinity thing to Zubro and Hannah loses her job because of it, I'll call your Sargent or captain or *someone* and do my part to make you just as miserable."

He nodded and leaned back so she could pass him in the cramped space behind the counter. "I understand, *Miss Harbin*."

She gave him a dirty look but said nothing. He let her get almost out of range, then eased one foot out and hooked her right ankle as she stepped forward. In an instant, both Winnie and the full tray of food went crashing to the floor in a spray of broken stoneware and french fries.

Several employees hurried over to help her up and clean up the mess. Tony just stood there, looking down as she glared at him and brushed herself off.

"My, my," the detective said gently as he turned to leave. "Looks like you really need to watch your step."

f f f

If I wasn't insane, this place would drive me to it, Hannah thought for at least the tenth time that day.

The door to her room was open, and she could hear wailing down the hall. It was a non-stop thing-- forty minutes now-- full-throated and with barely enough time in between for breathing. She still wondered where the man or woman (she couldn't tell) found the lung power, but she'd given up on speculating as to the cause of the cries. As she well knew, life gave you plenty of reasons to protest.

Early this morning Hannah had tried, stupidly so, to sneak out, so Tansey had gotten nasty and ordered her put back in restraints. She'd been placed in a rare two-bed room, one of those medically-oriented ones generally reserved for the more seriously

physically injured among the psych patients, and right now she was the only patient occupying it. Hannah supposed she was lucky-- right after that detective had left with her keys she'd gotten a roommate, a not-heavily-enough-sedated woman with vacant eyes and a face and hands that were cut in a dozen places and pocked with big, purplish-black bruises. She was gone now, transferred to a private facility this morning by an absentee husband, and just in time, too-- one of the duty nurses had come in response to Hannah's shouts and found the woman leaning over Hannah's bed, drooling and smiling as she mindlessly wound the cord from the unplugged hospital bed around Hannah's eyes.

The restraints had been removed, but Hannah had learned her lesson. Everything around here was locked and guarded, and no matter how much she wanted out, she wasn't going anywhere until Tansey allowed it. She didn't know why the doctor had taken this personal interest in her-- vendetta was more like it-- but as with a lot of other arenas in her life, she was helpless to do anything but wait out the storm and hope she'd get a break at the end.

The voice of the unseen wailer was joined by someone else's, this one a man who started screaming-- "*Shut up shut up shut up!*"-- hysterically. Hannah winced; surely to God the staff hadn't left some poor schmuck tied down in the same room with that motormouth.

"Christ on a scooter, this is a noisy place," said a familiar voice.

Hannah grinned as Winnie sauntered in and her spirits lifted for the first time since getting stuck in this miserable ward. The racket from outside the room abruptly ceased, and for a moment the silence was disconcerting. Then Winnie raised an eyebrow. "I gave'em that age-old hint: *Duct tape is your friend,*" she said. "Guess they took my advice to heart. Or mouth."

Hannah laughed and Winnie dragged an ugly, plastic-covered chair over to her bedside, unmindful of the screech and the long black marks it left on the linoleum. "I had a balloon," her friend told her as she dropped onto the seat. "Big red thing with a yellow Tweety Bird on it. But they wouldn't let me bring it in-- said it might scare some of the patients." Winnie's smile was wicked. "Too bad, huh? I was thinking you could suck on the helium and screw with their minds."

Hannah chuckled. "You're nuts. They should put you in this bed, not me."

Winnie tilted her head. "I'm just exploring all possible avenues of entertainment." She studied Hannah, her gaze lingering on the bandage wrapped around her throat. "So what happened this time?" she asked bluntly. "I mean, I knew it was bad when a jerk-off cop came by the Diner, but Christ-- your *throat*?"

Hannah blinked, surprised. "This cop was a jerk? Was he a blond guy, named--"

"Nah. Dark-hair. Nice looking but what a bastard. He never said his name."

"Huh." Hannah sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "He was here with the other guy, but I don't know much about him-- well, either of them, really. His partner's okay, though."

Winnie leaned forward, interested. "What's this? A spark?"

Hannah glared at her. "Don't be an idiotic. He's just walking the dogs for me."

Her friend's mouth dropped open. "You gave him the key to your place?"

"What was I supposed to do?" she demanded. "You'd end up in an allergic coma or some damned thing, and there wasn't anyone else. Besides, he offered."

Winnie made a disbelieving sound in her throat. "Guy could be going through your stuff right now, everything you own--"

"And we both know what a storehouse of wealth my apartment is," Hannah reminded her with a tinge of sarcasm. "There's a whole box full of cash, jewels and bearer bonds I never told you about."

"Fine." Winnie sat back again. "Just watch out for the other one." She held up her palms and Hannah saw they were scraped and nicked. "Would you believe the bastard tripped me at work when I said I didn't have anything to tell him? He thinks no one saw him but

one of the busboys told me later that he did-- course he doesn't have a green card, so he's not saying anything. Anyway, I dropped a full tray of food and Zubro docked me thirty bucks out of my check."

"What! He can't do that!"

Winnie waved off her protest. "What am I gonna do-- go on strike? Whatever. But I could swear the guy was threatening me. He told me to watch my step or something like that."

"Man," Hannah said. "That's *awful*. I can't believe he tripped you-- I wonder if his partner knows about this?"

"Probably," Winnie said without hesitation. "He might be just like him-- how would you know?"

Hannah thought about this. She wouldn't, of course, even though Jedrek seemed totally different. Plus, it didn't make any sense to bully Winnie-- that certainly wouldn't get... what was his name? Rutland, that was it. It wouldn't get Rutland any information. Hell, if she knew the answers about where her injury had come from, she'd gladly tell them everything.

But she didn't.

"So this time it was your neck?" Winnie asked again, as if she could sense the direction Hannah's thoughts had taken. "Must have been pretty bad to land you in here."

"Yeah." Hannah stared at her fingertips, which were cracked and dry from having her hands wet too much at work and never using lotion. What was the difference, anyway? She was going to look like Frankenstein when this bandage came off, even more so than she already did. "Stitches almost ear to ear. I don't even know how many."

"Christ," Winnie said softly.

She didn't say anything else and after a few moments Hannah looked up and gave her friend-- her *only* friend-- a wan smile. "Thanks for believing me, Win."

Winnie flushed. "We're gal-pals, remember? Been there, seen that." She cleared her throat. "So when do you get free? Hell, I can't even call and talk to you here-- the only phone's at the nurses' desk."

Hannah made a face. "I don't know. It's the same doctor as last April. Dr. Tansey, remember her? So she's all weirded out about it, thinks I'm suicidal."

"Uh-oh."

"Yeah. I tried leaving and ended up strapped to the bed like a mental case."

Winnie's eyes widened. "No shit? They tied you down?"

Hannah held up her wrists, showing pale skin striped with bruises where the leather had cut into her. "Guess I won't try that again. Being the only sane person and strapped to the bed while the maniacs drool on your face ain't fun."

Her best friend's face twisted in helpless anger. "There's got to be someone I can call about this," she said firmly. "Some social agency or--"

"Forget it," Hannah cut in. "I'll be out of here in no time." She prodded gingerly at the wrappings under her chin. "I think they're just waiting to make sure this heals up-- it was pretty deep and they kind of freaked."

"All right." Winnie stood, then stepped over and gave her a gentle hug. "I've got to go meet Rex, but you call me when they let you out. I'll come and get you, okay?"

Hannah cringed inwardly, imagining a bumpy ride to her place in Win's ridiculously battered and tiny Fiat Cabriolet. No doubt her boyfriend would be in the cramped backseat and bitching the entire time about how bad the car's shocks were, his charming English accent the only thing making his overly loud tirade bearable. "It's only a few blocks and they always let you out during the daytime," she reminded Winnie. "I can walk it."

"Excuse me, am I speaking alien here?" Winnie rolled her eyes and pointed at Hannah. "You patient, me taxi. Got it?"

Why fight it? "I'll call."

"Home *or* at the Diner. I don't give a shit what Zubro says." Winnie gave her a peck on one cheek. "And for Christ's sake, watch your back around here. It's full of crazy people."

Hannah giggled and watched Winnie leave, grateful for her friendship and, above all, her faith.

Monday October 2nd...

"Well, it just figures this place would be in a 'burb that's nowhere near an expressway."

Greg glanced over at his grumbling partner, who was staring out the window at the scenery along Route 64. It was actually a pretty nice day, and a pretty nice drive-- only a few weeks into fall but it seemed the seasons were changing a bit early this year, the heavy trees already well on their way to shades of red and gold. "We're almost there," he said reflexively. "Maybe another fifteen minutes."

"Didn't you say that a half hour ago?"

"C'mon," Greg said. "Look at it as a rare chance to get away from the crowds and traffic in the city. And all the exhaust fumes."

"Until it's time to go back and we find ourselves smack in the middle of rush hour," Tony retorted. "Then you can sing to me again about exhaust-free air."

Greg chuckled and nodded at the dashboard clock. "It's still early. If we're lucky, we'll miss that by a mile."

"Luck?" Tony pushed his hair back, his jerky movement more telling about his mood than anything else. "Luck is a nasty old bitch with a shriveled heart who likes to stab people in the back. You want luck, you have to make your own."

Greg glanced at Tony, amused. "So what did you step in on the way to work, chum?"

"Same old stuff," his partner answered. "A list of things to do eight miles long-- drive Ben here, pick up this there, what time are you going to be home, on and on. The joy of marriage."

Greg held his comments, but couldn't help wondering about Tony's attitude. He'd only met Dara and Ben once, Tony's wife and eight-year-old son, but both had seemed a little too reticent to be as demanding as Tony often described them. While it was true that Greg wasn't high on the marriage concept himself, Dara Rutland had seemed attentive and considerate of her family, and it was clear that she adored Tony and wanted only to please him. Greg was having trouble putting that memory together with the harpy that Tony insisted he had waiting for him at home every night. There was also the minor thing that Tony seemed the least likely person in the world to tolerate a spouse who fit the description he kept trying to convey.

"Route 25," Greg said suddenly, glad for the chance to change a subject he should have known better than to address anyway. "We turn here, and it should only be another mile or so to Trinity Boulevard. Then we turn left and we're there."

"Great," Tony said sourly.

"Nice out here," Greg tilted his head at the hundred-year-old homes they were driving past, all set on spacious, neatly manicured lawns big enough to hold small Chicago apartment buildings. Late blooming flowers bordered porches with rocking chairs, and old-fashioned lawn ornaments-- wagon wheels, quaint antique wheel barrows and the like-- further added to the ambiance.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Whitebread America. Ain't life grand."

Greg pressed his lips together-- so much for his attempt to find the blandest, safest topic of conversation. "Here's our street," he said and turned his car, a 1998 Jeep Cherokee, abruptly to the left. Tony swore when his elbow banged against the door and Greg thought it served him right; it wasn't often that he let his partner get to him, but damn... today Tony was just being a pain in the ass. He hoped the ride home wasn't as long as this one. "That's it up there."

"Where'd you learn to drive?" Tony demanded, rubbing his arm. "Race track?"

"Something like that," Greg said with a forced grin. His gaze stopped briefly on the other man's left hand, where a splattering of bruises showed across the knuckles. "What happened to your hand?"

"Banged it in the garage," Tony answered vaguely.

"Huh." Greg turned the wheel again and swung into a wide driveway next to a discreetly-sized maroon sign with white letters that read *Trinity Mental Health Center*. "We have arrived."

"Let's park this black buggy and find Dr. what's-his-name." Tony dug into his shirt pocket and came out with a piece of notepaper.

"Gorrado," Greg finished for him. "Guido Gorrado."

"Now there's a name," Tony said sarcastically.

"Whatever." It was all Greg could do not to snap as he rolled the Jeep into a spot, but no-- he'd be damned if he'd take on Tony's shitty attitude. "Let's just find his office. Come on."

Tony got out and followed him up the walkway without saying anything else, apparently giving up on his attempt, for now, to goad Greg into a verbal contest. The building in front of them was as old or older than the houses they'd passed out on Route 25, but big and imposing, built back when dark red brick and ornate, stone-rimmed windows had been all the rage. It would have seemed more fitting beneath a sky laden with thunderous clouds, perhaps on the set of some cheesy horror flick, than here, sitting serenely below a sun-filled, gorgeous weekday. A thousand mini-panes of glass sparkled down at them, and it was only when they got closer that Greg saw the metal mesh embedded in each, the sole outward indication that here was anything more complicated than a hospital, or perhaps an expensive private school.

Inside, at least in the overly large reception area and waiting room, was the same calm and cool atmosphere. Lots of varnished oak woodwork and lamp lighting around comfortable looking stuffed chairs and couches-- whatever dirty work happened in the mental world didn't occur in the quiet expanse out here, beneath the scrutiny of God or anyone else. The floor was covered by an

elegantly-patterned area rug and their footsteps managed to sound offensively loud when their heels tapped on the two-foot hardwood space between the door and the rug.

An older woman with expertly coiffed silver hair looked up from, of all things, an issue of *Scientific American* and gave them a professional smile. "May I help you?"

Greg pulled out his badge. "Detective Gregory Jedrek. My partner and I were told to come out this morning and ask for Dr. Gorrado."

She studied the detective badge carefully, as though she were used to such things being forgeries, before nodding and reaching for the telephone. "Have a seat, please. I'll page his assistant."

They did what they were told, with Tony keeping mercifully silent. The wait wasn't long-- no more than five minutes-- then a door at the other end of the room opened and a young woman stepped through and gestured at them. "Detectives," she said cordially. "I'm Ms. Tuwile, Dr. Gorrado's assistant. If you'll follow me, he's waiting for you in his office."

"Thanks," Greg said, amused when his partner made a *Wow, do you see this?* face at him behind the woman's back. She *was* lovely-- tall and slender, with had auburn hair cut into a businesswoman's classy style and light blue eyes. An expensive suit completed the no-nonsense picture, but its forest green color only highlighted an exceptionally pretty face, one that obviously had his partner's total attention.

Proving this, Tony lengthened his stride until he passed Greg and could speak directly to their guide. "So," he said in a completely different tone of voice than the one Greg had endured on the trip out here, "Tuwile-- that's an interesting name. I don't believe I've ever heard it before."

She led them to an elevator and pushed the UP button. "It's not very common," she said without further explanation, and Greg almost grinned. Tony ought to know better-- working in a mental health center, the woman was probably an expert at keeping personal information from strangers, and she looked way too smart to be

dazzled by a cop's badge. Tony, however, was undaunted. "Tony Rutland," he said and stuck out his hand, knowing she'd have to take it or seem impossibly rude. She did so, and Greg had to admire the way she kept her face impassive when Tony obviously held on too long. "My partner, Greg Jedrek." Greg nodded and touched a finger to his forehead, sparing her a repeat handshake. Tony looked at the pretty young woman expectantly, waiting. "Janice," she finally said, but with clear reluctance. "Janice Tuwile."

"That name again," Tony said with an engaging grin.

"My husband's family name," she said coolly, and Greg almost laughed. He saw Tony glance automatically at Ms. Tuwile's left hand and frown because she wasn't wearing a ring. She could be lying about being married, but Greg would bet she wasn't. She wasn't wearing earrings-- maybe she simply didn't like jewelry. Or maybe she simply wasn't interested in Tony. As he often did, Greg wondered again about his partner; was this just a harmless flirtation, or was Tony not the best of family men? In any event, it wasn't Greg's job to judge his partner, so it was best he just stayed out of it.

Tony started to say something else, then the elevator door slid open and they joined a couple of other staff members inside. A stop and a start, then a final stop, and they stepped off the elevator into an office area that was quite a bit busier and more crowded than the hushed reception area on the first floor. "This way, please," Janice Tuwile said and led them to an open office door. "Dr. Gorrado is waiting for you."

Before either of them could so much as thank her, she slipped down the hallway and turned the corner. Tony's look of frustration wasn't lost on Greg, although he thought his partner deserved the woman's rather cold exit in return for his blatant and manipulative behavior. "The ice queen cometh," Tony muttered under his breath.

"Looks more like the ice queen goeth," Greg shot back.

A pleasant, rich voice cut off what would have been Tony's retort. "Gentlemen, please come in and have a seat. I'm Dr. Guido Gorrado."

The man who rose from behind a desk to greet them was a handsome black man in his late fifties with a high forehead and a beard below short hair gone a distinguished white. Dressed in high-money casual, Greg could see the muscles of an athletic build moving beneath the doctor's expensive brown sweater, and when he shook hands with Greg, Gorrado's grip was firm but calculated not to be too strong or overwhelming, as if he were very aware of his own strength. Faint traces of an Italian accent cut through his speech, giving, perhaps, some groundwork for the man's name.

Greg introduced himself and then Tony, and the two settled on small but comfortable leather chairs across from the doctor's paper-crowded desk. The office wasn't large but it wasn't tiny, either, and it was clearly the work space of a man more concerned with results than appearances. A laptop computer in standby mode was pushed off to the side next to a pile of patient files and legal pads crammed with writing, more files were lined up against one wall below an arrangement of degrees and certificates. The wall behind the doctor's desk was divided by a tall, arched window through which Greg could see only the heavy foliage of a golden-leafed maple swinging in the outside breeze.

"I understand you want to know about Hannah Danior," Dr. Gorrado said, getting right to the point. "I have her case history right here. There's a lot you might find interesting."

Greg nodded, momentarily taken aback. "I... have to say, doctor, that it's rather unusual to get this kind of cooperation in the medical field," he finally said. "We usually run into the doctor-patient confidentiality thing." Tony gave him a sharp look, as if to say *Don't remind him of it!* but Greg ignored him.

Dr. Gorrado nodded, but still brought up a file, easily two inches thick, then spread it open on top of the papers already littering the desk's surface. "True, but that attitude is generally used to protect a patient whose history or disclosures may endanger his or herself-- surely in your profession you realize this. With certain patients there are times when the doctor may choose to divulge information because he feels it may be of benefit." He regarded Greg with clear brown eyes. "This is my feeling with Hannah. I haven't been able to reach Hannah-- I understand she's being temporarily held in the psychiatric ward at Illinois Masonic-- and I've received only

the most cursory information from the office there, so first I'd like you to explain what she's doing there and why it prompted your trip out here."

"She was attacked," Greg told him without hesitation. "Her throat was cut very close to the time when another young woman died of injuries she received from the same kind of attack a couple of miles away." He went on to give the psychiatrist as much of the details as were pertinent, ending with Dr. Tansey's speculation that Hannah had injured herself and Hannah's insistence that she remembered nothing about the crime. "Her history here at Trinity came up," he said carefully, "so that's when I called you."

Dr. Gorrado raised an eyebrow and Greg had the distinct impression the intelligent man knew he hadn't come by the Trinity "history" in the more accepted manner, but he didn't push it. "I worked with Hannah for nearly twelve years," he said, "so even without seeing her recently I feel fairly confident that this injury was not self-inflicted. I also believe her statement that she doesn't remember the attack."

Greg blinked. Twelve years? "What--"

Dr. Gorrado pulled a yellowed piece of paper from the back of the file and pushed it toward him. "I think this will answer about ninety percent of the question you were about to ask."

Greg took the paper and Tony leaned over to read it with him. It only took a few seconds for what they were reading to sink in. "Whoa," Greg said.

Dr. Gorrado gave them a couple of more minutes to study the text, then folded his hands and sat back. "As you can see, that young woman's start at life was rather challenging, to say the least."

Greg rubbed his forehead, noting that there were two more pages to the report that he had yet to read. "The child in this police report is the same Hannah Danior?" he asked. "It's hard to believe *anyone* could recover from something like this."

"Wait," Tony said, still straining to read over Greg's shoulder. "I only got part of what this says--"

"Let me summarize it as best I can," Dr. Gorrado said. "When Hannah was five years old, she and the eighteen-month-old daughter of her foster parents were abducted from their house while the mother was in the backyard. In the police hunt that followed, Hannah was eventually discovered in a small cave by the railroad tracks in their town, where she'd been sexually assaulted and tortured by a pedophile drifter. The toddler's body was also found, buried off to the side in the cave, and an autopsy revealed the toddler had undergone the same fate."

Greg nodded and fast-flipped through the paperwork, then scowled. "But this says there was no conviction on the murder of-- what's her name? Amy Terrell."

"While they had clear medical evidence that the drifter had assaulted Hannah, they could not prove that he had ever done anything to Amy Terrell other than bury her body, which he claimed was in 'his' cave-- along with Hannah-- when he returned to it. According to forensics, although he never had gloves, apparently he picked up the corpse by wrapping it in a dirty shirt-- he never even so much as came into contact with Amy's skin. Some of the implements used to torture Amy and Hannah-- various gardening tools-- had clearly been handled by the accused, but some had *not*... yet all were stained by blood from both children."

"Then someone else was involved," Tony said.

Gorrado nodded. "A further examination revealed that Hannah had been enduring sexual abuse for several years at the time this happened. The gardening tools were found to belong to her foster father, Boris Terrell."

"You just gotta love that foster care system," Tony said caustically. "What about DNA testing?"

"At the time it was nearly-new technology," the doctor told him. "Expensive and not widely used. Two years after Scott Cutler-- the drifter-- was incarcerated, he was killed in prison, so the option was never explored. Boris was charged but later acquitted because the bodily fluids found on both children did *not* match his, but it still left him under suspicion. There were two other foster children in the

family, Hannah's brothers, and they were immediately removed from the family and put back into the system."

"Where were they when Hannah and Amy were taken?" Greg asked.

"The foster mother had sent them to the park to play, and the police retrieved them as soon as she called about the missing girls."

Greg flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for. "Butch and Carl, ages ten and twelve," he read. "Found making mud pies in Clyde Park.' Where are they now?"

"Not a clue," Gorrado said. "I tried to find them when Hannah was thirteen, but they'd been adopted and the records were sealed. Given the violent nature of the family's past, I deemed it better not to pursue the matter. Hannah's natural parents are dead."

Tony looked from the report to the psychiatrist. "Wait a second. She was thirteen? Why did you wait so long to do that?"

Dr. Gorrado regarded the two detectives calmly. "Because Hannah Danior was catatonic for seven years after she was rescued from that cave."

Greg stared at him. "*Catatonic?*"

"Completely." The doctor took the old police report from Greg and tucked it in the back of the folder, then skimmed further through the papers. "Suffice to say we tried various methods of treatment, some perhaps a bit on the radical side, but all without success."

"What finally did the trick?" Tony asked.

Dr. Gorrado lifted his chin. "Frankly, we don't know, but I suspect it was a trauma very much like what she endured at five years old. The night duty nurse discovered Hannah crying but fully lucid on a Saturday night. Her throat was severely bruised and a further examination suggested she'd been raped, but there was no actually physical *evidence* of the attack-- no semen or flakes of skin, nothing. It caused quite a scandal at the hospital-- all the male

patients were checked, and all the orderlies as well-- but ultimately no charged were brought against anyone."

"And she didn't remember this either?" Tony looked skeptical.

"According to Hannah, she woke up in the dark feeling bruised and sore, but there was no one around. Since she was only thirteen at the time and we felt her mental status was fragile at best, we opted to focus on rehabilitation rather than reexamining and emphasizing the traumas she'd suffered."

A reasonable thing, Greg thought. "And since then?"

Dr. Gorrado was silent for a moment, as if thinking of how best to explain. "As you might expect, it wasn't easy," he said at last. "She had nightmares constantly, was extremely paranoid, slept very little during the first year after she came out of her state of shock. She had daily counseling and one-on-one tutoring, and getting her to the point where she could be around other people without being terrified was quite a feat. Medication helped, but it also slowed her ability to comprehend, and she was already seven years behind in her mental and educational development, not to mention having to undergo physical rehabilitation-- when someone doesn't use their muscles for seven years, they have very little body strength. She wasn't able to attend a normal high school, but she did test for and earn her GED at age twenty." Gorrado looked pleased at the memory. "At that point she made the decision to discontinue her anti-depressant medication and try to live a normal life. I haven't seen her in nearly two years, but she does call now and then." He smiled briefly. "I more or less promised her free telephone counseling for the rest of her life. From what I could tell, until this incident on Saturday, she was doing well, even taking a couple of college courses per semester. I recall her telling me her goal is to be a special education teacher."

"Uh-huh." Greg steepled his fingers together for a moment, then reached into his back pocket. "You say you haven't seen her for some time."

"That's correct."

"Well, Dr. Tansey-- the ER doctor at Illinois Masonic-- has," he told the psychiatrist. "As a matter of fact, she says she saw Hannah six months ago for another injury. Here's a copy of her patient summary." He handed it over.

Gorrado studied the paper with interest, his pleasant expression slowly morphing into a frown. "Well, this is disconcerting. According to this report, Hannah has clearly been the victim of multiple injuries. 'Heavy scarring on upper left chest consistent with stab wound, scar through right eyebrow, scar of unknown cause on left side of neck beneath jaw line, fresh scar of indeterminate origin across left collarbone.'" His sharp gaze found Greg's. "Still, 'consistent with stab wound'-- these are *not* the types of wounds a person usually inflicts upon themselves, even a seriously mentally ill patient. Those are generally more ritualistic and planned. Someone else is causing these injuries. Are there accident reports on file for any of these? Crime complaints?"

"Not a one." Greg folded his arms and looked from the doctor to Tony, then back again. "For most of them there aren't even records that indicate any medical treatment at all. This means that whatever she's been going through-- if someone is hurting her or if she's somehow hurting herself-- she's been dealing with it completely and utterly..."

"Alone."

Tuesday
October 3rd...

Winnie Harbin had two undying passions in her life: books and music. Well, okay, she had a *lot* of undying passions in her life-- after all, she was a well-rounded person-- but those were two of the main ones. Music she got on a regular basis by taking guitar lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music down on Lincoln Avenue. Books were a double treat-- usually, anyway-- because she got her supply of readable goodies at the Stars bookstore, conveniently located directly below the apartment of her best friend Hannah. In fact, they'd met in the store, reaching for the same book, and Winnie still grinned at the memory of how surprised Hannah had been when Winnie had shrugged and handed it over. Right now her pal was unfairly locked up in Illinois Masonic, so Winnie was going to have to be content with wandering around the bookstore alone for awhile, then heading home sans her usual ten minute stopover at Hannah's place, about all she could take because of the dogs.

Winnie loved this bookstore, much more so than the big chains or shopping at the mega-online booksellers. Anonymity wasn't something she particularly cherished-- she got enough of that in her day to day world. The Diner was a great place for it, in fact; there she was the faceless waitress that most customers would never see again, and who gave a bat's ass if they left her a fifty-cent tip on an fifteen-dollar check. She wasn't a person with rent and bills and a piece of crap car that might or might not start. She got that same treatment at the grocery store, the gas station, and a thousand other places. But not here at Stars.

"Hi, Win. How are you?" Alice, the owner, looked up and smiled cheerfully from behind a counter crowded with papers, stacks of books and a tangerine-colored Mac. Photos of all sizes were taped to the wall behind the counter, and somewhere in there was one of her and Hannah wearing ridiculous costumes, taken at the last Stars

Halloween party. Winnie had borrowed a friend's gown and made herself up as a vampire Countess Elizabeth Bathory, but Hannah's outfit had been a scream. A parody of the Bride of Frankenstein, Hannah had plastered white goop all over her face, blacked out her eyes, then wound her hair into in a hundred bobbing bits of tin foil. Bride of Frankenstein? She'd looked more like the Bride of *Beetlejuice*.

"Same as always," Winnie answered.

"Say," Alice said before Winnie could make her way any farther into the stacks. "How's Hannah doing? She looked in pretty bad shape when the paramedics packed her up."

Winnie stopped. "She's okay. Ought to be home in a day or two. A good thing because--" She stopped and they both looked up as something thumped hard across the ceiling. There was a scattering of sounds, running, then unmistakably the sound of someone walking.

Alice glanced at Winnie. "Funny... I'd assumed you were taking care of the dogs."

"Not unless I can do it while wearing a respirator. Hannah's got some friend of hers doing it." It was the easiest way she could think of to explain it. Winnie stood there for a second, then turned and headed for the door. "Think I'll go check upstairs and meet this guy."

Alice looked delighted. "Guy? Hannah's got a guy?"

"He's just a friend," Winnie said automatically, because she knew Hannah would want her to. "Some dude walking the pooches for her, that's all."

Still, as she stood outside and fished Hannah's extra key out of her bag, Winnie couldn't help fantasize a little. Hannah'd been through such a hellish existence, would it hurt the freakin' Universe to send a little happy in her direction? She let herself in and climbed the narrow staircase, then unlocked the door without bothering to knock. As she stepped through, too late she realized the noise might not be coming from the dog-walking cop, after all. It might be the

other one, the asshole who'd tripped her at work. Hell, it might even be a burglar, or someone--

"Hi," said a male voice. "Can I help you?"

Her heart stuttered for a second, then calmed a bit as she stared at the guy standing at the end of the coffee table, a tug-of-war dog toy gripped in one fist. Knothead and Puddles whirled and saw her and she backstepped instinctively; before they could ambush her, the man dropped the toy and snatched at their collars, holding them fast.

"I'm Winnie," she said. "Hannah's best friend. I was down in the bookstore and I heard noises up here. You must be--"

"Greg," he said. "I'm looking after the dogs for her."

"Right." For a moment neither of them said anything and Winnie grabbed the chance to scrutinize him. Nice-looking, in an all-American sort of way-- short blond hair going a bit toward the spiky style, yuppie-style glasses, blue eyes, maybe six feet tall with an athletic build. He could've passed for a computer geek instead of a cop, and maybe that was intentional-- all in all a bit too clean-cut for Winnie's tastes. But he looked safe enough for Hannah, and after all, he was a cop. Then again, so was that other moron.

"So," he began, "you--"

She sneezed.

"Uh-oh," he said.

"I'll be all ri-- *ahhh-chooo!*"

"You were saying?" he asked mildly.

"I'll be downstairs," she managed, then sneezed three more times before getting the hell out of there. He must've stirred everything up, been playing with them for awhile-- Hannah usually made a point of dusting and vacuuming if she knew Winnie was coming over, plus she'd send the dogs to "their rug" and tell them to stay put. Amazingly, they always obeyed.

By the time Officer Greg-- as she'd already begun to call him in her mind-- joined her on the sidewalk in front of Stars, Winnie had her sneezing under control, or had at least outlasted it. The "fresh" air of Belmont Avenue had cleared her sinuses of dog dander, doubtlessly replacing it with an unhealthy but at least tolerable level of carbon monoxide. Now she could expect to sneeze once or twice every ten minutes for the rest of the day. No biggie.

"Feeling any better?"

A bit surprised by the genuine concern in his voice, Winnie regarded the light-haired man curiously as he came out of the entry door, then automatically turned the knob to make sure it had locked behind him. "Yeah."

"You want to have a cup of coffee?" he asked. "We could go by the Diner--"

"Anywhere but there," she cut in. "It's not like I own stock in the place, you know?"

He grinned and glanced up the street. "What do you suggest?"

"I could do nachos," she said promptly. "Mexican place right up the block. How about it?"

He motioned at her. "Lead on."

Winnie did, but it was a short walk, only a couple of doors west. It wasn't long before they were settled amid a colorful array of painted wooden tables and chairs and waiting for a iced tea, both deciding against the choice of early-afternoon alcohol. People chattered and waiters moved constantly-- the place was a kaleidoscope of color and noise. Still, it made Winnie feel comfortable, sort of like the Diner but not, full of a protective bunch of people but without the spying, prying eyes of a fat, greasy boss.

"So you and Hannah are best friends," the cop said after the waiter had taken Winnie's order. "Known each other awhile?"

"Not so long," Winnie answered, and took a sip of tea. "A little over two years. We met at the bookstore."

He smiled. "Seems like a fun place."

That was obvious, so she didn't comment. Instead, she said, "It's awfully nice of you to do the dog-duty thing."

This time his smile was more pronounced, crinkling up the corners of his eyes. "No problem. She needed a hand, and the pups and I are having a good time with it."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, then his expression changed as he focused on her. Okay, she thought, here it comes.

"I'd like to lend a hand with something else, too," he said. "I'd really like to find out who attacked Hannah in front of her doorway."

"If she knew, she'd tell you," Winnie said carefully. She picked up her water glass and took a sip, giving her eyes somewhere else to look besides into his.

"Really." Officer Greg folded his arms. "And what about you-- if you knew, would *you* tell me?"

"Of course."

He leaned forward. "Because I get the feeling that there's a whole lot more going on here than she's willing to admit."

"Look," Winnie said impatiently. "She doesn't know who's doing this stuff, okay? If she..."

Damn.

Nothing stupid about this man-- the way his gaze zeroed in on her, she knew her slip of the tongue hadn't gone unnoticed. "What I meant--" she began.

"No good." Before he could continue, a waiter appeared carrying a platter of nachos heaped high with salsa, sour cream, and jalapeño slices. Whew-- saved by the taco chips. The guy added a couple of small plates and napkins, silverware, then checked their water supply, and Winnie hoped that it would be enough to derail Greg's train of thought. Hungry, she dug in immediately, savoring the

spicy flavor of the peppers and seasoned ground beef despite her nervousness over what she knew was coming. The cop gave her a few moments, loading up his own plate but fussily picking off all the sliced jalapeños.

"Don't like peppers, huh? You're gonna have a hard time getting Hannah to back off the hot food when you guys eat out," she commented.

Incredibly, Officer Greg blushed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I'm just watching her dogs while she's laid up."

"Isn't denial fun?" she asked mildly. "Some people--"

"Speaking of denial," he interrupted, "what did you mean when you said Hannah didn't know who was doing 'this stuff'? What 'stuff' would that be?"

"My tongue got twisted up, is all," she said quickly. She shoved a double-loaded chip into her mouth, effectively ending her answer.

"I saw the scar on her neck," he said abruptly. "And I read Dr. Tansey's report. Did you know her body is covered with them?"

Winnie stopped in mid-crunch. Sure, she knew about the scar on her neck-- hell, everyone could see that one-- and the one across her collarbone, too. But... there were more? Somehow she managed to mash the food in her mouth enough to swallow it, a mistake when it lodged somewhere in the middle of her esophagus like a wet lump of dough. "I knew about... a few."

"Where are they coming from?" Greg asked intently. "Who the hell is doing this to her, and why is she-- and maybe you-- working so hard to protect him?"

"She-- *we*-- don't know," Winnie insisted. "Listen, I already told this all to your partner. Wasn't that enough?"

Caught off guard, Officer Greg blinked. "You spoke to my partner? When was this?"

"So he didn't mention it?" Winnie's mouth twisted, but she managed to stop herself before her opinion of that jackass came out. After all, they were probably the best of pals, and Lord knows, she didn't need to get this guy pissed at her, too. "He came by the Diner on Sunday. I told him the same thing." She tilted her head at him. "You remember that part, right? That would be where *we don't know*."

The cop surprised her by grinning at her sarcastic tone. "Yeah, I remember that. Vaguely. But I'm sure I'll forget it by the end of the meal."

"Then I guess we'll have to remind you."

"You do that." He swiped at his mouth with the napkin and stood, swiping the check off the tabletop as he did so. "In the meantime, I've got to head out-- no, no, this afternoon snack's on me. Enjoy your peppers. And mine, too."

"Thanks." She reached across the table and plucked a finger-full of the ones he'd pushed aside from the edge of his plate. "Don't mind if I do. Waste is a terrible thing."

"True," he agreed. "I'll be around with the dogs if you get a sudden flash of recollection. Any idea when Hannah'll be released?"

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe not." Winnie frowned. "That doctor doesn't like her."

"I think it's more likely that she's worried about Hannah rather than something personal," Greg said.

"Aren't we all," Winnie said.

"Yeah." He threw a ten dollar bill on the table, then added another couple of bucks for the tip, unconsciously scoring brownie points. "We are. So keep in touch."

Winnie nodded automatically and watched him go, then almost laughed outright when she realized she'd been trying to imagine what he and Hannah would look like as a couple-- what, suddenly she was having matchmaker urges? From the blush she'd seen earlier,

Hannah didn't need any help with this one, although she wasn't at all sure how her friend would, or even if she *could*, handle a relationship with a guy. She didn't know all the details, but Winnie had the impression Hannah's growing-up times hadn't been so hot; the girl *never* talked about her past and that much secrecy usually meant a lot of pain and no gain in bringing it up. Unfortunately, it also usually meant a hard time in the here and now.

Winnie looked down at the table and saw that Officer Greg had also managed to drop one of his cards on the table without her noticing. She picked it up and fingered it thoughtfully. Had she really seen what she thought she'd seen that day a couple of weeks ago in the bathroom at Hannah's? So much had happened since then, Hannah's attack included, that it was hard not to doubt her own memory. The mental images she'd thought were so burned in her head were fading fast, worn away by the work and stress of everyday life, the recent increased worry about Hannah. Still, a few were hanging in there, unpleasant and, perhaps, unwanted--

Standing outside Hannah's bathroom door, giggling over something inane, some stupid blond joke about a woman getting off a bus and walking down the sidewalk, not realizing her left breast was hanging out of her blouse. Hannah was listening and laughing around a mouthful of toothpaste, rushing through the ritual because she knew that even though the dogs were banished to their rug and the place was vacuumed, Winnie was apt to start spewing snooze at any second. She'd just said the punch line--

"And so she says to the cop, 'Oh my God, I left the baby on the bus again!'

--when a thin line of red, shocking and growing wider with every slow-motion blink that they stared at it, appeared literally out of nowhere and swept across Hannah's right collarbone. Hannah dropped her toothbrush into the sink and winced, then slapped her hand against her shirt as the red spread through the fabric like a streak of scarlet paint. Her finger fumbled at the buttons and she peeled it away, revealing a fresh three-inch wound, weeping crimson tears.

"What the hell?" Winnie demanded. "How did this happen?"

"It doesn't matter," Hannah said grimly. She quickly stripped off the ruined shirt and tossed it in the wastebasket. Lines of red dripped down her thin chest and she swiped at it with one hand, trying to keep it from reaching her bra. Her clean hand yanked open the medicine cabinet and pulled out a box of gauze pads. "Here-- open a couple of these."

Winnie did as she was told, then watched as her friend took the wad of gauze and pressed it against the wound to slow the bleeding. "Hannah--"

"I can't explain it," Hannah said grimly. "And if you think about it too much, it'll do nothing but make you as crazy as I am." She slammed the door to the medicine cabinet hard enough to make Winnie cringe, then fixed her with a haunted stare. Hannah's voice softened. "So just pretend you never saw a thing, okay? It's just... easier that way."

But pretending wasn't easier, it was *denial*. Now Winnie turned the card over and found another number handwritten on the back, probably the cop's home phone number since he'd taken such a personal interest in Hannah. Winnie had been telling the truth when she'd said they didn't know who was hurting Hannah, but if she ever somehow found out...

Well, then, she damned well *would* 'keep in touch.'

And so the story continues...

About the Author

Yvonne Navarro grew up on the north side of Chicago and spent her youth making up stuff in her head and drawing pictures to go along with the stories. Her first fiction was combined with artwork and was a mockup of a newspaper with the cheerful headline "Dr. Seuss Dies in Fire!" somewhere around the second grade. While she drew pictures constantly, she always had a storyline to go with them.

She didn't decide to seriously try to write those strange little mental tales until 1982; after that, she sold her first short-short story in 1984 to *The Horror Show Magazine*. As time went on, she wrote more and more, and has now written in excess of eighty stories, over seventy of which have been or are scheduled to be published. In 2001, she swept first, second, and third place of the Short Story category at the Illinois state level of the Mate E. Palmer Communications Contest with "Ascension" (which appeared in the *Graven Images* anthology published by Berkeley Books, October 2000), "Divine Justice" (which appeared in the *Skull Full of Spurs* anthology published by [Dark Highways Press](#), May 2000), and "Santa Alma" (published in the cd anthology *Extremes* by [Lone Wolf Publications](#), April 2000); "Ascension" subsequently took first place at the national level.

Sooner or later she was bound to try her hand at something longer, and her first novel, *AfterAge*, an apocalyptic vampire novel, was published in 1993. Her second novel, *deadrush* (this time putting a new turn on zombies) was published in 1995; both were finalists for the Bram Stoker Award in their publication years.

In her third solo novel, *Final Impact*, she turned to a mix of horror and science fiction. *Final Impact* won both the Chicago Women In Publishing's Award for Excellence in Adult Fiction and the "Unreal Worlds" Award for Best Horror Paperback of 1997 from the *Rocky Mountain News*. She kept the *Final Impact* storyline going in *Red Shadows*, then followed that with *DeadTimes*, an unrelated, pure

horror novel. Her first suspense novel, *That's Not My Name*, was published in June of 2000 and placed first in the both the Illinois state and national levels of the Mate E. Palmer Communications Contest.

In addition to solo projects, she's written a number of media novels, including the novelizations of *Species* and *Species II*, *Aliens: Music of the Spears*, and three Buffy the Vampire Slayer novels: *Paleo* (an original), and *The Willow Files, Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*. *Paleo* won first place at the Illinois state and second place in the national level of the Mate E. Palmer Communications Contest in another category.

Besides recently finishing this novel and completing her fourth (and second solo) Buffy the Vampire Slayer novel, *Tempted Champions*, Yvonne has numerous other projects in the works, including a children's book collaboration, plans for a sequel to *AfterAge*, and several other novels which are already outlined. [The Overlook Connection Press](#) will publish the long-awaited limited edition of *AfterAge* in 2002, which will contain the first part of an uncompleted sequel to *AfterAge* called *Red City*. In her spare time (!!!) Yvonne studies martial arts, and very, very soon, she's finally going to run off to Arizona.

Yvonne maintains a huge web site at www.yvonnenavarro.com with full info, including covers and good-sized excerpts, from all her books, both finished and in-progress. The site has con pictures, books and lots of other fun stuff. She's also the owner of [Dusty Stacks Bookstore](#), which has great little books, [t-shirts](#), and other neat tidbits for sale. Come visit!

